



THE COMING

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PAST INDISCRETIONS
JANUS IS A TWO-HEADED GOD

THE COMING

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Prologue

August, 1943

Over the din of the B-17 bomber's ascent into the air, the radio decided to squawk, emitting a familiar voice. "This is 'Flying Mamba.' Position confirmed. Hey, Johnny boy, whichever dumb bastard said 'War is hell' obviously never pulled duty in the Bahamas! Heaven on earth! Am I right, or what? Over."

Captain Jack Harrington grinned at his former co-pilot's comment on their now-completed "dream" assignment, and signaled his radio operator, Keith Watkins, for C channel to reply. Glancing out the window at the almost identical bomber flying in close formation, Jack gave a quick salute to his friend. "'Flying Mamba', this is 'Sweet Revenge'. Bad news, Nat. You have the wrong war. General Sherman, late of the Civil War and perpetrator of that quotable quote, had more on his mind with his march to the sea than we did on this babysitting gig. Over."

Naturally, Lieutenant Ian Baker of the Royal Australian Air Force, stuck his two cents in--or whatever the hell it was they used for money down at the bottom of the world. "Now, sir, I do believe it's my duty as co-pilot to correct you. Our RAF students, British or otherwise, aren't young children--or ankle-biters--as we Aussies like to say. And after all, the flight training school on Nassau is the finest in the Caribbean."

Flight training school. Christ, what a waste of valuable time for an old-timer like Jack! The foul taste of bile rose up in his throat, and truth be told, he was hard pressed not to spit it out. Out the window lay the golden sands and crystal waters of the Bahamian islands chain. Beautiful, yes, but how in good conscience could a man fritter away the days on this semitropical paradise when there was so much work to be done? When the horrors of war breathed hot and heavy day in and day out? When death was as close a companion as his sweaty regulation undershirt?

He grimaced. Bottom line here: the fate of the free world was so uncertain, he literally burned with the need to get back in the thick of things, whether in Europe or the Pacific arena. Thankfully, the layover at his next destination, Bermuda, would be brief. By this time next week, he'd be flying daylight bombing raids with his unit over in Ridgewell, England.

"Sir? Is everything all right?" Baker's blonde mustache bristled concern, and he tapped Jack on the shoulder to recall him to the here and now.

Annoyed, Jack checked his instruments. Damn altimeter gauge was stuck again. "Cut the 'sir' crap, Baker. I'm doing my bit for your king and country. So tell me again why I have to drag your sorry ass to Bermuda?"

Two other members of the crew, Salvatore Scarpelli the navigator and Danny Flannery the bombardier--twins in spirit not birth--wagged their bushy eyebrows and nudged each other in the ribs. Their captain's anger was legendary. Everyone knew that, including Jack.

He ignored the byplay to settle his wrath against the prune-dried Aussie. Had to take it out on someone, so it might as well be the person responsible for separating him from his co-pilot and best damn friend a man could have: Nat Terrell. In fact, if Jack were a superstitious man--which he wasn't--he would have claimed Nat as his own personal good luck charm. With Nat by his side, Jack had twenty-three successful missions to his name, or rather to his plane's name, "Sweet Revenge." When dealing with the enemy, any revenge was sweet.

"Not my country, precisely, er, Captain." Baker calmly tapped the altimeter gauge until it righted itself. "Needn't get cranky, mate. This wasn't a hardship tour, now was it? Plenty of time to sunbake to a crispy brown."

Which he had, to his skin's leathery detriment.

Nat's voice fought static to be heard on the radio. "Boys! Boys! Play nice now, why don't you? On the same side, no denying that. Ian, you'll have to forgive my pal, Johnny boy. He's still put out 'cuz that cute Bahamian honey preferred my butt to his! Over."

Scarpelli and Flannery couldn't hide their guffaws. And big men like them certainly knew how to laugh it up. Jack stared them into submission, causing them to shuffle apologetically and bury themselves in busy work.

Baker, on the other hand, lifted a sun-bleached eyebrow and stroked down his prickly mustache, all the while studiously regarding Jack.

"Don't jump to conclusions, Baker," Jack warned. "It's my pal, Nat, who's harboring illusions." He gestured to Watkins, the radio operator, for an open channel. "Nat, you ol' sot, you got the story wrong. That honey fancied my bedside manner, not yours! Over."

The rough edge that had niggled Jack since breakfast in downtown Nassau suddenly smoothed out. Locking horns with Nat always had that mellowing effect on him. Neither the deafening drone from the four turbo-supercharged engines nor the biting cold from high altitudes disturbed his complacent mood.

But that Aussie sure was a burr in his side. Hell, if only Nat were here instead. Jack shot a look of sheer displeasure at the co-pilot. And why not? At thirty degrees below, a man was entitled to growl like a bear.

Over the intercom, he spoke to his men. "Okay, heads up everyone. Time to put your air on. We're at 10,000 feet and climbing." Oxygen masks were necessary at that altitude since the inside of the B-17 wasn't pressurized.

He stretched in his seat and cracked his knuckles. Unusually tall for a pilot, he often felt cramped behind the controls. Once again, he checked the skies. Still no clouds in sight. A picture-perfect day for a routine flight to Bermuda. "Course position?" he requested from the navigator.

Just as promptly, Scarpelli relayed the information.

Damn good men, all of them. Usually the B-17, or Flying Fortress, as it was affectionately known, had a crew of ten. But because "Sweet Revenge", with sexually suggestive nose art, had been tasked to train raw recruits from British, Canadian, and Australian forces, Jack was down four men: tail, ball turret, and two waist gunners...and, of course, his regular co-pilot, Nat. They would all be replaced once he reached England, of course, but these men, including Watkins, Scarpelli, Flannery, and Chuck Ziegler the flight engineer, were like family--the family Jack had never had. Not a close one, anyway. Not with a passel of step-kin with him being odd man out. But his military family, that was a different story. They all pulled together under the hazard of enemy fire.

A team. They had been a team. So why the hell did the wing commander reassign Nat at the last minute?

Baker adjusted the strap on his oxygen mask. "Fancy yourself to be a ladies man, do you, Captain? Lud, I love 'em myself. Especially your Southern Belles with the delectable accent."

Jack grunted. The oxygen had a somewhat metallic scent to it. Usually didn't bother him, but today it seemed to dry his throat. Damn it all, he'd give anything for a smoke.

But that would have to wait until they landed. Instead, he popped a stick of chewing gum in his mouth, and savored the spearmint flavor. Belatedly, he remembered to offer one to Baker. "No, actually, I don't care much for women, other than in the bedroom, that is. Can make a man cut his own neck, in a manner of speaking." He'd seen it happen often enough, not only with his stepsisters' discarding

boyfriends hand over fist, but with his stepmother destroying his dad.

Baker's blonde eyebrow arched up again in an unspoken question.

"Just look at your Edward VIII," Jack explained. "What's he now, the Duke of Windsor? He attended that damn party Command threw for us the other night, remember? Eddie looked as healthy as a wax candle, didn't he? One minute he's king of the British Empire, and the next he's assigned as governor of the stinking Bahamas! And all because of a woman."

"You sound bitter, mate," Baker had the nerve to say.

Jack shrugged. "Never let them get under your skin, that's my motto. Women. Nothing but trouble."

Baker took his time chewing on his piece of gum. "I disagree with you--"

"Captain!" Flannery called from his position. "There's something out there at two o'clock high."

A luminous mist appeared high in the sky, growing larger with each passing second. By all that was holy, what in Christ's name was it? Silvery grey, this cloud or fog ominously spread in all directions, blocking out the sun, ocean,...damn, even the horizon itself.

"What the hell?" As Jack glanced at his instruments, his heart almost lurched out of his chest. Never mind the damn cloud, the magnetic compass on the control panel spun like crazy!

Baker confirmed the malfunctioning compass, then heaped on more bad news. "Gyros and locators not working. All flight instruments out. Whatever this is, Captain, we're in for a rough ride."

Flashes of purple lightning vividly seared across the sky in front of them. Or what would have been the sky had everything not blended together in a sea of shimmering grey haze. The very air hung heavy with the acrid stench of burned ozone and octane gasoline.

Almost as one, the crew broadcasted their terror through the intercom. Navigation no longer was sure of their position. The flight engineer doubled over with vertigo. Damn it all, everyone even started to take on a strange greenish glow. Christ, what was going on?

Through the crackling of heavy static, Ned's voice radiated his panic over the airwaves. "'Sweet Revenge', this is 'Fly...Mamba'. Good God, Johnny, what...happening to you...? Disappearing right before...eyes! Where the...What's happen...Over!"

Then...there was nothing. Nothing at all. Disorientation and an odd sense of separation from self enveloped Jack. For all he knew, they'd been cut off from civilization, plucked from the sky, and tossed out into a vast cosmic dumping ground.

A wave of nausea hit at the same time a tremendous gravitational force yanked the B-17 deeper into the cloud. Watkins lay unconscious next to his radio. Baker slumped down on the malfunctioning controls, his blazing blue eyes hidden in the shadow of his thinning blonde hair. No crew member made a sound. Only the roar from the turbo engines disturbed the eerie quiet of their unnatural grey cocoon.

Jack had one last thought before passing out. "End of the line for us, ol' girl. Too bad we couldn't fly more missions." He spoke to the bomber as it continued its flight without benefit of pilot. "May God have mercy on our souls."

Chapter One

Present Day

Gramps was dying. He knew it, and she knew it. Larissa Parish sat next to him on the bed and lifted his age-mottled hand to her cheek.

"I'm here, Gramps. Just flew in." She tenderly gazed at his sleeping face, painfully aware that soon he would be gone. Totally and completely gone.

Blinking back tears, she adjusted her tortoise-shell eyeglasses, tucked the homemade comforter under his chin, then leaned over to kiss the top of his balding head. She was not going to cry. Getting away from her job had been darn difficult, but she didn't travel over 2,200 miles for Gramps to see swollen eyes and a reddened nose.

"Are your arms tired?" His voice wavered, but his eyes retained their mischievousness. "Quite a flight from Baltimore to Great Falls."

"Gramps! That joke's ancient!" Despite her grief, Larissa smiled at the old man who had been such an important influence on her--as an adult and as a child. Dad had died young, leaving an all female household. Mom had coped as best as she could, but with three young girls in varying stages of development, she often left the youngest one, Larissa, in his capable hands.

Now frail and weak, Gramps lay motionless under the covers as if even that scant weight was too heavy for him to tolerate. A slight odor of camphor filled the air, probably from an applied ointment to ease the pain from his weary body.

She quickly sobered up. "I brought you some flowers. Carnations."

The floral scent and the carnations' fringed petals did much to bring a bit of cheer to the sick room. She held the bouquet for Gramps to sniff. "Mom told me...you weren't doing well."

"Thank you, child. I've been better. But I appreciate your coming." His raspy coughing racked more than his emaciated frame. The bedposts actually shook. "Here, let me look at you. Just the sight of you does a body good. Heaven on earth!" With effort obvious in every movement, he sat up and slowly sank back against the pillows. Lifting a long lock of her hair, he tut-tutted. "Pretty as a picture, but you still hide behind that mane of hair of yours. Larry, you've got to fix yourself up. Go to the beauty parlor. Get a permanent. Get contact lens instead of those heavy-framed eyeglasses, why don't you?"

Not comfortable with society's rigid ideal of beauty, Larissa never paid attention to the cruel whimsy of fashion. Growing up in Montana, she didn't have to worry about New York's Madison Avenue dictates on what was in or out. Besides, where she worked, beauty definitely was not an asset. To get ahead, a person had to use her brains--no ifs, ands, or buts about that.

Another coughing fit stopped Gramps' list of her deficiencies. "Child, I'm afraid you've dithered too long. I'm not going to be able to keep my promise to you, like I did with your sisters."

Try as she might, Larissa couldn't keep her throat from thickening. And her eyes stung with unshed tears. She had to keep her composure. She just had to. Glancing around his airy bedroom, so chockfull of mementos from bygone days, she settled her gaze on the bureau where a treasured photo of his World War II bomber squadron was displayed.

"Larry? Are you okay?"

Sniffing, she turned away from him, took a deep breath, then faced him with a smile. He was the one dying, and he was concerned about her. She swallowed her sadness. "I'm fine, Gramps. What promise

are you talking about?"

"Why, to walk you down the aisle for your wedding! Don't you remember? I promised all you girls that, right after your dad passed on. Of course, Molly and Ellen were older, but you were just five."

Animation sparkled the green of his eyes. Green, the color of an emerald rainforest. She inherited her brilliant eyes from him. "Good God, girl," he scolded. "You're a full twenty-eight years old! Why haven't you married? In my day, a girl that old was on the shelf--"

More coughing. From a pitcher, she poured water into a cup and held it to his lips. "Drink, Gramps. You need it." She filled another cup and also gulped down lemon-flavored water. "Don't worry about me not being married. I've looked around, believe me. No guy can measure up to you."

Marriage was something she had no interest in, anyway. She liked her life just the way it was: all work and very little play. The closest thing she had to a family life was when she took the time to fly back to Great Falls for her occasional role as maiden aunt to four nieces and nephews.

Larissa mentally corrected herself. Single aunt was more precise than maiden.

As Gramps shook his weary head, he sighed. "Kissing butt, as usual, Larry! Tell me, do you butter everyone up at that hush-hush government job of yours?"

As a signals analyst with the National Security Agency, Larissa's job wasn't to "kiss butt," as Gramps crudely put it. She spent her days...and very often nights studying and decoding some of the millions of electronic communications generated around the world. Maintaining national security was never more of a challenge than it was right now. Her agency's purpose was to protect the country's information systems and to collect and decipher foreign intelligence. No insignificant task. In fact, her work was more of a life's mission than a job, so having a husband just wasn't part of the equation. Besides, men had a habit of loving and leaving. Not only had she experienced that tendency first hand, but also watched her older sisters suffer through infidelity as well.

Before she had a chance to answer, Gramps held her gaze and squeezed her hand with surprising strength. "Larissa, I want you to promise to do something for me. My last request."

Gramps never called her "Larissa" unless it was really serious.

"Promise me, child," he continued. "I've thought of nothing else these past few days."

"Of course, Gramps. Anything--"

"I want you to scatter my ashes in a particular spot in the Caribbean."

Oh my gosh. Words of surprise couldn't get past the lump in her throat.

"Yeah, yeah, I know." Gramps waved an unsteady hand. "Morbidity, and all that. And, well, I know we've all depended on you too much, child, being the most responsible one and such. But you're just the girl to do this. Anyway, can't ask Molly--she's a sickly thing. And Ellen's had it pretty rough with the divorce. So I'm asking you, Larry."

Larissa stared off into space. Death was never an easy topic to discuss.

"Larry, I truly want this. Remember me telling you about Johnny--the best friend a man could have? He always said I was his good luck charm." Gramps gave a slow chuckle. "That's him in the picture, next to me."

Slipping her glasses down on her nose, she looked again at the black and white photo of the bomber squadron. Close to a young Nat Terrell, stood a tall, dark, hunky guy, and by his devilish grin, she could tell he had no shortage of self-confidence. Typical pilot. Just like Gramps! In fact, machoism was

probably part of a pilot's job description.

Gramps patted her hand. His touch felt warm and reassuring. "Did I ever tell you how the plane Johnny and five airmen were in, 'Sweet Revenge', actually disappeared right before my eyes?"

Not trusting her vocal cords, she nodded. Even as a child, the mystery of the vanishing plane had titillated her imagination.

He related the story again, anyway. "They were on their way to Bermuda. I was in the other plane, 'Flying Mamba'. I heard them squawk about their instruments running amok, and watched them vanish into nothingness. God, I went crazy searching for them. Later, Headquarters sent plane after plane out after them, but no dice." Gramps sighed. "Well, I never told anyone this. All these years, and I never breathed a word. Guilty, I guess, in view of what happened. You see, without Johnny knowing, I requested time off to go back stateside. Nineteen forty-three, it was. We were in Nassau at the time. Your granny, bless her heart, had sent me an SOS. She wrote me that she was pregnant, and we, well, you know, we weren't married."

"Gramps, you little devil!" Funny how she'd known him all her life, yet here was an unsuspected side of him. And of Grandma, too.

"Yeah, well, I had a reputation back then, as did Johnny. I always called him Johnny boy!" The grin on Gramps' face tickled Larissa more than his unexpected news. "But I loved your granny, so I did right by her when I got home on leave. We settled here in Great Falls, next to Malmstrom Air Force Base, and she straightened me out. Yeah, she stuck by me, all those years. What a sainted woman she was."

Gramps wiped a tear from his eye. "I've got to tell you though, Larry. Granny saved my life. If she hadn't written me about her condition, I would've co-piloted that bomber. Disappeared with the rest of the boys." His eyes lost their focus. "For more years than you have to your name, I've been walking around here as guilty as sin."

"No, Gramps. You can't feel guilty. What was meant to happen, happened."

He shrugged, setting off another round of coughing. His insides must've felt like a punching bag. "Anyways, hell, I figure my ashes should be scattered in the same spot theirs are. I've got the coordinates. It'd be a type of 'coming home party.'"

For a long moment he was quiet. "Will you do it, child? Will you promise?"

Wow. The reality of impending death hit her full and square in the midsection. Willing her lips to keep from trembling, she smoothed his remaining grey hair off his brow. "Of course, Gramps. You know I'll do it." As he'd said: she was the responsible one. But she fought off a shudder just the same. "But I'll make a deal with you. Let's postpone this trip for as long as possible, okay?"

"Larry, you're such an optimist. Always were." Gramps gave a faint smile. "I'll do my best." A gentle sigh, a fluttering of his eyelids, and soon he was sound asleep.

Larissa silently blew him a kiss, then tiptoed from the bedroom. The shudder that she had so successfully squelched before, returned to rattle through her, shaking her teeth. For she had promised her grandfather to do the very thing that she had always feared more than anything else in the world.

She gulped down pure terror. It had a bitter taste. The scattering of ashes wasn't the problem, but the journey itself was, traveling to that spot in the Atlantic. Or Caribbean. Or wherever the heck it was that the bomber had disappeared.

All that ocean and one tiny boat.

Oh my God! Hunched over, she fought an attack of the dry heaves. Goodness, her skin must've turned a

nauseous shade of green. There was no other way to get to Gramps' intended gravesite. Not by plane, car, train, bicycle; no, nothing else. It had to be by boat, over miles and miles of deep, endless sea.

Larissa bit her lip, inadvertently drawing blood. Sometimes a person had to face her demons head on--whether she wanted to or not. Well, this was going to be one of those times for her. She didn't have a choice. One day, very soon, she'd have to entrust her life to a rickety, floating bath toy, maneuvering through deadly waters filled with sharks, seaweed, and brine.

She took a long breath to calm herself, then wiped the sweat from her palms. Okay, bravery didn't come easily. This was something she'd have to work on every second while out on the open sea.

The important thing here was to do this for Gramps.

Gramps. Tears, long denied, now flooded her eyes. Dear Gramps wouldn't be with her much longer.

Avoiding her mother who was downstairs baking cookies in the kitchen, Larissa headed for the spare bedroom to indulge in a good cry.

* * *

Standing on the deck of the forty-three foot luxury yacht "Adolphus," Larissa held onto the railing with clenched fists. As the yacht cut through the dark waters of the Atlantic, salt water spray cooled her bare arms even as the sun, high in the sky, relentlessly sizzled down on her. Perfect weather for late April, perhaps even ideal. Certainly it was a boater's delight.

But all she could think about was the deep, bottomless ocean. As crazy as it sounded, she'd have given anything in the world to be safe back at her workstation in Fort Meade, Maryland, poring over computer printouts of electronic signals!

"Hey, Larry! Care for a swim? I'll help you overboard!" Abigail Abernathy fluffed up her stylishly coiffured golden head of short curls and made her way over to the railing. With a viselike grip, she grabbed Larissa's upper arm and yanked her toward the watery grave below.

"Thanks, but no thanks." Disengaging herself from her friend's unyielding hands, Larissa had to wonder whether Abby had been serious or not. One never really knew with Abigail. Physically, she was perfection personified, but well, the facts had to be faced: she could be a stone-cold bitch.

"You're no fun." Abby turned her back on the vast expanse of sea, to bathe her full-figured, bikini-clad body in the sun. "This whole trip is turning out to be a bore. Can't we just dump your grandfather's ashes now and head straight for Nassau? I mean, honestly, he won't know the difference, and I just can't wait to hit the casinos."

Larissa tightened a fastening on her lifejacket--just to make sure it didn't come undone--then walked on the deck to the pewter funerary urn where Gramps' remains rested. She didn't take Abby's words personally. After all, it had been Abby who so generously offered the means to carry out Gramps' last wish--by using her brother's yacht. Then again, she probably just wanted a vacation from the agency.

"Avery says we'll be at the right spot soon, Abby. Ten more minutes or so." Larissa checked her favorite Star Trek watch. Funny how time had no meaning out here on the open sea. "Your brother also asked me to convince you to wear your lifejacket, but I told Avery no one on earth had the power to make you do something you didn't want to do."

"True, true." Abby pouted her ruby-red lips. "But you're no slouch in that area either, Larry. How long has it been that we've known each other, two years now? And how many times have I told you Avery is just dying to go out with you? He's a millionaire, you silly little fool. Why, if you'd just snap your fingers, he'd be yours for the taking. And then we'd be sisters!"

Larissa couldn't resist a dig. "Maybe that's exactly why I've never dated him." Caressing the smooth surface of the urn's classical Greek design, she turned around to stare out at the ocean. If a girl was looking for a flaxen haired, hazel-eyed Adonis, well, she supposed Avery was okay, in an overbearing way. But as a lifetime partner? She silently shook her head. No, Avery and his luxury yacht held no appeal. At least, not for her. And besides, what would he want with a no-frills, near-sighted, work-oriented, computer nerd? Well, no-frills except for her rosy lacquered toenails. She gazed down at her toes and wiggled them. Every woman had a weakness: a pretty foot was hers.

For her levity, she received a punch on the arm. "There, that's what you get for disappointing me. As if I could believe you wouldn't want me as your sister." Abby punched the same spot again. "I'm not going to give up hope, though. Still plenty of time left on this pleasure trip to change your mind. Honestly, Larry, why do you think he agreed to take us here, anyway? We may be siblings but Avery never does anything from the goodness of his heart." She batted her lashes. "Like I do."

Facing into the wind, Larissa adjusted her prescription sunglasses as the breeze whipped back her hair. The sound of waves splashing against the hull of the yacht, the smell of briny sea water, and the cool ocean mist hovering over her body--the sea reached out and touched her soul, using the five senses as an intimate lover. It was heaven here, truly heaven, except...it would've been infinitely better if they'd had their feet planted on terra firma.

"Why do you hate being on the water?" Abby's curt voice cut through Larissa's meanderings.

Larissa sighed. It was so hard to put into words the primordial fear she'd had ever since childhood. "Well, it has something to do with the depth, I think. When I was a kid, just the thought of going down and down...without finding bottom would turn me into a blithering idiot. After all, the nearest ocean was about a thousand miles away from Great Falls." She shrugged. "Who knows? Maybe I had a past life where I drowned, like those people on the Titanic."

"Hmmn." Abby stroked her chin as if her thoughts were on another topic. "Ooh, here comes Avery. Come on, take off that lifejacket and let him see what a cute bathing suit you have on."

Abby usually didn't approve of Larissa's wearing apparel. She glanced down at her grey spandex suit, but most of it was hidden by the floatation device. If Abby liked it, maybe it showed too much skin.

"Too bad it's not a bikini, Larry." Determined to have her own way, Abby pulled on the lifejacket strap.

"Abby, cut it out." Larissa slapped at her friend's intrusive hands. Goodness, maybe she should've gone ahead and rented a darn boat no matter what the cost. Sometimes Abigail Abernathy could be one huge pain in the neck. Although they often commuted together from the small community of Odenton, Maryland, thankfully they also didn't work together at Fort Meade. Obviously too many hours in each other's company put an uncomfortable strain on their friendship.

"This is the spot, ladies. Halfway between Nassau and Bermuda." Avery Abernathy, skipper of the "Adolphus," extended his lanky arm out to encompass the ocean as far as the eye could see.

About an inch shorter than six feet, he was an imposing male, with a wavy mane of burnished hair and a low brow resting over hazel eyes. Whether he was romantically interested in Larissa or whether that was a figment in his sister's imagination was unknown. Just going by outward appearances, she would have thought he preferred glitzy, glamour types. But he'd always behaved appropriately toward her.

"The crew will be cutting the engines right about...now." On cue, the engines went dead. Pleased, Avery winked at her.

Overwhelming silence assaulted their ears. The engines quieted and the yacht now motionless, this noiseless state was too eerie to be normal. No birds, no insects, not even the wind disturbed this

absence of sound.

He leaned on the railing and gave her an easy smile. "Glad my schedule was free so I could help you out, Larry. I know how hard it is for you to get away from that critical job of yours."

She returned his smile. "Thanks again, Avery. I can't tell you how much this means to my family."

Most people didn't understand the importance of electronic surveillance, including Mom. Nearly every telephone call back home ended with her denigrating Larissa's job and pleading for her to return to Montana.

No earthly way. Early on, she decided not to go Molly and Ellen's route. Perhaps that was why Larissa had pushed herself so hard in school: to get a ticket out of Mom's small town mentality.

But Mom wasn't the only one who had a grudge against the agency. More often than not, daily newspapers included at least one article by critics claiming the agency's resources were used to spy on civilians and conduct economic espionage. Total hogwash, of course. Why couldn't they understand protecting classified information and decoding enemy messages were so very vital to U.S. security? Still, it was a pleasant relief to be in the company of someone who appreciated her and her colleagues' work.

But right now, her work involved something even more important than intercepted conversations, communiqués, and other electronic transmissions.

Avery removed his captain's hat as a sign of respect. "It's up to you, Larry."

Abby also turned to face the ocean and sobered her expression.

Right. Perhaps Larissa raised the pewter urn to the sky too eagerly, but she couldn't wait for the yacht to start up again. A zillion miles from land, it was unnaturally quiet floating on top of the sea.

"Gramps," she called out, her voice radiating into the distance. "Gramps, do you hear me? We miss you here, but as you wanted, your last wish is about to be carried out. Your ashes are now mingled with your missing friends."

Unscrewing the silvery lid, she said a brief blessing, then poured the remains into the ocean.

"Are you going to throw in the urn, too?" Abby asked.

"No, I think I'll keep it--"

The sea had other ideas. The boat abruptly lurched to the side, causing Larissa to lose her balance...and the urn. The urn's shiny top and base hit the water with a savage splash to slowly filter down and down and down. Watching helplessly, she started shivering.

"Honestly, what's going on, Avery?" Abby hung on to the railing as the crest of a wave crashed against the wooden deck, soaking all three of them.

"I don't know." His simple words conveyed his confusion. "Let me tell the crew to--"

"Compasses don't work!" shouted a voice from the cabin. Then suddenly, ominously, a grey cloud rolled in, overshadowing the pristine blue sky with hurricane-speed winds. Pulsating dark purple lights split the heavens, producing flashing, jagged lightning. A mechanical, burned-out odor filled the nautical air. Because the yacht was without power, it tossed and pitched on waves which had risen without provocation.

Good God! What was happening?

Terror radiated from Avery's golden eyes. "Larry, Abby, get inside the cabin! And Abby, you put on a

lifejacket, pronto!"

Fighting the force of gravity which so desperately wanted to throw her into the ocean, Larissa moved away from the railing to take hold of Avery's strong hand. Would her age-old nightmare finally be coming true? Would she soon plummet downward, headfirst into the water?

She shook off her panic. No time to think about that; she had to concentrate on her actions. Avery's hand was warm, a lifeline between her and the ocean. But, as he pulled her toward him, another wave, humongous in size, smashed into the boat and plucked her from his grasp.

Airborne. Weightless. For a few precious moments, she was lifted up, while her sunglasses took off in the opposite direction. Helplessly flying up into the air, she struggled to return to the yacht. But that was not to be.

The last thing she heard before hitting the turbulent seas was Abby screaming her name.

Then nothing. The bitter cold of the water came as a shock, but not as much as the realization that her life would soon be over.

A kind of peacefulness settled through her even as her lungs struggled to cope without oxygen. A losing battle for her lungs, of course. Still, she faced her demons head on--and won. She wasn't afraid anymore.

As the final bubble of air trickled from her mouth, Larissa smiled for the last time. At least she'd accomplished her goal in coming here...and now she'd be with Gramps for all eternity.

* * *

No. No! This can't be happening! For one endless moment, Avery Abernathy stared at convulsing waters. The ocean swallowed Larissa Parish whole. No trace of her or her orange floatation jacket. That crazy storm, so suddenly, so mysteriously descending upon them, now just as suddenly dissipated. Blue skies returned, along with gentle gusts of wind. Only small waves of the tempest's previous anger remained, lapping the sides of the yacht. Apparently Lord Neptune of the Sea was satisfied with his handpicked human sacrifice.

The next second, Abby's high-pitched screams broke the freeze paralyzing Avery's body.

"Man overboard!" he yelled. "Tell the crew to get out here, pronto." Racing over to the circular life preserver, he flung it out into the water.

Thankfully, for once, Abby didn't argue. She squawked her message out into the open air and continued down into the cabin.

He didn't wait for reinforcements. Tearing off his canvas shoes, he plunged into the cold ocean...and came up for air. Nothing. Diving down again, he frantically searched as best he could. Still nothing. As he resurfaced, he quickly took note of what was going on around him. His two crewmen now also in the water, swam like dolphins--bobbing their heads to exhale and inhale air, then taking to the depths again.

Abby, although still wide-eyed with shock, also studiously scanned the blue ocean. She was a bimbo, of course, but she had her uses. Their parents, doddering old fools that they were, believed him to be a superlative brother, helping his sister with her living expenses. It went far deeper than that. He bankrolled Abby, totally and completely. After all, how far would a girl with champagne tastes go on a government salary?

No, he paid her room and board, so to speak, in exchange for conversations, gossip,...anything she overheard while working in the Fort Meade commissary. Any tidbit, however small, could be helpful in

getting the lowdown on potential global business deals. So what if this "insider" information was illegal? Why, last year alone, he pulled off his biggest deal yet--a six figure sum--by sifting through something Abby had said. Putting two and two together, he was able to sell valuable data to one of the world's top electrical equipment manufacturers concerning an upcoming secret deal, thereby beating out some of the European competitors. And Abby, bless her empty little head, remained clueless on these clandestine activities.

Avery ducked back into the water, only to come up again after a minute. For two years, he'd tried to worm his way further into the National Security Agency with Larissa Parish as his intended stoolie. Larry was a pleasing eyeful. All she needed was some gilding to come up to his beauty standards. With her job as signals analyst, she had access to hundreds or thousands of foreign codes. He stood to make millions more from whatever innocuous murmurings she let slip from those kissable lips. But she had resisted his blandishments...until now. Fortune had smiled on him with this heaven-sent opportunity to ferry her on his yacht.

Using both hands, he wiped dripping hair off his forehead. Shit. This was a nightmare. The agency wouldn't take kindly to one of their valuable employees turning up missing. No, they'd put their best investigators on the case, then their collective gazes would turn to him.

Without looking in a mirror, he knew he blanched white. Even people who were squeaky clean didn't stand up to the agency's scrutiny. A knot of fear settled in his throat.

From the deck of the "Adolphus," Abby wailed. "Avery! Did you find her? Where can she be?"

Before answering, he waited until his two crewmembers resurfaced. Both of them slowly shook their heads. There was no need for words.

He sighed more deeply than when his beloved dog had died. "Abby, we'll keep looking, but I'm sorry. Really sorry. I think we'd better get used to the idea. It would take a miracle for Larry to be...alive."

Chapter Two

After five long years, even paradise could seem like hell. Jack threw his cigarette substitute--a rolled sea grape leaf--down on the pristine island sands and stared out at the endless ocean. Yeah, just one month of this same-old, same-old turned to hell when all a guy had for company was a cheerful Aussie and a mismatched set of twin wannabees.

Although the leathery leaf wasn't lit, he ground it into the finely grained sand anyway. Habit, he supposed. Another boring day in the tropics and he'd go stark raving mad. If he wasn't already. Christ, it was difficult to be objective about his own behavior. At this rate, he could've been loonier than an ol' coot, but completely unaware of it. Five years, two months, seventeen days....He glanced at his well-worn watch. Plus ten hours and thirty-five minutes--out of the loop, to put it laughably.

Only Jack wasn't laughing. What was going on in the world? Did the war still rage on? Had the Allies won? He scratched his chin, now covered with a bushy black beard. Why the hell hadn't anyone come to rescue them? Or capture them? He'd give anything to get off this stinking, godforsaken rock.

Turning away from the blindingly white beach, he trudged barefoot up the sandy slope that led to the surrounding rainforest. Might as well see what the traps caught for dinner. If he was lucky, he'd find a big, meaty iguana waiting for him.

He sighed. What the hell else was there to do on Robinson Crusoe's island besides fill one's belly?

A sudden movement in the dense underbrush caught Jack's attention, and he pulled the hunting knife from his pocket, just in case.

"Easy! Easy, mate. It's only me." Ian Baker, also dressed in island casual--nothing but military fatigues cut down to shorts--emerged from the jungle, looking like the wild man of Borneo.

Jack grimaced at his own wit. Way back when, Borneo was to have been Baker's next assignment after Nassau, but instead he had opted for encrypting duty in Bermuda with a Brit decoding operation. Hence the side trip after the Bahamian assignment. Had Baker stayed on his side of the Pacific, chances were that none of them would be here, taking up space and twiddling their thumbs. But more important than that, now two of their number would never leave--resting, as it were, in shallow graves near one of the island's beautiful lagoons.

Shielding his eyes from the unrelenting sun, Jack repocketed his knife, then turned around to gaze out at the ocean. After all this time, he still held a grudge. Maybe Baker would get the hint and not disturb him.

But no. The man had all the sensitivity of an elephant. "Harrington," he called out. "It's happening again."

Jack knew exactly what his earthbound co-pilot referred to. On a spit of land ten miles across, not much transpired that escaped their notice. Baker could only be referring to one thing.

"Damn." Checking his watch, Jack stared at the second hand frozen in position--just like so many times before. "Scarpelli's and Flannery's stopped, too?"

"Dead as cactus."

"Right." No one had come up with a satisfactory explanation for all their timepieces going on pause at the same time, and later starting up again...also at the same time. It was as if Father Time unexpectedly took a vacation, leaving them adrift without the anchor of passing minutes to hold onto. Some kind of time warp engulfed all four of them: then, after an unknown amount of time, the watches resumed their

ubiquitous ticking.

Jack scanned the horizon but the intense blue of the sky revealed nothing unusual. Nothing that resembled a nebulous fog or a magnetic storm, like the conditions that brought them here in the first place. "We'd better scout around. Make sure everything is okay. No telling what'll turn up."

Baker made a mock salute, then headed south along the shoreline, leaving Jack to go north. The men all knew the drill. They couldn't leave anything to chance. Nine times out of ten, after this peculiar stoppage of time, they'd find useless objects washed up on the beach, like shredded paper, broken glass, and bits of steel and chrome. Sometimes they'd come across a jackpot. The best thing yet had been a case of beer "bottled" in strange aluminum cans.

There had been a wild celebration that night! Jack allowed himself to smile. Truthfully, his ragtag group of men hadn't had much to celebrate in five years.

Once though, something came across them. Not from the sea, but from one of the island's limestone caves. Hell, he sweated thinking about it even now. A band of goddamn pirates, for chrissakes, brandished bloody swords and swooped down, ready to kill every single one of them. And that was how Keith Watkins, the radio operator, had died.

Walking along the edge of the inlet, Jack bent over to pick up a shiny object. It was only part of a conch shell, so he hurled it into the sea. Thankfully, those rejects from the seventeenth century had decided to hightail it back to the cave they'd crawled out of. The hell of it was, this was a tiny isle, and that was a tiny cave; his men should have been able to find those bastards. But as inconceivable as it sounded, the pirates had gone in, but did not come out. It was like they disappeared off the face of the earth.

As warm waters swirled about his feet, his toes sunk into the gritty wet sand. He checked his watch again, but the second hand was still glued to the number five.

"Maybe those pirates should come again and finish the job," he grumbled, kicking a piece of driftwood back where it came from. "Put me out of my misery, anyway. If this hellhole isn't a prison, I don't know what is. No cigarettes, no music, no more booze, and...no women."

No gratification of the flesh. Damn. He and his men had been here so long, the wild herd of goats grazing nearby on the lush, tall grasses was starting to look good!

Shaking off that perverse thought, he waded into the crystalline sea up to his knees. It was a shame, a damn shame these waters weren't cold enough to take away the pain of sexual deprivation. The familiar longing plagued him for the millionth time. Maybe if he dove deep enough, the temperatures would go south and then he could find relief. About to take the plunge, he spotted something bobbing in the distance. What the hell? Squinting into the setting sunlight, he saw that the object was orange. Orange like a lifejacket. And by all that was holy, this lifejacket had arms!

Without a second thought, he sliced through the water toward the object--the person. "Christ, please be alive," he prayed, stroke after stroke. Digging another grave alongside his two friends held no appeal whatsoever.

But for right now, the only thing that mattered was closing the gap that separated him and this person in distress. Quickly reaching his goal, he smoothed back dripping hair splayed every which way over the victim's face.

For a moment, his heart stopped as solidly as his watch had. It was a girl, the most exquisite girl in all the world. Of course, he was pragmatic enough to realize that any girl would have been exquisite after five years of abstinence. Even one with blue lips like this poor creature had. Wasting no time, he

swiftly towed his precious cargo to shore.

Dear Christ, she wasn't breathing. She was as limp as a rag doll, so he lifted her chin to tilt her head back and begin mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. But that lifejacket prevented him from seeing if her lungs were rising with the forced air. Using his free hand, he fumbled with the fastenings, then tore off the jacket....

Sweet baby Jesus! Jack's heart actually constricted. This girl had a body on her to die for--

No time for that, his mind screamed. Exhaling into her mouth, he counted to five and forced air into her again. "C'mon, baby. You can do it," he urged between breaths.

But although that curvy chest of hers rose, he still didn't hear her exhale.

"Do it for me. Breathe!" Panic rushed into his voice. She was so lovely laying there, a dusting of sand against her cheekbone, her long, dark hair heavy with water and grit. He took another moment to scan her skimpy one-piece swimsuit...and swallowed his astonishment. Female fashions must've really changed since he last hit USA's sweet shores. This suit was skirtless--cut extremely high on the leg, leaving very little to the imagination.

He wiped the sweat from his brow. Yeah, she was lovely all right, but so damn lifeless.

She couldn't die. He wouldn't let her. In between breaths, he roughly shook her by her shoulders. Maybe that wasn't the best thing to do, but he couldn't just let her slip away. Fear--cold and heartless--froze his soul. "Damn it to hell, babe, come on! Cut the crap! Breathe!"

He willed her back to life; he made her suck that air into her lungs and spit it out again. His reward was at first a slow rise, then fall of those delicious, rounded breasts. As she took deeper breaths, she started coughing until she was fully and beautifully conscious. And now awake, she stared at him, as if not comprehending what had just transpired.

Under the scrutiny of those blazing green eyes, he must've turned red, but hell, his unkempt beard hid a multitude of sins.

She propped herself up on her elbows and lifted a feathery eyebrow. "Do you always swear at strangers?"

An inappropriate urge to laugh tickled his innards. Hell, these last few minutes had been extremely tense. The girl almost died for chrissakes, and here she was, cracking a joke! His mind racing a million ways, he rubbed his bushy chin to gather his thoughts. "Er, I, well, I thought it would help."

Now sitting up, she glanced to the right and took in the curve of the flawless white beach, the vivid turquoise water, and the teeming, tropical forest. The view was the same on the left as well. "I'm awfully c--cold," she said apologetically.

"Christ, yes! Of course you are." He slapped his forehead. How could he have forgotten that her lips were still blue? "I'll get you a blanket--"

No, he'd better not leave her alone. Not that Baker, Scarpelli, or Flannery would harm her, but men were men, as the saying went. And right now Jack himself was feeling very...manly.

"Tell you what." Brushing sand from his torso, he wiped his hands on cutoff pants. "I'll carry you to my shack. It's not much, but you'll be more comfortable there."

Even her nod of agreement was made with obvious effort. The poor kid had been through hell. Lifting her was easy. And she felt good in his arms...cold and clammy, but good. As soon as her head rested against his chest, she fluttered her eyes closed. Thick, fringed lashes, full ripe lips, and a cute, pug nose: this girl, maybe eighteen or so, was made for kissing. But, hell, at thirty-three, he had fifteen

years on her.

Getting way ahead of yourself, Jack, ol' boy. He grinned. And why not? This was the most exciting thing that had happened on this island since the damn pirates. But, of course, what was more important was that this girl's arrival meant there'd be a search party out looking for her. And wouldn't they be surprised to find not only Beauty but the four Beasts as well?

Finally, he and his men could leave this place.

Carefully walking with his important bundle around palm trees and flowering sea grape bushes, he held her tighter. Along with the spray of the ocean, a subtle fragrance of lilacs drifted up to him. A very feminine scent. There was no way he could resist, so he leaned his cheek against her hair to inhale her sweetness. But when she stirred, he straightened his position.

"I'm Larissa Parish," she murmured against his bare chest, much to his skin's delight. "My friends...call me Larry. They'll be looking for me, in their yacht." A tremor traveled through her slender frame. "I don't know what happened. There I was, scattering my grandfather's ashes, and then...it was so odd. The weather was perfect, but then suddenly a big wave swept me...overboard."

She shuddered again, obviously reliving the trauma. "Thank you for rescuing--"

His rescue ship was to be a yacht! Might as well go first class, after all, the four of them not only deserved it, but earned it.

He placed his index finger against her lips, and grew amazed at just how delicious that brief touch felt. "No need to thank me, Larissa." After five years spent exclusively with men, there was no way he would call this beautiful creature a man's name. "Once we flag down your friends, then you'll have returned the favor by rescuing us as well."

She gazed up at him with a questioning look. "But how?"

Christ, she was gorgeous, even in her drowned rat state. But she shivered almost uncontrollably.

Hurrying to his thatched hut awkwardly constructed of palm fronds, he gently sat her on the edge of his makeshift bed, draped a blanket around her, and started massaging her toes with a towel. The poor kid was completely out of it; she almost fell down on top of the bed, but valiantly fought to stay upright.

After he rolled woolen socks onto her icy feet, he helped her into his pilot's jacket--to take away the chills. "Don't worry about a thing. Let's just get you warm...."

Hell, the desire in his voice was thick enough to cut. Hopefully, she didn't notice. He stepped away and got her a glass of collected rain water to drink. "I'm Jack Harrington, by the way. The others are Baker, Scarpelli, and Flannery."

She thanked him with her eyes, then glanced around his hovel that he called home. Seeing it through her perspective, he scratched his hairy chin, then shrugged. Neither he nor his "house" were prepared for female company. One of the first things he'd do when she fell asleep was shave, then trim his overlong hair.

"Do you mind if I take a nap?" She yawned, and her eyelids drooped sensually. "I have a thousand questions but I can't seem..." She yawned again. "...to think of any of them."

Christ, he could use that cold shower right about now. But that was not in the cards, so he lifted the covers and eased her into the bed, tucking her in. Incredible how smooth her skin felt. "As Baker would say, 'No worries.' I've a ton of questions, too, but they'll wait. You sleep now, I'll be on the lookout for your friends."

An idle thought crossed his mind. Too bad his cot wasn't a double wide one.

"Thank you, Jack." She snuggled under the blankets looking for all the world like an angel. "You're very kind."

Kind? He took one more gander at his unexpected manna from heaven, then picked up his shaving supplies and left the hut. When she woke up, she'd discover her rescuer to be a clean-shaven United States Army Air Force captain, instead of a sorry ass beach bum. Not that it would make any real difference. Soon, very soon, he would be back in the States. Home sweet home--enjoying a hero's welcome. And better than that, he could take to the skies once again.

Anticipation zapped a clear path to his midsection. By Christ, he was so pumped up, he could almost taste it!

* * *

The first thing that hit Larissa was the smell. Or smells, actually. Whew. Several odors fought for her attention. Rotting vegetation, overripe fish, the stench of mildewed laundry-- all rolled up into one pungent olfactory treat. Still, no matter the smell, it felt good to be alive.

Sitting up, she wrinkled her nose and scrutinized her current living quarters. The shack's structure consisted of dried palm leaves or fronds, many of which had fallen away-- obviously in dire need of upkeep. Only one small room, the hut reflected its owner's appearance: ramshackle. But with a little maintenance, it would improve immensely. Definitely bachelor's quarters, just as the man who had rescued her was definitely single. Instinct told her that.

Personal articles were scattered over a few low-lying tables. An empty carton of cigarettes, a well-worn deck of cards, several whittled carvings of animals--actual and fanciful, plus a really old issue of Time Magazine sporting the face of Joseph Stalin on the cover as Man of the Year. The year being 1942.

She flipped through the pages. Despite being so old, the magazine was in pretty good condition. Probably was worth money. Odd choice though, to have as the only reading material around.

Larissa slid out of bed, stood, then wiggled her toes in the overlarge socks. Self-preservation warned her that she'd better put something on over her spandex swimsuit. That guy Jack, had devoured her with his gaze, which probably meant he hadn't seen a woman in a long time. His "home" confirmed her suspicions. He and his three friends must've been shipwrecked or....She pulled off the leather pilot's jacket heavy with genuine lamb's wool. Or perhaps their plane crashed. And if so, then that explained Jack's phrase, "returning the favor by rescuing us."

I wonder how long they've been marooned here? And why haven't they been found yet? Adding these questions to her growing list, she found a mildly soiled white t-shirt and slipped into it. There. It covered everything it was supposed to, and then some. From the size of it, she surmised that that Jack fellow had to have been pretty tall. And strong, too. Carrying her all the way from the beach hadn't seemed to disturb him one bit.

To complete her "beauty" regimen, she picked up a comb missing a few teeth and tried to make her hair presentable--which was pretty hard to do considering the sand, knots, and salt water. Unfortunately she couldn't check her appearance in a mirror. There were none lying around.

She grinned at her feminine preparations. Not that she was interested in Jack or his three companions. Men were men, as far as she was concerned. But he did present an interesting puzzle, appealing to her in a gruff sort of way.

Barefoot, Larissa stepped outside the hut into the hot, steaming jungle. She gulped down hard. Quite a change of scenery from her hectic life on the east coast. Goodness, what would she do if a snake slithered across her path? And what if it were poisonous? Pausing, she took a steadying breath. Why

worry about that now? At the moment, she had enough on her plate.

The dense rainforest talked to her with a cacophony of dark animal noises reminding her that she didn't belong. And she didn't, of course. She was totally, completely lost.

Doing a 360 degrees, she pondered her next move. Too bad everything in the distance appeared as a blur without her glasses. Which way to the beach? Thankfully, a refreshing ocean breeze answered her, cooling a path up her legs and into the t-shirt.

Great! She checked the sun's position, then headed west to follow the gust of air. Maybe Avery and Abby found this place already. Maybe the yacht was docked offshore and they were waiting to pick her up.

Funny thing was, she felt absolutely fabulous--for almost being a dead woman. She fulfilled Gramps' wish, battled her childhood fears, survived a dunking in the ocean, and now she'd hook up again with Abby and have a quick vacation in the Bahamas. What a fantastic adventure--everyone at work would be so envious.

She sighed. But still, it was too bad she'd had to leave work in the first place.

Stopping to check out the local flora and fauna, she bent down to pick up a colorful seashell. A magnificent sample of nature's bounty, and yet, something bothered her, here in paradise. Niggled at her consciousness. If she could just put her finger on it....

She glanced up at the brilliant sky, now darkening as daylight turned into twilight. The weather for the trip had been perfect, just like it was right now. No clouds, no wind. Nothing. So, what had happened back on the "Adolphus"? Why had she been hijacked off the yacht's deck?

Accustomed to mulling over different problems at the same time, Larissa made her way through the thick growth of the palm trees toward the clearing of the beach. A cool breeze hit again, chilling her through the fine sheen of perspiration that had popped up on her skin. A piece of the puzzle clicked into place. Gramps' words returned to her: how he saw his friend's plane disappear right before his eyes. At a certain location. At a certain latitude and longitude. And at that very spot, she had strewn his ashes. After that, all hell had broken loose.

The very coincidence of it gave her the willies.

Silhouetted against the iridescent blue waters stood two men gazing out at the horizon. The one on the left was extremely tall and lean, and from the back, he appeared very muscular. He had to have been Jack, only his hair didn't look quite so shaggy. The other man came up to Jack's shoulders, slightly stocky with lighter, shorter hair.

Larissa raised her hand in greeting. "Hello there! Any sign of the yacht?"

Both men turned to face her at the same time. And when they saw her, they both had identical reactions: widened eyes, mouths agape, and quick intakes of breath.

Heat crept up on her cheeks. While she knew she wouldn't cause a mirror to crack, she also could admit she was no beauty. Just how long had these men been isolated here?

Jack recovered first. Now clean-shaven, he looked years younger. Large, wide jaw and piercing, grey eyes. Rather hunkish, too.

A bubble of amusement tickled her throat. Well, okay, definitely a hunk, complete with broad shoulders, powerful pectorals, and sexy dark chest hair that swirled down past the snap on his shorts. Mmm, yummy! But instead of smiling, he fisted his hands on those masculine hips, narrowed his stormy eyes, and frowned at her.

"I didn't expect you to wake up so soon." His tone accused her. But of what? And why?

"Guess I'm just anxious to find my friends." Shrugging off his disapproval, Larissa held out her hand to the other man. If she could describe Jack's demeanor as brooding, this man's would've been called sunny. She shook the man's hand. "I'm Larissa Parish."

He made a low whistle. "Harrington here didn't do you justice, Larissa." Cupping her hand in his, he almost beamed at her--his smile was that wide--and only slightly hidden by a bristly mustache. "Ian Baker, at your service. May I say, you're a most welcome addition to our tiny isle?"

He had an accent, maybe Australian, plus the cutest dimples on either side of his mustache. However, his words caused that peculiar worry nagging at her to return with a blast. "Thank you, but, surely just a temporary addition, Ian. Abby and Avery Abernathy, my shipmates, soon will be here." She eased her hand from his. "Have you two been stranded here long?"

Jack turned away to resume his study of the sea. "Long enough."

Ian rolled his eyes at his friend's rudeness. "You must forgive our captain. He's a bit cranky at our overlong stay."

Strange how Ian and Jack avoided saying just how long it had been. She walked over to Jack, carefully avoiding the hoards of hermit crabs scurrying in and out of the minuscule holes in the sand. Just being close to his unadulterated masculinity made her heart pound out a code easily decipherable. "I haven't thanked you properly for saving my life. When I went under, I didn't expect to ever see the sun again."

The appreciative look she gave him had been known to dazzle many a bachelor. In some situations, a woman analyst had to use feminine charms to get what she wanted. But evidently, Jack was not impressed. Shrugging, he avoided her gaze. "Yeah, well....We should split up. Better the odds of our spotting your friends' boat. Scarpelli and Flannery are further down the shoreline. They haven't caught sight of anything so far, though. It'll be dark pretty damn quick so we shouldn't waste more time."

Ian grimly nodded. "What do you think our chances are, Harrington?"

The funny thing was, they both checked their watches at the same time. As if time, on a deserted island, had any meaning! Just to be sociable, she glanced at her own wristwatch, as the Star Trek Enterprise's second hand swept past the twelve. Six-thirty. But what that had to do with the rescue was a complete mystery.

Jack shrugged again. "Who knows? Er, Miss Parish, you go south with Baker while I go on ahead--"

"It's Larissa, remember? Or actually, as I said, I prefer Larry." Her gratefulness to this man was beginning to wear off. He was hiding something. Something important.

Tossing a lock of sea-salt hardened hair over her shoulder, she forced her lips to curve up into a stiff smile. By gosh, she'd find out what his secret was. "And if you don't mind, Jack, I'd like to accompany you."

"Ho! Two points for the Yank." Ian smoothed down the bristles on his mustache. "But, if I may say, Larry,..." He halted, a mischievous twinkle lighting his sky blue eyes, "I'm much better company than Harrington, here. And how would I recognize your ship without you by my side, eh?"

"I believe you." She grinned back at him. "About being better company! But I'm sure you can manage. By the way, it's a forty-three foot yacht and its name is 'Adolphus.'"

Although she spoke lightly, a thread of fear weaved through her breast. "Only don't turn away any other boat, okay? The most important thing is to get rescued."

Ian smartly saluted, pivoted, then started to march. "I've got my orders, mate!" Beginning his trek, he

loudly mumbled, "Abby, Avery, Abernathy, Adolphus. Bloody peculiar fascination with the letter 'A'." Not waiting for her, Jack trudged in the opposite direction, all the while scanning the horizon. "Not too late to change your mind. This way's got sharp coral and rocky prominences."

Walking through the incoming tide breaking on the shore, she hurried to catch up.

He pointed at her legs--her rosy colored toenails peeping through the sand and the surf. "Guaranteed to slice into delicate feet."

Not usually quick to anger, she almost simmered with indignation. He implied she was fragile, not used to the rigors of island living. True, but surely that wasn't a weakness?

Matching his stride, she tried to keep her breathlessness from her voice. "Don't worry about me."

"I won't," was his ungracious reply.

What happened to the kind man who had saved her and tucked her into bed? Obviously he had vanished into thin air, along with his overgrown beard.

"Tell me, Jack, just how long have you been trapped on this island?"

Bending down, he scooped up some water and let it trickle down his back. With her gaze, she followed the droplets over the hills and valleys of his muscles.

"Astute of you to figure out we're unwilling visitors here." He sighed. "Our plane crashed...over five damn years ago."

Her surprise caught in her throat, causing her to cough. "Five years? But that's impossible!"

He raised a dark eyebrow at her as if challenging her to dispute his words.

"Well, gosh, I mean, why hasn't anyone found you?"

"My question, exactly." Stopping to peer at something out beyond the jagged cliff up ahead of them, he shook his head as if to dismiss it, and continued his bruising pace. "When we crash-landed the aircraft, the radio worked, for all the damn good it did us. We couldn't raise a thing on it. Dead as a doornail. Or as Baker would say, 'dead as cactus.' Since we've been here, babe, we've seen neither planes nor ships. That's why we still have flares left. Nothing to shoot them at. Hell, it's as if we've dropped off the edge of the world."

Wow. That was so odd. And so hard to believe in this day and age that a plane couldn't be found. But she believed him. After all, why would he make up such a story?

He gave her a lopsided grin. "Speechless? Christ, I'm not. Me and the others have a damn backlog of words to unleash so prepare yourself."

Reaching the bottom of the cliff, he stepped up onto a high, sharp-surfaced rock. "Best spot to look out over the inlet. It's a hell of a climb to the top, though." He folded his arms against his bare chest.

"Here's where we separate the men from the boys, babe. So which one are you?"

She was really beginning to hate his sun-bronzed face, square jaw, and firm, enticing lips. Plus his classically high cheekbones and dark, sensuous, steely eyes. Gritting her teeth, she held out her hand for him to help her up. "Actually, Jack, I'm neither, in case you haven't noticed."

His laugh escaped him. It was deep, strong, and genuine. "Hell, yes, I've noticed. Been living like a monk for these five years. One reason why me and the others are so anxious to help you locate your yacht."

She laughed with him, even though standing on the slate rock felt like walking on glass. He was honest,

at any rate. "Well, heck. I thought you all were just trying to be good Samaritans!"

"Oh, we're good, Larissa. I can promise you that."

An ache of desire suddenly pulsed within her--strong and urgent and unexpected. "Why don't you call me Larry?" Although panting slightly from her exertions, she also could admit her heart rate increased because he was an extremely sexy, virile man. Without intending to, she licked her lips.

"Why don't I?" He pulled himself up onto the next razor-sharp boulder. "Because you don't look like a Larry to me." Stretching out his hand to her, his gaze lingered on the hemline of her, or rather his, t-shirt, now riding high on her thighs.

If only she didn't have to climb these rocks of Gibraltar! Scraped, battered, and bruised, she somehow managed to drag herself up to where he stood. Whew! Although her job was mentally demanding, it wasn't physically demanding. Maybe when she got back, she'd sign up with a health club.

He spoiled her reverie by swearing. "Christ! At this rate, we'll get to the top in five more years." Insisting on silence, he bullied and forced her up the slippery slopes until they reached the summit.

Finally. Wiping sweat mixed with a bit of blood off her forehead, she collapsed down on the grassy part of the cliff. Her poor feet would never be the same. "You're an arrogant...taskmaster, aren't you?" The term "bastard" came to mind, but she refrained. "What did Ian say? You're the captain of this group? Well, that doesn't mean you have to be Simon Legree."

He didn't pay attention. Staring out over the ocean, he searched from east to west--and back again. Catching her breath took forever, but soon she joined him out on the promontory. The view was absolutely gorgeous, even with blurred vision--almost worth the price of admission. The sun sank slowly, radiating pink and orange shards of light into the deepening crystal blue of the sky. Awed, she held onto his arm to gaze down at the white foam of the surf, looking so small beneath them. It truly was beautiful, only...only there were no ships to be seen.

Without taking his gaze from the sea, he said, "So how determined are your friends to find you?"

She was too tired to complain about that insult. Instead, she moved away from him. "They'll find me. Even though Abby can be a royal pain at times, she's a really good friend. I know she'll hound Avery until they find me."

Sunlight gradually slipping away, Jack waved his arms to displace a flock of white, grey, and black terns running wild over the grass. He sat, but still faced the never-ending sea. "What about Avery?"

"What do you mean, what about Avery?"

"A boyfriend of yours?"

"No, he's Abby's brother."

Jack pulled out a wide blade of grass and chewed on it. "Hmnn, I thought as much. You're too damn close to being jailbait to have a boyfriend."

Usually, women considered it a compliment to be thought younger than their years. But by Jack's tone, she knew he meant to offend her. Her blood started boiling again. "Oh really? Well then, you'll be surprised to learn I'm twenty eight."

"That so?" He dropped the blade from his mouth. "And still not married?" Standing, he brushed dirt from his legs. "Didn't figure you to be an ol' maid."

Oh, boy. Her well-honed trait of diplomacy was fast leaving her. Or, to use Gramps' expression: her tendency to "kiss butt." How'd Jack know she was single, anyway? Inexplicable fury exploded within

her. She stood and set her fisted hands squarely on her hips. "Sorry to disappoint you, but you're wrong again." Glaring at him, she felt an urgent need to use his midsection as target practice.

Larissa scratched at her head. How strange. She didn't usually fantasize about pulverizing someone. Especially someone who'd just saved her life.

Instead of answering, he bent over and ran his hand over the thick, high grass. "Ah, here we are!" Picking up three small objects, he then reached into his cutoff pockets, pulled out a leather bag, and gently placed the objects inside.

"Tern eggs," he explained. "They make a passable omelet." Still ignoring her, he scanned the horizon again. "Too dark to see anything. We'll have to call it off until tomorrow." He walked past her, heading for the forest. "Time to eat, anyway. Tonight, it's my turn to cook."

Her lower lip trembled with pent-up rage. It really did. But realistically, why was she allowing this big lug to affect her so? What difference did any of this make? The only thing important here was to get off this damn island.

She grimaced. Goodness, she had to get off this island and soon. Jack's swearing was starting to wear off on her.

"C'mon." He waved her on to follow him like the Pied Piper. "The way down through the jungle to our camp isn't as bad."

Pressing her lips together to keep from venting her spleen, she took her position behind him. She really didn't have a choice but to tag along. Maybe her dependence on him grated more than she realized.

He glanced back at her and narrowed his gaze. "So, you were saying I'm wrong? How?"

Given these few minutes to cool down, she now regretted her previous outburst. "It's not important."

"Hell, if I'm wrong, I want to know about it."

She flared her nostrils. If he was wrong! This man had a doozy of an ego. But now her little show of temper seemed petty, even to her. "It's nothing. You said I was an old maid, and I said you were wrong."

He turned around and lifted a dark eyebrow at her, almost leering at her. "You're not old and you're not a maid, is that it?"

Good gosh! She must've flushed redder than the paint on her toenails! Jack made it sound like she was some kind of tramp or something. She'd had a few affairs, sure, who hadn't? But that didn't mean she was promiscuous.

"Whatever," she mumbled, brushing off low hanging branches of whatever kind of plant life this island had to offer. Never a lover of the great outdoors, she once again acknowledged the reason for accepting a job on the east coast. Wide open, primitive spaces and her just didn't mix. Not to mention getting hitched to an obnoxious, self-inflated male! Prime examples were her brothers-in-law.

"Hmmn. Interesting." Giving her a smile that she could only describe as lascivious, Jack turned back around to lead the way through a trail in the bushes that, though he could see, was invisible to her.

She crossed her fingers, hoping she wouldn't run into a snake or other denizen of the jungle. How unreal all this was--a nightmare, even. Larissa Parish, highly successful signals analyst with one of the top organizations in the U.S. intelligence community, now forced to keep company with a randy, boorish, macho man on a desert isle in the middle of nowhere. And with no basic amenities--like running water and toilets.

God! She exhaled her frustration. What had she done to deserve this trial and tribulation?

Even Jack's loud voice seemed hushed in their surroundings. "What's going on in the world? Is the war over? Did we win?"

Five years out of touch with civilization. Of course, he'd be eager to learn the news. Here she was whining about her situation, when Jack and these men had struggled by themselves for so long. She softened her tone. "Things are pretty much the same, Jack. Nothing ever changes much. As for wars, there's always some type of skirmish going on, overt and covert. Plus--"

He whirled around and seized her by the shoulders. "Christ! I'm in no mood to play footsie with you. The war. The big number two. Germany and Japan, remember?"

He was serious. There could be no faking his smoldering eyes, corded neck, tightened lips, and the vein now dangerously throbbing in his temple. She couldn't deny it; he frightened her down to her very soul. But she refused to let him see her fear.

Biting her lip, she glanced down at her shoulders, painfully imprisoned by his grasp. Maybe living here somehow unhinged his mind. "Um, that war? Well, we won." She lifted her chin to meet his glaring gaze head on.

"When?" he barked.

Oh, this was bizarre. She was so close to him, she almost could see the insanity in his eyes. Which was too bad, because he really was a hunk of a guy. Swallowing hard, she offered, "1945. Could you let me go now?"

He immediately released her, and she carefully massaged her bruised skin. Poor guy had lost his marbles. Feeling pity for him, she sadly shook her head. The best thing she could do was to humor him.

Throwing her a disgusted look, he cut a branch of palm fronds obstructing the path. "Well, that's good news, at any rate. Sorry if I hurt you." His voice turned bitter. "But what the hell, after all this time, what does fate drop on the doorstep but a dimwitted female!"

Dimwitted female! Her eyes blazed. No one ever dared call her that before.

He raked his gaze over her again. "You do have your compensations, though."

Sex. It always came back to sex, didn't it? But she wouldn't let it bother her. He thought she was a pinhead, but she knew he was crazy. She'd let it slide. Once Abby and Avery rescued her, they could make arrangements to get this man some professional help.

One foot after another, Larissa tramped through the deepest jungle this side of Tarzan the Apeman. Crossing fingers once again, she prayed that Jack Harrington was sane enough to lead her to camp.

Chapter Three

While Larissa "freshened up" or whatever the hell women did to make themselves look presentable, Jack joined the group now pacing by the open stone fire. Among the three of them--Baker, Scarpelli, and Flannery--anticipation for seeing their female guest hung so heavy, it almost could be smelled. As it was, the pungent scent of fish permeated the evening air. Someone had already started dinner.

"Er, Captain." Sal Scarpelli shoveled his solid feet back and forth in the dirt. "I went ahead and put the grouper on the fire, 'cuz you were, y'know, busy."

Of the four men, he was the beefiest, with Flannery coming in as a close second. The two of them could've easily been speakeasy bouncers during the previous decade's prohibition period. Scarpelli, though, had an overabundance of shyness despite his six foot one frame. Five years in isolation hadn't helped him come out of his shell. And here he was, still calling Jack, "Captain."

"Good idea, Sal." Jack leaned over to check on the fish, then assembled the fixings for a desert island-style salad. "I'm hungrier than a--"

"Don't be a dipstick, Harrington," Baker growled. His already lined face, wrinkled by overexposure to the tropical sun, creased up further with disapproval. "Sal and Danny are dying to hear about the woman." With a twinkle in his blazing blue eyes, he rubbed his hands together. "And what a sweet armful she is, too!"

He paused. "On top of that good fortune, there's an excellent possibility tonight might be our last on this bloody pile of rocks. Thank our lucky stars!"

"Yeah, Jack." Obviously Flannery couldn't keep still, for he fidgeted around the fire, almost jumping like those kangaroos Baker told tales about. "Ian says she's absolutely beautiful! Better 'n Betty Grable. Better 'n Dorothy Lamour." He scratched at his newly-shaved chin. With his red hair and fair skin, his bare face appeared pinker than a newborn's bottom. "D'ya think she'll like me?"

Bless them all, but these men had been through hell and back. Jack loved them as if they were brothers. Actually, they were his family. Growing up as an unwanted castoff in his stepmother's house did nothing to endear him to the traditional family unit. "Sure, Danny. What's not to like? In fact, the woman specifically told me she wanted to hook up with a brawny, freckled bombardier from Brooklyn."

"Golly! Really?" Flannery's wiry hair frizzed out with his enthusiasm. "Hot dog! Sal, let's go grab some sea grapes for dinner!"

Hoots and hollers--all on Flannery's part--echoed down the seashore toward the large, leafy tropical plants.

Watching the two men's uneven stride on the sandy beach, Jack exchanged an amused glance with Baker. Amazing how Scarpelli and Flannery retained their naiveté even though they both were twenty seven.

"How do you think the twins will react around Larry?" Baker whipped out a large knife and grabbed a fallen coconut. He was in charge of the dessert portion of the meal.

If Jack considered all the men his brothers, then Ian Baker would've been the older brother he usually butted heads with. Two dominant males in a pride of lions usually meant big time trouble. And now there was a nubile young female as part of their group. Jack shuddered. Thank Christ they'd soon be off the island and back in civilization. Fingers and toes crossed on this one.

"Well, hell, no surprise there. They'll fall all over themselves trying to please her." Jack removed the tern eggs from his leather pouch. An omelet would go nicely with the fish. "My guess is once they get back to the States, they'll propose to the first girl they see."

"You think?" Baker made a face, distorting his craggy features. "But what if they both want to marry Larry? She sure is a lovely sheila."

Jack'd be damned if he allowed a girl off her trolley to marry into his close-knit "family." No sense telling Baker about her mental oddities, though. He'd find out for himself soon enough.

And speaking of Larissa, Jack looked up and saw her exit his shack. A lump of desire settled in his throat. She cleaned up nicely; he had to give her that much. Not that a little dirt and jungle rot would make any difference to a woman of her exquisite, tainted beauty.

Squatting on his haunches by the cooking pit, he watched her head for the campfire. Even from this distance of about fifty yards, a healthy radiance emanated from her, from the rosy flush on her cheeks to the tanned surface of her arms and willowy thighs. Everything about her was lovely to look at. Funny how feminine styles changed. Last time he was back in the states, all the women had short hair, crimped with masses of curls. But Larissa's bronze-brown hair hung long and straight over the curves of her bountiful breasts, unfairly hidden by Jack's shapeless undershirt. Truth be told, he preferred hair uncut and loose. Better to lose one's fingers in when indulging one's libido.

He lassoed in his imagination. Those thoughts could get a man into trouble.

She moved as one unused to walking barefoot in the jungle, and he smirked when she stumbled over an imperfection in the path.

"Now, now, Harrington," Baker warned as he peeled a brown layer of coconut husk to reveal the white "flesh" underneath. "Why don't you curb your mean-spirited side for once? I don't know about you, but the twins and I haven't been this excited since Betty Grable stopped off in Nassau to pay the troops a visit."

Baker was right, of course. Jack could admit that. Larissa was definitely good for morale. But, hell, she disturbed him clear down to his very bone marrow. As if he needed more reasons to be cantankerous.

Cracking the fresh eggs into a small frying pan, he poured in goat's milk and added some herbs. For being stranded on a deserted island, he and his men were pretty lucky--food-wise, anyway. In addition to plentiful seafood, a herd of wild goats grazed on the cliffs and grassy pastures, providing an occasional meat dinner. More important than that though was what Nana the goat supplied. Tethered to a tree, their reluctant mascot, an ornery ol' beast, produced sweet, nutritious milk.

But, however "lucky" they were, all of them prayed to go home--daily, if not hourly. And now, with Larissa's arrival, the odds were finally in their favor.

"I'll behave, Baker. On all counts." Jack nudged the side of the bubbling omelet to gauge how much cooking time was left. "If you will."

The last thing they needed was to fight over the woman's sexual favors. If she were so inclined to bestow them in the first place.

He wiped his brow with his forearm. That yacht of hers had better drop anchor tomorrow and welcome them aboard. Otherwise, hell, there was no telling what would happen. Not with four horny bastards salivating over her.

"No worries, mate." Baker burst into a grin from ear to ear. "I'll treat her like she was my own sister!"

Jack glanced over at the man's "formal" attire; besides the ubiquitous cutoffs, he wore a wrinkled,

short-sleeve crew neck shirt. As they all did, making concessions for their female guest. But the shirt wasn't long enough to hide Baker's telltale bulging crotch. "Then, Baker, tell me why I'm not reassured?"

The ever-present sounds of the forest dipped in volume for a moment. Most likely in response to Larissa's approach, poised as she was like the Greek goddess Artemis, among her woodland friends. Before entering the campfire circle, Larissa squinted her eyes, as if sizing them up.

"Larry!" Setting down the makeshift dessert bowl--a helmet--filled with coconut pieces, Baker leaned over and whispered to Jack. "Don't she look good enough to...?"

Then he stood and rushed over to her side. Given his short stature, he reminded Jack of a gibbering monkey. "Hello, luv. Good to see you. We're having a barbie in your honor."

"A barbeque! Why, thank you, Ian. Everything smells wonderful. I had no idea I was so hungry."

A genuine smile of pleasure lit Larissa's face, causing a stab of unexpected pain to lance through Jack's chest. Christ, what the hell was wrong with him? Pretty face or not, this little honey was off-limits. And not only because lusting after her was a sexual minefield. No, she played with half a deck, to say the least. He repeated that thought to reinforce it. Had to have been loony, for if the war just ended three years ago, how could anyone forget it that quickly? He never would, that was certain.

Scarpelli and Flannery, back with a bucket full of sea grapes, stopped in their tracks and, mouths hanging to the ground, stared at Larissa as if she were a mirage. And so she was--a pool of cool water to the eyes of dehydrated men....

A loud sizzle and a faint whiff of burning eggs yanked Jack out of his reverie. He lifted the pan off hot stones, then flipped the omelet. It took some getting used to seeing Flannery without his scraggly beard and Scarpelli without his abundant one, just as they had expressed surprise on seeing him with his shorn face.

Jack rubbed his smooth chin, vaguely missing the comfort of an unkempt beard. Living on the outskirts of civilization did have its advantages.

Baker had the audacity to curve his arm around Larissa's shoulders while leading her toward his men. "And here's the rest of our crew."

Larissa held her hand out to shake Scarpelli's paw. "It's good to meet you, I'm Larry Parish--"

Polite manners on an uncivilized tropical island? Hell, what was she--a politician's mistress?

That particular thought angered him beyond all reason. Frowning, he introduced them. "Larissa, that's Sal Scarpelli, our navigator, and Danny Flannery's our bombardier." Jack turned back to the eggs, now a bit brown along the edges. "We'd better eat. Everything's ready."

Damn, he sounded like a stinking housewife, didn't he?

"Hullo, ma'am. Er, nice to meet you." Scarpelli placed a towel down on the ground and smoothed it into place. "Maybe you'd like to sit by me?"

"Yeah, Larry! Don't forget me, too." Flannery maneuvered to her left, then plopped down, ungainly as always. "I'll sit by you on the other side."

Jack shook his head. In the dark light shimmering up from the heated rocks, Flannery's and Scarpelli's eyes reflected the same emotion: desire. Hell, as Baker was always fond of saying, those two were like natural born twins. "Bookends," Jack couldn't help muttering.

Baker wagged a finger. "You promised, Harrington."

Larissa glanced over at Jack, but didn't comment. Maybe she didn't hear the byplay. Taking her seat on the towel by the deep pit fire, she genteelly sat on her heels, making sure the hem of the undershirt covered her knees. "You're a bombardier, Danny?" she questioned Flannery as he sat almost bursting with excitement. "How very interesting. Tell me about what you do."

What was there to say? Lieutenant Flannery dropped bombs. But she pretended she was fascinated with what he had to say. Fastening her gaze on the man, she drank in every word, as if pulling a lever and releasing sleek carriers of death was the most enthralling job on earth.

Women! Jack snorted. As useless as a three dollar bill.

Scarpelli and Flannery fought to fill her plate with everything they all had prepared. Sitting like a queen bee, she thanked them with her eyes, even though Jack could tell she brimmed full with amusement.

Tearing a piece from the roasted fish fillet, he chewed on it. Maybe he should cut her a break. If he were in her shoes, he'd be amused too.

"Goodness, there's a lot of food here, isn't there?" She daintily sliced into the fish. "Delicious, too. You're a good cook, Jack."

If she said that to annoy him, she'd succeeded beyond her wildest dreams. In the twilight sky, the stars twinkled with furious determination. Almost as if they wanted to brighten the night with their distant glow. And with almost the same determination Jack had in keeping his emotions in check with this woman. Somehow, she rubbed him the wrong way.

He grimaced. Shouldn't have used the word "rubbed." Illicit pictures of her giving him a massage capriciously flitted through his thoughts.

"Actually, Sal cooked the fish," Jack muttered.

Scarpelli blushed--a silly trait he wasn't able to control. In fact, his blush was even redder than his friend's red hair. Embarrassment stiffened his movements.

But his twin wasn't at a loss for words. "Aw, now, Jack, don't go modest on us. With your special seasoning, this stuff really tastes great!" Flannery twitched and squirmed beside her. Even his Adam's apple bobbed up and down. "Larry, our captain's cooking is the best."

Pointing at her dish, he continued, "This here type fish is grouper, and here we have conch meat, and this fruit is sea grapes, and--"

Jack interrupted before her deep green eyes began to glaze over. "Danny fancies himself to be a naturalist. Probably because he was born outside in a park. In Central Park. New York, you know." He added that just in case she wasn't up on her parks.

"I know," she coolly replied, turning back toward Flannery.

His mean-spiritedness returned. For some reason, Jack didn't want to share her with the others. Damn. He usually wasn't so petty. Taking a swig of water, he gestured at Flannery. "In fact, we have Danny to thank for the variety of our meals."

While Flannery's chest puffed out with the acknowledgement, Larissa tilted her head at Jack, her attention fully on him. "How so?"

But Baker butted in, as he usually did. "Yeah, when we first landed, Danny was our food taster. Y'know, conducted edibility tests on the vegetation. Produced some Technicolor yawns, if I remember right!"

Flannery gave a wide Irish grin. "You remember right, all right!"

Larissa glanced at all of them, then, to Jack's perverse delight, she stopped her gaze on him. "What's a Technicolor yawn?"

He stuffed a spoonful of eggs into his mouth. Slightly rubbery, they slid down his throat. "Vomit. It's Aussie talk."

Baker grinned. "And bloody colorful it is, too."

Would she be a Goody Two-Shoes and poker up to express disapproval?

She laughed. "That is colorful, Ian. But, Danny, how dangerous for you."

Christ, she earned a friend for life. Flannery's big ears almost flapped with pleasure, while Scarpelli glowed heat to the tip of his nose with envy!

Finished with his meal, Jack stretched out in the blaze of the fire and picked up a chunk of coconut. "We all want to hear more about the war, babe. Now that it's over, what else is going on in the world?"

To her credit, she finished her goat's milk as if unfazed by his question. But she was nervous. He could tell by her darting gaze and her slim fingers, now drumming an impatient beat. "Mmm. This milk is good. How do you have fresh milk on the island?"

Talk about diversionary tactics. But no one seemed to mind, especially Scarpelli. The goat was his special pet.

Standing, Scarpelli lumbered over to the palm tree where the goat was contentedly chewing its cud, if, of course, that goat did anything contentedly. "This here is Nana, ma'am. She lets us milk her everyday. Say something, Nana."

Even in the fading light, Jack saw the wicked gleam in the cloven-hoofed beast's dark eyes. To show its displeasure at being disturbed, it lowered its head to butt at Scarpelli with its small horns. Then it bleated its own peculiar noise, echoing out into jungle wilderness.

Larissa braved the elements and approached the goat. "Nana, the nanny goat. Cute." She scratched Nana between the horns, and oddly enough, the beast didn't seem to mind.

Then quickly, as if to continue to throw dust in their eyes concerning the war, she turned to flattery. "All of you have done a wonderful job making the best of things. Five years is an extremely long time to be stranded. It is five years, isn't it?"

"Yeah, Larry," Flannery agreed. "With the war on, we figured they just hadn't gotten around to rescuing us." He scratched at his wiry hair. "I wonder how come they didn't? But, hey, never mind that. I can't hardly wait to get home now!"

With her piercing gaze, she looked at each of them as if measuring them against some hidden standard. Did Baker also notice this?

Jack regarded the man from down under. No, he sat hanging on her every word, seemingly mesmerized by a pair of emerald eyes. Strange though, her large eyes reminded Jack of someone, but who?

Of course: Nat. Of Nat's vibrant green eyes.

Jack threw a hardened piece of coconut into the pit. Good ol' Nat. Nat better have made it through the war. Imagine his surprise when Jack tracked him down and grappled him in a bear hug!

Larissa shifted that clear gaze of hers. "Hopefully, my friends will find us tomorrow and we all can go home."

"Might be hard for your friends, ma'am." Scarpelli started clean up duty, scraping off the food remnants

from the plates and gathering up leftovers. "Y'see, I think we landed on one of those cays belonging to the Exuma Cays in the Bahamas. Y'know, teeny, tiny islands." He gestured with his thumb and index finger to show how small. "The Exuma Cays have 365 little islands, one for each day of the year. It could take your friends a while."

"A long while," Flannery morosely agreed.

Now wasn't that a stinking cheery thought?

Feeling the hackles rise on his neck, Jack checked his watch, just to make sure it was ticking. Damn strange things happened when it stopped. Relieved to see the second hand making its usual sweep, he nodded at Flannery. "Your turn to...you know."

The man nodded. "Yeah. Well, Larry, I sure can tell you I enjoyed tonight! See you tomorrow." He lingered his gaze on her, then left the campfire to go get the gun...and stand guard at that infernal limestone cave.

As Larissa watched Flannery disappear into the thick foliage, Jack could almost hear the gears in her brain working, wondering. Maybe she had more cards in her deck than he gave her credit for.

But now it was almost completely black, so all three men pitched in to clean up. Baker left to put water on the cooking stones, and Jack took the "disposing of the scraps" duty. Several yards from camp, he dug a hole, all the while straining to overhear Larissa's and Scarpelli's conversation.

"Let me wash these dishes, Sal." The clattering of aluminum plates indicated she gathered the dishes together.

Scarpelli replied, "No, ma'am, it's okay. We just put 'em in a net, dunk it in the lagoon, and leave 'em soak overnight. I clean 'em in the morning. It's too dark and...."

Silently, Jack added, 'And too dangerous.' He finished hollowing out the pit and raked in scraps of coconut husks and the like. Good thing the navigator was being discreet. No need to alarm Larissa about the pirates. Not that they were in any real danger. In five years, the bastards had just appeared once. Of course for Watkins, once was enough. Still, if Larissa was a squeamish sort..., well, a hysterical female would be hard to handle.

Returning to the site, he watched as Baker poured seawater onto the hot stones encircling the fire pit. The resulting hiss of steam caught everyone's attention.

Jack clapped his hands together with feigned enthusiasm. Had to get this little honey tucked away so they could all relax. Funny how sexual tension wore down a man's defenses. "That's the extent of the excitement around here, babe. Time to, ah, turn in for the night."

He'd almost said, "go to bed," but damn it, if the word "bed" wasn't loaded with images and longings he couldn't dare admit.

Her impressive sigh raised her chest in a titillating manner. "Yes, it's been quite a day."

Christ. Baker and Scarpelli almost drooled.

Unaware of the havoc she wreaked, she flashed them a smile that lit up the night. "I just have to say again, I think you four have done an extraordinary job living off the land like this."

Scarpelli grinned like a fool. "Actually, ma'am, we, y'know, we started out as six."

Damn his heart! Even Baker inhaled his disapproval at the navigator's words.

Naturally, Larissa had to know more. "What happened--?"

Jack took her by the arm. Soft and pliant, yet with firm muscle at the core. "It's not important. Now, let's get you to--"

"No." She firmly planted her feet in the dirt. "No, tell me."

Scarpelli shot his dark gaze at both Jack and Baker, then held out his hands as if to ask what choice did he have? "Gee, well, uh, back when we first arrived, we had a really bad hurricane. No fooling, we didn't know the first thing about storm survival. Poor Ziegler. He was our flight engineer. He got...smashed when a palm tree came crashing down."

She bit her lip. "I'm so sorry."

"Yeah. He was a swell guy." Baker tugged on his earlobe. "Well, see you in the morn--"

"And what about the other man?"

This time Jack sighed. A woman's curiosity was not to be denied.

She wouldn't budge, all right. "Sal? What happened to the other man?"

Fingering the neckline on his shirt, Scarpelli flashed a panicked gaze at Jack. "Er, it was the pirates."

Jack forcefully tugged on her arm, but the hell of it was, she didn't move an inch.

Instead, she prattled on. "Pirates? What about pirates? You mean smugglers?"

Persistent wench, wasn't she?

Baker vibrated intensity from the tips of his thinning hair to his stubby toes. "Naw. He means honest-to-goodness pirates. Peg-legs, eye-patches, and gold teeth pirates. And they came out of a cave, of all places. They didn't even give us a fair go at them, because then they disappeared back inside it!"

Damn. No good sugar-coating it now. Jack shrugged and looked her square in the eye. "Nothing to worry about. Long time ago. They came and left, but Watkins, our radio operator, wasn't as lucky as we were. We couldn't save him."

Her frown showed she puzzled on that information. "Is that why Danny isn't here? His turn, you said. Is it some sort of guard duty?"

Hell, this dame was quick.

Baker answered her. "Yeah, just to be sure. Gives us something to do besides being beach bums." He rapidly smoothed down his mustache, probably wondering if she would go off the deep end on them.

More than anything, Jack wanted to get her safely out of the way. The feel of the palm of his hand around her smooth upper arm teased every blasted inch of him. And for some strange reason, perspiration poured from him like lava out of an erupting volcano. Baker and Scarpelli spewed forth sweat as well.

"Listen, don't worry about anything, okay? We'll protect you. Promise." Jack pulled on her arm one more time, and thankfully, she followed him.

"You sleep tight, Larry," Baker called after her.

"Good-night to you, too," she returned politely.

It was difficult to see the path in front of them, but thankfully the quarter moon provided a beacon of light.

He delivered her to the "door" of the shack, then took a step away. "Do us all a favor and just go to bed, okay?"

Her steady gaze was unnerving. "Where will you sleep?"

Scratching the back of his neck, he laughed. It was a good release. "Is that what's bothering you? Hell, I'll bunk with Baker. He snores, but I can handle it."

She looked so lost, almost as if she was in shock. Without planning to, he took her hand and sandwiched it between his own. "You get some sleep. You've had a hell of a day. Tomorrow, we'll search for your friends."

Her smile quivering a bit, she nodded. "Good-night, Jack. And thanks."

After she went inside, he stood where he was for a long time. What had she thanked him for? He was a mean son-of-a-bitch, but she thanked him anyway.

Running his hand over his hair, he turned, heading for Baker's shack. Larissa Parish was a trooper. A real trooper. No hysterical female about her. Just look how she handled the news about the pirates. Too bad she had to learn that even paradise wasn't trouble free.

* * *

Shafts of moonbeams filtered in through palm frond slats, illuminating Jack's shack in a ghostly glow. Larissa sat on the bed, elbows on knees, head in hands, forehead furrowed in thought. What in the world was going on here? Why did these men--not one, but all of them--believe that World War II had just ended?

Oh, she could ask, no doubt about that, but she shivered clear down to her wriggling toes just thinking about what the answer would be. And added to this bewildering mix were pirates. Not smugglers or thieves but ho, ho, ho and a bottle of rum type of pirates. Pirates that disappeared into an island cave. Good God, were they all insane, or what?

She removed the t-shirt, folded it, then picked up another one to wear as a nightgown over her swimsuit. Mundane, everyday activities tended to calm and soothe the psyche. Slipping the shirt over her shoulders, she stopped mid-stream. Wait. Maybe these men weren't crazy. Maybe they had eaten some type of hallucinogen. Something that tasted good, but scrambled the contents of the brain. Danny Flannery had acted as food taster on this wild, untouched island. Chances were he tried lots of things unfit for human consumption.

Yes, that was it. That had to have been it. She finished dressing, then combed the knots out of her hair. Thank goodness she figured that one out. There were no murdering pirates, and these men weren't survivors from the last big war. Then again, they couldn't have been holdouts from World War II. Not unless they'd found the Fountain of Youth, anyway.

Larissa slid under the covers and relaxed against the makeshift mattress. Today's aches and pains returned with a vengeance. And no wonder. When was the last time she'd climbed a sharp, shale cliff...barefoot? She grinned. Obviously not in this lifetime.

Come tomorrow, Abby and Avery would get here and life would go back to normal. Hopefully before Mom, Molly, and Ellen learned of the disappearance, anyway. Most likely Abby was driving her brother crazy by tugging on his arm and demanding that he find her friend.

An awful thought haunted her. What if that peculiar storm had capsized the "Adolphus"? What if Abby and Avery also were in trouble?

Larissa shook her head. She couldn't dwell on the negative. Just the positive. And that meant she'd get rescued and then make sure each of these men would get the help they needed to readjust back to the twenty-first century world. No more "World War II" business. That was too freaky.

She could admit to being especially concerned about Jack. His stormy grey eyes seemed to mock her, teasing her with forbidden delights. He attracted her, in a strange "Me Tarzan, you Jane" sort of way. And, as odd as it sounded, somehow he reminded her of Gramps, too.

Smiling again, she allowed herself to drift off. Tomorrow promised to be a busy day.

* * *

A shot rang out into the blackness of the night. The next second, Larissa jumped out of bed, instantly awake. How long she'd been asleep wasn't important. There could be no mistaking the high velocity discharge of a gun.

Oh gosh. What should she do? Jungle noises, previously eclipsed by the piercing sound, now resumed a primitive beat, almost matching the drumming of her heart. Invisible insects buzzed around her, annoying, yet at the same time, comforting. Without them, she was very much alone.

It didn't take a genius to figure out what happened. Big, burly Danny was on guard duty by the cave. One of the golden rules pertinent to island living would've been "don't waste bullets." So he'd seen something, something serious enough to shoot at. The others must be racing to him, wherever he was.

She hugged her arms to her chest. Dear God. Should she investigate or should she stay here? If only she had her glasses!

A crunching of pebbles on the path outside the shack answered her. Footsteps. Gulping down fear, she picked up a large stone to use as a weapon and flattened herself in the corner, up against the palm frond wall.

Bathed in darkness, someone stealthily entered. Breathing hard, he approached the bed. "Christ!" He stood with arms akimbo. "Where the hell did she go?"

"Jack!" Nearly collapsing with relief, she left the corner, but then tripped over a table. Forward momentum caused her to collide into his hard and muscled arm. For a second, she longed to linger against him. "Um, sorry. I'm so glad you're here. What's happening?"

Although she couldn't see, she heard his labored breaths and sensed his tightly coiled emotions just barely under control. She also could feel something else in the air. Something earthy. Something sensual. Biting her lip, she set the stone down. As strange as it seemed, she'd never experienced a more erotic atmosphere--torn between terror and desire.

"Planning to bash me in the head?" he asked, humor evident in his tone.

"Of course not. But I heard a shot--"

"A mistake, that's all. Sometimes by the cave, there's a certain shimmering...." He ran his hand over his hair. "Never mind. Danny thought he saw something but he was wrong. We checked it out." Jack cleared his throat. "Can't blame him for being on edge. But, well, I just wanted to let you know, so you wouldn't worry."

What on earth was happening to her? Just standing by him, she sensed her nipples hardening and tingles of lust pulsing through her inner core. This was very, very weird! Usually engrossed in her work, she rarely took the time to go out on a date, let alone indulge in an amorous interlude or two. And as she'd told Gramps, no one really ever measured up to her idealized vision of the perfect man. So she never bothered with lust or passion. And lust or passion never bothered with her.

But now, here, every moment that ticked by seemed to deepen this strange desire she felt for Jack. Wiping sweaty hands on her shirt, she took a step back from him, counted to ten, and inhaled deeply.

No use. She still wanted to throw all caution to the wind, strip down naked and make wild, monkey

love! Goodness, maybe she should blame the floral scented tropical air. Or the moonlit night. Or the threat of danger.

She grinned. Maybe tonight's dinner contained an aphrodisiac.

"What's so funny?" Resentment colored his deep voice.

"You can see me smile? I can hardly see you, Jack." Gosh, she sounded like a silly coquette, didn't she? Next thing on the list was to bat her eyelashes and giggle!

He maneuvered better in the dark than she did. Before she knew it, he stood by the front of the shack. "Well, I'll let you get back to sleep. You'll need your rest for tomorrow. Although this garden spot might be heaven on earth to some, we're all looking forward to leaving here."

God help her, but she didn't want him to go. More than anything, she wanted him to stay with her. Her breathing deepened, and she joined him by the door. "My grandfather used to say that all the time. 'Heaven on earth.'" Gazing up at him, she admired the curve of his jaw and his prominent chin--sharp silhouettes against the backdrop of the night.

"My best friend, Nat, says that as well." Jack looked down at her, his expression unreadable. "You remind me of him. Got the same mischievous emerald eyes."

"That's funny. Nat was Gramps' name, too." She resorted to batting her lashes. "And I can thank him for these green eyes."

Licking her lips, she inched closer to Jack. Analytical, dispassionate Larry had vanished. In her place was emotional, sensuous Larissa. At least for this one night. She licked her lips again. Jack wouldn't be difficult to seduce--not after five years of celibacy, at any rate. And he wanted her too. She could almost hear his heart pounding out his intentions.

Mmmm. This promised to be one helluva coupling.

He gripped her arms by her shoulders. "Larissa," he murmured, "we shouldn't--"

Crackling noises from the dense underbrush signaled someone's approach. "Harrington!" It was Ian Baker, holding a torchlight.

"Damn." Jack swore under his breath.

Larissa sighed. Obviously there would be no seduction tonight.

Ian walked up to them, his torch casting off warmth and a glowing intensity. Now she could clearly see Jack; he had a burning look to his eyes that rivaled the torch's fire.

"Larry, you okay? Bloody mix-up by the cave. Did Harrington tell you?"

Nodding, she realized Ian's interruption for what it was: making sure nothing improper happened between her and their captain. Despite the heat from the torch, she shivered as some sanity returned to her. What kind of deserted island madness had enveloped her? How insensitive was gratifying her own sexual needs in the midst of three other very attractive males, also without female companionship for half a decade? Not too diplomatic of her, to use another of Gramps' words.

The men glared at each other, blue eyes locking horns with grey.

She mentally packed her libido away in mothballs. One woman plus four men equaled a very explosive situation. "Yes, Ian, Jack told me. I'm so relieved everything's okay."

"Yeah, me too." Ian slapped Jack on the back, causing him to growl. "Just making sure things are bloody well okay here. I have it from a reliable source our Johnny boy is a ladies man, through and

through."

Johnny boy. As if reality had no meaning, suddenly she was back in Gramps' bedroom, looking at the photo on the bureau. The image of his best friend, a cocky, young man named Johnny returned. And remarkably, Johnny looked like Jack. Johnny was...Jack?

No! It couldn't be. It just couldn't. Tenuous pieces of information floating out in her subconscious fell with a savage thud into place. The ground figuratively opened up and swallowed her.

Larissa looked at Jack, praying with all her might that this was just a horrible coincidence. "Is that what Nat called you? Johnny boy?"

Jack scratched at his chin. "That's right. How'd you know? He's my good-luck charm."

Good-luck charm. Oh God. Oh dear God. A lightheaded feeling descended upon her and she felt herself swaying in the cool island breezes. "What was Nat's last name?"

"Christ, Larissa. You're turning white like a sheet. What the hell difference--?"

"His last name?" Her request came out as a whisper.

Jack glanced at Ian. "Must be everything catching up with her at once. I'll get her to bed." Jack's hand curved around her back, then he lifted her off the ground.

Her body had already started to go numb. She couldn't feel the sensation of him carrying her. "Please?" She pleaded with him.

As he entered the shack, he replied with his lips close to her hair. "Terrell. Nat's last name is Terrell."

Right. And that meant the world had turned inside out. Larissa did something she'd never done before: she fainted.

Chapter Four

Despite everything, Larissa slept soundly. A delicious languor seeped into her bones, delaying her from jumping out of bed. Under the covers, she stretched as a cat did, preparing to meet the new day.

Funny how she didn't feel sore. But if her body suffered no ill effects from yesterday's misadventure, her mind sure did. As a scientist, she didn't rush to embrace the impossible. There had to be logical explanations for highly unlikely situations. Like her justification of last night's uncharacteristic wanton behavior. Maybe Danny had found some potent, stimulating herbs on the island--ho shou wu or damiana, for example. Maybe that was why the fish tasted so good...and why she acted so lusty.

Getting out of bed, she grimaced as early morning heat penetrated the palm shack. Off came the nightshirt, then she glanced down at her bathing suit, well aware that she desperately needed a bath and clean clothes. The bath could be taken care of in the nearby lagoon. The clean clothes might be a long while in coming.

A really long while. She grabbed another of Jack's t-shirts, slid into it, then braided her hair. Her faith in the sanctity of the universe had been shaken to its very root. For how could she be stranded on the same island with Gramps' best friend, Johnny? And if, against all odds, Johnny was in fact Jack Harrington, then how could she explain that Jack and his men had aged only five years in the intervening decades?

Her stomach bubbled at her. Good God. This conundrum could drive a logical person insane.

And not only that, but chances of rescue off this tiny isle of paradise were now decidedly slim because maybe...somehow, she'd been dragged into a "hole" cut into the very fabric of existence. Located just outside normal time and space.

Oh my God! Her stomach heaved again. The Bermuda triangle!

Holding her hand over her mouth, she hurried outside to find a convenient spot to retch her guts out.

* * *

Cleaning up as best as she could, Larissa followed the jungle path to the wide, open cove. There she spotted Sal and Ian on opposite ends of the beach. She could distinguish between the two of them because of the height difference. All was quiet except for a lone cry of a seagull hovering high in the cloudless sky. Closer to her however, was Jack, casting a net into the turquoise blue water. All three men paid a silent tribute to the sea, probably hoping and praying to spot anything manmade on the horizon.

Her spirits sank even further. How could she tell them their long vigil was not at an end? How could she tell them that everyone they loved was now, most likely, buried in the mists of time?

The answer to that was simple. She couldn't. Not without further proof, anyway.

Waving a hand at her, Jack anchored his net, then trekked over barriers of sand to meet her. Bare-chested and wearing cutoff shorts, he looked as good as those hunky male models decorating swimming edition calendars. She turned away, pretending the rising sun was in her eyes. No, he looked better. Thank goodness Ian had interrupted when he did. Otherwise....

"We didn't expect you up so early." Jack led the way toward a grassy mound complete with tree stumps for seats and a large flattened stone as a table. Fresh coconut and other island fruits were piled high in helmet bowls while colorful flowers were strewn around the stone surface.

"Sal prepared the table." As Jack took the position facing the ocean, he picked up a flower by its stem

and gestured for her to sit. "I had no idea he had a romantic heart."

She smiled briefly, but then lowered her gaze to nibble on a piece of coconut. Was Jack really and truly Gramps' old friend? After such a shock to her system, conversation wasn't easy.

"How did you sleep?" he asked.

"Actually, I had a great night's sleep." The zombie-like tone of her voice belied her words. But it was true. Physically she felt fine.

"You look like hell, babe."

A chuck of coconut caught in her throat. Coughing, she flashed reproach at him and reached for a cup of water. "Thanks," she muttered.

"No, really," he insisted. "We're usually so healthy here, but your skin's the shade of an avocado." He stood and beckoned to Ian to leave his position. "Hey, Baker. Doesn't she look like the underside of a rock?"

Larissa tightened her lips. Obviously diplomacy wasn't one of Jack's strong points. But then again, Gramps had always told it like it was, too. She frowned. Gramps and Jack. No wonder her stomach yawned and heaved.

When Ian joined them, his face crinkled up with pleasure. "G'morning, Larry. Er, I'll have to second the captain's appraisal. Anything wrong?"

Wrong? What could be wrong except being on the wrong side of Alice in Wonderland's looking glass?

"No, Ian," she uttered bleakly. "Nothing's wrong."

Without glancing up, she could tell they stared at her. Taking a big sigh, she reprimanded herself. She had no proof that these men were throwbacks to the 1940s. And more than that, she didn't want proof. As least not now. Maybe there was still hope Abby and Avery would find her.

"I, um, I must've eaten something that disagreed with me, that's all." She managed a grin at Ian.

"Technicolor yawn and all that."

Instead of reassuring them, they both seemed ill-at-ease. Ian made a low whistle and Jack narrowed his darkened eyes. "This morning you were nauseous?"

"Yes. Is that a crime?" She stood and defiantly placed her hands on hips.

"No, no. Not at all." Ian eased her back down. "You just sit now, luv, and...rest, eh? That's the ticket. Eat up and don't upset yourself."

She couldn't figure them out, but then again, she had bigger problems. Much bigger. Somehow, she had to come up with a solution to this problem. Defeat wasn't acceptable. All she had to do was put together the clues to figure out the answer to this puzzle. After all, that's what she did at work, and she rarely had any trouble there. She needed to gather the information and think.

But the men were waiting for her to reply. "Um, thanks, Ian, but I'm really not hungry. I think I'd like to--"

"Take a nap." Jack scooped up a handful of grapes and stuffed them into his mouth. "Yeah, you do that while we get back to scanning the sea."

She had to laugh. "I just woke up."

Skewing his lips, he kicked a fallen palm branch out of his way. "Christ, isn't that what women in your condition are supposed to do? Sleep?"

"Women in my condition," she deliberately repeated. "And what condition is that?"

Ian smoothed down his mustache. "Er, maybe she isn't aware...." He got up in a hurry. "I think I see Sal waving to me. I'll, er, see you both later." Ian took off down the beach, leaving hollowed out footprints in the sand.

Jack snorted. "Coward," he called out, but there was no malice in his tone. "You see, babe, cranky females aren't Baker's specialty. Nor mine. So why don't you rest--"

"You think I'm pregnant, don't you?" How bizarre, but what else could he be talking about? And she really was starting to get hot under the collar with him calling her "babe" all the time.

He shrugged, then pulled out a pocket knife and speared a large piece of fruit.

"Why, Jack? Just because I was sick?"

"I've got to get back on watch, babe. To be truthful, yeah, morning sickness, and your fainting, and your, how do I say it, free and easy nature."

Flipping back her braid, she flared her nostrils. "You mean last night?"

He hooked his thumbs on the belt loops of his cutoffs and glared at her. "That and you making a point to let me know you lost your virginity."

For a moment, she was speechless. "Well, you're certainly blunt, aren't you?" How could she have ever conceived of going to bed with this impossible chauvinist pig. Or prig. "And, for your information, I'm not pregnant. End of story."

Larissa stood, deciding on her next move. She might be way off base with her Bermuda Triangle theory. After all, hundreds of other ships and planes had disappeared within the confines of its boundaries: from the Sargasso Sea, north of Haiti, to Miami, and to Bermuda. So where were *those* survivors? Or the wreckage? Other than pirates--buccaneer types or not--this island was only inhabited by four men. Plus lucky, lucky her.

Maybe she also should join the search for the Abernathy yacht. Another pair of eyes, however nearsighted, against the backdrop of brilliant blue on brilliant blue would be a good idea. And if strange and peculiar things were the order of business on this island, then maybe her friends could cut through the fog and find her. She could hope, anyway.

Jack, though, was like a dog with a bone. Or a little boy with his toy gun. He wouldn't let the subject drop. "Are you sure? Maybe you and that Avery fellow."

She pointed a hostile finger at him. "You are way out of line,...Mr. Harrington. I'm not pregnant, and that's all you need to know. It's impossible. Besides, Avery and I are just friends."

The darn man had the audacity to smirk. "Just friends? Hell, I can attest to your overfriendly ways last night."

Oh, he made her so angry. "Disappointed, Harrington? Well, too bad. Don't look for that to be happening again."

He raised one of his dark eyebrows. "Pity," was all he said.

Squinting, she shielded her eyes from the sun. By the look of things, she'd be a toasty brown color by nightfall. "Now that that's settled, I think I'll take look-out up on the cliff."

Not that she relished the idea of losing more skin while scaling that jagged piece of volcanic rock, but she had to show him she wasn't some porcelain doll, either. Especially a pregnant, porcelain doll.

"Suit yourself." He started for the shoreline. With the tide now out, he'd have a bit of a hike. Stopping, he turned back toward her. "By the way, why'd you want to know about Nat Terrell? And how'd you know he always calls me Johnny boy?"

Just the mention of Gramps' name made her eyes tear. Gosh, she missed him so. But it wouldn't do for Jack to see her cry. Probably would add more fuel to the fire concerning her non-existent pregnancy. "Just a lucky guess," she prevaricated. "See you later."

Tramping through the sand, Larissa headed for the large promontory. One way or another, she was going to get off this exotic outpost from hell.

* * *

Dinnertime around the stone pit fire would be a somber affair. At least it would be for Jack. The day had yielded nothing but eyestrain and sunburned skin. Other than a few fleecy clouds hovering nearby, there was nothing to be seen out in the ocean but sky, water, and an occasional seagull. Damn.

A few feet away, Baker and Flannery played catch with a dilapidated leather football--Flannery's personal property that survived heavy, daily usage. Good thing it hadn't completely deflated. To take the edge off the day's lack of success, the men needed a healthy way to release some aggression.

As Scarpelli was chief cook tonight, Jack mentally prepared himself for burnt tern. Sniffing the air, he was not disappointed. Ten teeny, headless, featherless birds roasted on the spit--two for each person.

He made a face. For some reason, he wasn't very hungry. He'd give his second tern to Larissa.

Larissa. Squatting down, he cast a long gaze at his shack which now housed the delicious, desirable, and all-too-free-with-her-favors Larissa. Hell, last night he nearly had a hernia, straining as he did to keep from pouncing on her. She had been so close, so close he could feel her wondrous scent weaving through his skin, making his hair stand on end...not to mention another part of his body. Sometimes magic wasn't all potions and witchcraft. She radiated the real thing--the ol' black magic variety.

He ran the tip of his tongue over his dry lips. If only he had a cigarette to take the edge off. His nerves, so brittle before, were just about to snap.

"Do you think the birds are ready, Captain?" With a stick, Scarpelli poked a tiny breast of tern, causing juicy liquid to sizzle on the rocks below.

"Yeah, Sal. And here comes our guest of honor now." As if pulled up like a marionette, Jack stood on his feet. Larissa, barefoot and beautiful, was dressed for the occasion. Along with his undershirt, she wore a white petaled flower in her hair and somehow had strung colorful island blossoms together in a lei.

His blood pressure must've soared off the charts. Christ Almighty. They were all red-blooded males here. What the hell was she trying to do?

Flannery stopped in his tracks to gawk at her, allowing the football to smack into his chest. Baker, also visibly disconcerted, closed the hapless Brooklyn boy's opened mouth and roped him in toward the food.

Weighted down by thoughts of everyone's uncertain future, Jack sat on a flattened stone and stared at the well-cooked birds. He'd let the others play host with Larissa tonight.

"Hi guys," she twittered as if she didn't have a care in the world.

Jack looked away in disgust. She certainly was in rare form, he'd give her that much.

After heaping lavish praise on the cook and their nearly burnt "chicken" dinner, as she called it, she

settled down next to Baker and fluttered those emerald orbs at him. "I hear you've got guard duty tonight, Ian. Would you mind if I go along with you and scout out the cave?"

Jack did a slow burn. He couldn't help it. What the hell did she want to go to the cave for? Sightseeing? Amateur spelunker, and all that?

Baker answered with his customary composure. "Don't think that'd be a good idea, luv. You know, could be lions and tigers and bears lurking around out there." His wide grin wrinkled that rubbery face of his. "See? I keep up with the cinema--saw 'The Wizard of Oz,' don't you know? Funny thing though, all along I thought they were talking about Australia!"

Nodding at Baker, Jack showed his approval of the Aussie's diversionary tactics. For if something peculiar happened around the cave, the last thing they needed was to worry about the girl...or rather woman, as she was so quick to point out.

But there was no stopping Larissa. As she leaned forward, a strange twinkle gleamed in her eyes. "It's not lions, tigers, or bears I'm concerned about. It's getting off this island. I mean, what if, for whatever reason, my friends don't find us? Then what?"

"Then we're stuck, that's what." Jack savagely chewed on a piece of coconut flesh, then spit out an inedible part.

She ignored him. "Sal, you said those pirates came out of the cave, then returned to it. I take it they haven't been seen since."

"That's right, ma'am." Scarpelli stuck a crude toothpick in his mouth to hang out like a cigarette. "We combed the inner recesses of the entire area, but couldn't find 'em. Downright spooky."

Flannery's big ears seemed to flap agreement. "Yeah, especially seeing that I watched 'em go in. Five of them, there were."

"Don't mind the twins." Baker flashed his dimples at her. "They exaggerate sometimes."

Larissa couldn't keep the surprise from showing on her face. "Sal and Danny are twins?"

Jack cracked his knuckles and took a deep breath. "Identical," he exhaled. All four of them had a laugh at her expense.

With a mysterious little smile, she remained quiet until their amusement subsided. "I still want to go. It sounds to me like there's something unusual about that cave. I'm going, either with or without you, Ian."

"Bloody well with me then, Larry." Baker massaged his bristles until they stood on end. But he wasn't pleased. None of them were.

Jack rallied to his men's side. "So you think you can find something we've missed, is that right, Miss Perfect? What the hell makes you so special?"

She primly folded her hands in her lap. "Well, with my training in electronics, I might be able to--"

The others were more polite, but he made a rude noise. "Sal, wouldn't you say it's time to cut through this crap and clean up?"

Reddening, Scarpelli started his chores. Flannery also got up to gather scraps of food for the goat.

Tugging on Jack's sleeve, Larissa flashed an appeal at him. "You did mention a 'shimmering,' didn't you? That could mean any number of things."

She puzzled him. She really did. He glanced at Baker to discover his thoughts. Living together for five

years sometimes rendered speech unnecessary. Baker lifted his sun-bleached eyebrows as if to say, "What do we have to lose?"

Taking Baker's cue, Jack settled down. "So where'd you get this training of yours?"

"In grad school. MIT--Massachusetts Institute of Technology, plus for my job as a signals analyst, I often have additional training--"

"Hell." Jack shook his head. Beautiful and smart. A deadly combination.

Baker sat up at attention. "Signals analyst? Does that have something to do with breaking enemy codes?"

Larissa slowly nodded as if being cautious with her answer. "Yes, that's one way to phrase it."

The Aussie could hardly contain himself. "Ho! I know someone in the Foreign Office. A pip of a gal I wined and dined back in Sydney. She's the one responsible for me being here, in a manner of speaking."

Like a prize Bantam cock, he jumped up and strutted his stuff. "Impressed her with my smarts. I've a knack for deciphering gibberish," he bragged. "I worked on breaking the Japanese code--revealing plans to invade Midway Island back in '42, don't you know?"

Larissa's eyes widened as large as saucers, obviously impressed with Baker's key role in that crucial battle in the Pacific. A tinge of jealousy stabbed at Jack. For some damn reason, he wanted to impress Larissa, too.

"So my sheila asked if I cared to join a Brit decoding operation going on in Bermuda," Baker continued. "As my next assignment was to be in the wilds of Borneo...I said yes!"

Flannery and Scarpelli dissolved into laughter. "Tell Larry about the monkeys!" Flannery urged.

Baker gave a wide-brimmed smile. "Familiar with that part of town, Larry? No? Its claim to fame is being the home of the proboscis monkey--cousin of the big schnozzola, Jimmy Durante. Closest thing to sheilas around there."

"And so, to avoid going to a "sheila"-less island," Jack interrupted, "you opted for Bermuda to decipher letters from German spies. But we all ended up here, "sheila"-less anyway."

Winking at Larissa, Baker sat back down. "Until now."

Yeah, right. All male gazes turned toward Larissa. And she blushed as deeply as a maiden caught naked.

"Hard to believe you're a working girl, Larry." Baker scratched at his thinning hair.

Jack waved him silent. That was enough Aussie talk. "Yeah, but her working makes sense. You know, with rationing and everything. And women taking jobs so their men can enlist to fight. Remember the posters of Rosie the Riveter, pushing up her sleeves to get the job done? Women working in steel mills and such to keep the war effort up. A noble cause, anyway."

But that thought disturbed him. Larissa didn't have a husband, but maybe she had a boyfriend.

Rising, Jack held his hand out to help her up. "Tell you what, babe. I'll go with you to the cave, so Baker can concentrate."

"Fine." Her smile was like candy, melting in his mouth. "Let's go now while it's still daylight."

Baker wiped his hands on his shorts, then joined them. "This'd better not turn into a bloody tea party."

Deep inside, Jack agreed with his co-pilot. Hopefully, Larissa wasn't satisfying some voyeuristic urge.

Leaving Flannery and Scarpelli to do the clean up, Jack used his large machete knife to cut jungle growth hanging down in their path. Time would soon tell if Miss Larissa Parish could back up her outlandish claims. Electronics, grad school, MIT. Christ, why'd she have to be a goddamn brain?

Chapter Five

Although the dense rainforest retained the day's steaming heat, Larissa shivered anyway as she followed the two men deep into the lush, tropical jungle. Twilight would soon fall...and then night, erasing whatever light the sun had been kind enough to grant. Nighttime fears, so easily dismissed during the day, quickly would come swooping down to prey upon the irrational part of her mind.

That doesn't matter, she told herself firmly. Investigating the cave might be the only way out of this bizarre situation. So the sooner it was done, the better.

The men tramped on ahead of her, as surefooted as one could expect over near-virgin trails. Ian led the way, leaving Jack to follow behind him. Which allowed her to gaze upon Jack's strong, muscled legs, his broad shoulders, and his tight, cute butt without embarrassment of discovery. But the knowledge that Jack Harrington was, in all likelihood, Gramps' old friend, well, that truly was too much to comprehend. What would Gramps have thought? What would he have said?

Never mind. She continued her scolding. That doesn't matter, either.

As they placed one foot after another, the roar of a distant waterfall kept them company, filling in for makeshift conversation. The roar grew louder, so they must've been approaching it. After hiking over hill and dale, hither and yon, she spotted a clearing ahead. Opening up before them was the most magnificent, breathtaking view. Wiping debris off her forehead, she stopped by the water's edge to drink in the sight. Mother Nature surely deserved a pat on the back for creating this tiny spot of heaven on earth.

"This...this is gorgeous!" she managed to blurt out. Majestically tumbling over a cliff at speeds she could only guess, the falls rushed down into the lagoon, spraying them with cool droplets of water. A faint rainbow made its appearance at the base of the falls.

"Too right!" Ian flashed a grin. "Would be downright paradise if it wasn't so deadly." Setting into the soft dirt an unlit torch he'd carried, he gestured toward a dark hole cut into the cliff. "Meaning the cave, Larry. The cave's deadly. It's a beaut of a tunnel, all right. Sometimes I even think it hums."

She studied the entrance to the "musical" cave. Carved into the rocks, this doorway into the bowels of the earth was like a gigantic, inverted "U." But deeper into the cave, the tunnel seemed to collapse upon itself. Of course, looks might've been deceiving. From where she stood, ink-jet blackness obscured the view.

Oddly enough, Jack glanced at his watch, then lit his own torch that he carried. "Enough talk. Are you going in or not, babe?"

Mr. Personality. She brushed back strands of stray hair, squared her shoulders, and sauntered up to him. "That's what I came for. Shall we?"

Ian entered first. "Every evening, we take a walkabout, scouting the closest chambers to the entrance. Bloody spooky, it is. Nary a sound but for the eerie dripping of water somewhere in the cave."

As she suspected, the passageway grew smaller until even she stooped over to proceed. Never before claustrophobic, she began to have a very intimate understanding of this particular pathological condition. Hands sweaty, heart pounding, she struggled to keep up with the men. 'Cause if she didn't, then that meant she'd be left behind...alone...in the dark.

Ian's cheery voice rang out ahead of her. "This here's what we call Grand Central Station."

Stepping down slippery, limestone stairs naturally sculpted into the rock, Larissa walked into a

fantastically vaulted interior cave to join Ian and Jack. Some type of peculiar lighting or glow illuminated the enormous area, casting brilliant colored shadows and revealing gigantic icicle-like formations hanging from the roof--stalactites, and from the floor--stalagmites.

"Wow." Impressive as the chamber was, it also was extremely frightening. A massive army could've been hiding behind those grotesque lime carbonate deposits. She shivered. "I sure do feel tiny."

An obviously reluctant grin split Jack's somber face. "That's because you *are* tiny. So, as Baker says, this is Grand Central. There are three separate chambers leading off this one, with innumerable branches off those. Some of them extend for miles underground." He shrugged. "But, as far as we know, none of these subterranean systems have an outlet to the island. This is the only way in or out."

His words echoed in the vast, empty space around them. Rubbing her upper arms, she wished she'd worn something warmer. Or, more to the point, she wished she didn't have to be here at all.

Still holding the torch with his left hand, he drummed his fingers against his right thigh. "Well, Miss Perfect, here's the cave with its unholy shimmering. You went to graduate school. What do you make of it? Hmmn?"

She bit back a grin. She called him Mr. Personality, and he thought her Miss Perfect. Did she really give the impression that she thought she was flawless? "Gosh, Jack, I'm flattered you think I can come up with an answer after only...five minutes, but I'm sorry to say scientific research usually takes longer than that."

Ian laughed good-naturedly. "Now, children," he reprimanded. "Let's not fight."

"Christ, I knew she was just hot air. All women are." Jack stomped around the cavern, briefly lighting the hulking stalagmites. "Let's do the rounds so we can get the hell out of this stinking cave." Handing the torch to Ian, Jack stepped into the darkness to scout the closer entrances into the chamber.

Larissa sighed. Jack was in a snit, again. But she had to be fair about it. If she'd been trapped on an island for an ungodly length of time, would she react any better?

She had to pray. Please, God, I don't want to find out!

Reaching over to one of the colossal limestone deposits, she touched its slimy surface. A strange pulsing seemed to vibrate into her fingertips. Almost like an electrical charge...producing a magnetic field! She felt energized, strong, and more alive.

Goodness! Many researchers believed that the earth's natural geomagnetic field was crucial for life on this planet to function optimally. Support for this observation could be found in the weakness and poor health early astronauts suffered when returning to earth. To combat this, space suits now included a magnetic lining, eliminating many of the previous discomforts. Even her own alma mater, MIT, conducted studies of magnets to determine the effect on health.

The longer she stared at the limestone formation, the more it seemed as if it did shimmer, or maybe even hum, with a fantastic power. "Do either of you see--"

Someone grabbed her right arm just above the elbow. It had to have been Jack because she could see Ian with the flickering torch. He pulled her so hard, she almost lost her balance. "Jack! Stop it!" Goodness, brute strength and Jack Harrington seemed to go hand in hand, didn't it? She yanked her arm away, imagining vivid, blotchy bruises on her skin.

"Jack, I don't appreciate you--"

To her surprise, he appeared on her left. "What the hell are you blathering about now?"

Ouch, her right shoulder radiated pain as if it had almost been pulled out of its socket. As she glared at

him, her nostrils flared. "I'm 'blathering' about how roughly you tugged on my arm. Almost wrenched it out."

She expected an apology, but was sadly disappointed.

"Wasn't me, babe." Then, suddenly, he frowned and checked, of all things, that darn watch of his! The strangest look covered his face--one of...fear? Too quickly for her to register the movement, he snaked his arm around her and hurtled her away from the rock. Tersely, he shouted, "Baker! Stopped again!" The words seemed to contain a wealth of meaning.

She couldn't catch herself, so she ended up sprawled out on the limestone floor. But the pain of rock against flesh didn't hurt as much as the realization that someone else had gripped her arm. She gulped. Someone else, like one of those murdering pirates. But, where had he come from? And where in the world did he go?

Ian came running, and the two of them circled the stalagmite. Trembling like the proverbial leaf, she watched them scour the area.

After who knew how long, Jack wiped his hands on his shorts. "Nothing," he pronounced. "I don't like it. Don't like it one bit." He glanced at his watch, then gestured toward Baker. "No longer stopped. C'mon, let's go. I'm standing guard with you tonight."

"After you tuck this little lady in back at camp, Captain." Ian walked over to Larissa and curved his arm around her shoulders, easing her upright. "You all right, luv? Fair near curls my hair, what's left of it, to think of those blighters getting their hands on you."

"I'm fine, Ian." She appreciated the warmth of his arm and his comforting nearness. "But how about if I stay here with you?" There was no way she could return to the shack by herself even in the daytime. If she stayed, then Jack wouldn't have to leave Ian by himself.

Jack reclaimed the torch. "I hate to break up this love-fest but it's time to go." He led the way out of the cavern back into the tunnel.

After an infinite number of steps entombed in darkness, they finally reached the outside. She inhaled deeply, thankful to experience unencumbered air. Ian helped her sit on a smooth, flat stone, then lit the torch he'd previously set in the dirt. "You rest a moment. Be right back." Off he went to have a whispered powwow with Jack.

She shook her head. Hard to get used to this male chivalry thing. Another big sigh and she ambled over to them. "Okay, guys. Here's the deal. Something's brewing in the cave, right? I think the two of you should be on guard--together. It's safer." She shrugged. "I can't find my way back alone, so I'll just stay here. Don't worry about me."

Jack pulled on his lower lip. "No. I'll take you back--"

"And leave Ian alone to face whatever might come out of that cave? I appreciate the thought, but I think we'd all feel safer with the two of you watching for boogiemen."

Lifting his eyebrow, Jack took her arm and turned it, palm side up. "Boogiemen usually don't leave bruises, babe."

Oh, boy. He was right. Dark indigo blotches appeared on her upper arm, visible even in the scant light.

She reclaimed her arm, then turned her gaze on Ian. "What do you say? I'll just curl up over by that palm tree, out of the way. You won't even know I'm there."

His high intensity grin was at maximum wattage. "Ho, we'll bloody well know, won't we, Harrington?"

Jack almost grunted. "I still don't like it--"

It was Larissa's turn to grin. "Overruled!" She headed for her temporary bed, ready to camp out under the open sky. The roar of the waterfall would lull her to sleep. On her knees, she gathered moss, grass, and dried leaves to make a soft mattress. Actually, this great outdoors business wasn't half bad. "G'night," she called out before lying down.

Closing her eyes, she snuggled into the "bed." Goodness, but it had been quite a day.

A gentle fluttering against her bare legs caused her to jump up. "No, no, lie back down." Jack, knelt beside her and eased her into a prone position again. Bare chested, he'd removed his button down shirt and spread it over her body. He completed his ministrations by tucking the shirt under her chin.

His manly scent drifted up to her. "Mmm," she murmured. "I do like your bedside manner." Oh, gosh. Where in the world did that come from? The heat of embarrassment enflamed her face, but fortunately, the night hid her blushes.

"Good to know I'm not slipping." Chuckling, he smoothed a strand of hair from her face. "Pleasant dreams, Larissa."

Without getting up, she watched as he walked back to Ian and the cave. Then she exhaled deeply. No, Jack, you're not slipping. Not at all. Planning to fill those pleasant dreams with a certain captain, Larissa closed her eyes to sleep.

* * *

La cueva del Diablo. The Devil's Cave. In the gloom of the hot, Caribbean night, young Estrella Mercado watched the Devil's Cave crackle with eerie, unholy green lights. "Madre de Dios," she whispered from behind her hiding place. "It's coming! The end of the world is coming."

Instead of earth's apocalypse however, two of the remaining inglés came walking out of the cave. She spat out her hatred. English pigs! But no matter how strong her loathing, she took care to remain concealed behind the sacred mangrove tree, its tangled vine-like roots providing effective cover against the velvety, summer sky. Her dark hair and skin also cooperated to keep her out of sight.

"Wot happened?" asked the fat one named Gore. Or rather, he used to be fat before they got stranded on this island.

"Well, I dunno," Reinhold, the tall one, replied. "There wuz that magic light, just like the time we broke through 'n slit that fancy cove's throat. Blimey! Those were the days! Anyways, I reckon I wuz able to stick me hand through again, and don't you know, I grabbed an armful of female flesh, all right 'n tight!" He smacked his lips, now flapping because his gums no longer held teeth.

Estrella shuddered. Evidently it was time to doctor the men's food again with white willow root to wilt their most offending members. She adjusted the tight cloth now binding her budding breasts. Every day, she thanked the good Lord above for deceiving these men--these pirates--into thinking she was not yet a woman. At fifteen, she appeared to be no more than ten. Even depraved, quarrelsome drunkards had no wish to bed una nióa, a child. But the time was coming...and soon. Last night, Gore had eyed her with undisguised lust, while the other remaining inglés scratched at their genitals to relieve their pent-up frustration.

"The liddle lovey, whoever she wuz, pulled away from me, though." Reinhold stomped passed the mangrove, intent on his loss. "So she be gone."

Gore slapped the other man on the back. "There's always Estrella." His beady eyes shone in the blackness of the night. "No matter wot her ma said, I feel it in me bones she's older 'n she lets on. " His grin revealed missing teeth. "I feel it in this bone as well!"

Estrella didn't need to look to see him massage his crotch. Filthy, filthy beggar. And the mere mention of her dear, sainted mother brought tears to her eyes. They had been so happy, just the two of them back home in Caracas. But then the pirate ship landed in Venezuela, stealing women to cook for them...and service their unnatural desires.

She wiped her eyes on a ragged sleeve. All the others had died soon after the mysterious storm stranded them in this unholy land with la cueva del Diablo. Only Mamá still lived, sheltering Estrella as only a mother could. But now Mamá looked down on her from heaven, while the five inglés left drew straws on who would be the first to bed Estrella.

"I've a feeling, too." As Reinhold walked into the rainforest, his raspy voice drifted back toward her. "I'm thinking that cave's ready for us t'go through one more time. Wot do ya say we come again tomorrow night 'n yank that lovey back with us. Mayhap we'll get lucky 'n slash a few throats along the way." He brandished his cutlass in preparation, the sharp sword dully gleaming in the light of the quarter moon.

"Aye!" Gore lumbered from side to side next to his fellow pig. "We'll do just that. 'N if yer lovey gets away, then I've first dibs on Estrella!"

"Done!"

Estrella waited until only the soft waves of the ocean kept her company. It was time for her to take her chances and leave these inglés, to head for safety to the other side of the island. And yet....

She turned back to stare at la cueva del Diablo. Strangely enough, the cave continued to pulse with la luz verde. The green light. If the end of the world wasn't coming, then perhaps something else was. Something important enough to delay her departure for just one day.

Pushing back her heavy, thick hair, Estrella picked up her skirts and headed for her secret sanctuary, away from the men. Tomorrow night, she would return once again. If all the angels and saints smiled upon her, then maybe, just maybe, she would find a way to defeat the inglés to finally, finally be free.

* * *

Morning came too early, as it usually did. Without opening her eyes, Larissa stretched out, relieving the kinks in her body. But something was wrong. Something niggled at her. She should've been brushing up against leaves and twigs and grass.

She sat up quickly. The only foliage she saw was the bits and pieces still on her t-shirt. Someone had carried her back to the hut. Someone by the name of Jack Harrington, no doubt.

She didn't know whether to be angry at his audacity or pleased by his thoughtfulness.

Okay, maybe she was a little of both. But now, with the new day just beginning, she had a lot of thinking to do. Thinking pertaining to that darn, peculiar cave.

She stepped outside into an area dappled by hot, tropical sunlight. Another scorcher to frazzle the nerves. The first order of business, though, was to clean up. But rustling among the bushes alerted her that someone was coming, so she waited.

Danny's big, burly form came into view, carrying a jumble of clothes. "'Morning, Larry! I thought you might be up." A devilish twinkle sparkling in his brown eyes showed his appreciation of her still flushed-from-sleep face...and body.

Without thinking, she smoothed down the creases in the t-shirt.

"Figured you'd like a change of clothes. Frocks 'n aprons 'n Hooverettes." He handed her the stack. "Here, see if they fit."

She took them, amazed to see women's things on an all-male desert island. "Hooverettes?" she repeated. Fingering the white organdy frill on a wraparound long dress, she figured a hooverette was like a housecoat, only dressier. Also heaped on top were two dresses plus a floral, old-fashioned, full apron. Goodness, she hadn't seen an apron like that since Grandma's day. Sure looked like authentic 1940s stuff. "How on earth did you get these, Danny?"

He shuffled his feet. "Aw, ain't no mystery there. Went shopping one day in Nassau. Told the guys I bought my girlfriend some presents." Reddening to the roots of his hair, he darted his dark gaze everywhere but at her. "Really though, they're for my sister. But no telling if she'll ever get to wear 'em now, so I thought...you might like 'em."

"Thank you, Danny. That's so sweet of you!" She surprised even herself by kissing his cheek.

"Hot dog!" was his enthusiastic reply. He slapped his cheek as if to prevent the kiss from getting away! "Well, uh, I'd best be getting back. I'm supposed to be watching for that boat. See ya later."

With a heavy stride, he plodded down the path toward the shoreline.

Larissa glanced down at the clothes again. Imagine wearing honest-to-goodness forties' fashions--

"I don't recommend you being so free with your favors, babe." Jack straightened up from leaning against a tree and headed her way. Hanging out of his mouth was a rolled up leaf masquerading as a cigarette. "These men haven't had the pleasure of female companionship in a long time. The only bussing Danny's done lately is with Nana the goat."

She distorted her lips. Jack's Dr. Jekyll had obviously disappeared. Mr. Hyde was out today. "Bussing," she intoned. "What a quaint word. Where I come from, a kiss on the cheek is a sign of gratitude."

"Oh, yeah?" Raising his eyebrow, he offered his cheek. "Aren't you appreciative I tucked you in bed last night?"

Although she wanted to laugh, she held her amusement in check. It wouldn't do to encourage the man. "No, actually, I'm not." Brushing past him, she entered the shack to set down the clothes and get a towel. After bathing, she'd wear one of her new outfits: the frilly hooverette.

Outside once again, she stood with hands on hips. "You still here? Why'd you bring me back, anyway? I thought we agreed Ian shouldn't be left alone."

Jack threw his "cigarette" away, opened up a pouch, and removed a piece of coconut. He held out a chunk for her, but she shook her head. "But Baker wasn't alone. After Sal noticed his watch had stopped, he rushed out to the cave. He and Baker stood guard, while I got rid of the distraction."

"Meaning me?"

He gave her a long, slow grin. "Well, I'm not talking about the goat."

She rolled her eyes. "Okay, you made your point. But I don't understand this business with the watches. Why do you always look at yours? What difference does it make if the watch stops?"

Finishing the coconut, he pulled out his canteen and took a swig. "Water," he pronounced. "Want some?"

"My, all of a sudden, you're so polite. No, thank you. What about the watch?"

He wiped his mouth on his forearm. "It's like this, babe. Every time the damn watch stops, something screwy happens. Flying on this mission, our instruments went south and we crash landed here. The pirates came. You came. Hell, we all came here. And last night, you got grabbed. Et cetera, et cetera, ad nauseam." Cocking his head, he challenged her. "So what's your theory, Miss Scientist?"

Wow. Time stopping. Her legs felt rubbery, so she sank down to rest on a stone. If only she could think this through. It explained so much, but there were still pieces of the puzzle floating around.

Without looking at him, she knew he waited for an answer. Good God, she wished she had one! "I need to think about this, Jack. Maybe, somehow, there's something we can do."

"Well, don't think about it too long. We need you to pull your weight around here now that we're posting a guard at the cave during the day, and double at night." He lifted a section of her hair off her shoulder, then dropped it. "You could use a bath."

She stood. "Thanks for stating the obvious."

"Want your back scrubbed?" His smile was a bit crooked.

She smiled back at him. "Not by you." But she gave him only half her attention. Inwardly, she churned over this latest information. "After I clean up, do you want me to go to the cave or watch for the yacht?"

He gazed at her with clear, steely grey eyes. "The yacht."

"Fine. And who's cook tonight? Danny? I'll have him show me the ins and outs of island cuisine. That okay with you?"

"Just peachy, babe." Turning, he started back toward the jungle, presumably toward the cave.

"One other thing, Jack." She waited for him to face her again. "Please stop calling me 'babe.' I like it better when you use my name."

"Do you?" he asked sardonically. "I'll keep that in mind, babe." Moving quickly, he soon disappeared into the rainforest.

As she headed toward the fresh water lagoon, Larissa put him and his unfathomable ways out of her mind. The salvation of this ragtag group depended upon her. She knew that as surely as she knew certain magnetic conditions were known to distort the flow of time. And since those conditions happened to be in place on this isle of sand and coral, perhaps that explained why she now had the pleasure of drooling over Gramps' best friend from World War II.

Chapter Six

Growing weary with this exercise in futility, Jack welcomed his guard replacement with open arms. "Nothing happening, Sal," he sighed as he stood and brushed dirt and sand from his rear. "It's been as quiet as a tomb." Which really was a good thing, but given everyone's high expectations concerning Larissa's arrival, well...damn! He'd give anything to get off this island. Even a brief dip in the cool waters of the lagoon hadn't helped clear the cobwebs from his brain.

Scarpelli lumbered his hefty self over to the pool and nodded. "I don't understand this place, Captain. Sometimes the cave almost crackles with electricity, then other times--completely dead."

"Like now," Jack agreed. "Well, you keep watch and I'll be back after dinner. Danny and I have tonight's shift." Scooping up water, he slicked back his hair. "I think I'll see how our resident woman is getting along."

Sitting back against a tree, Scarpelli aimed his gaze at the mouth of the cave. "Go easy on her, Captain. Y'see, I think she's starting to realize her friends ain't coming for her."

Or for us. Jack handed the gun over to the navigator. "Yeah, poor kid. Stuck here with four horny bastards!"

Scarpelli's infamous blush vividly rose to the occasion.

Jack grinned and swatted him on the back. "See you later." But as he tramped through the jungle, his grin faded. Hope faded. Thoughts of rescue faded. All of them had been buoyed by anticipation, but now, cold reality and disillusionment sifted sharply through their souls. Optimism didn't last long when day after day paraded on and on and on in an endless passage of time. No matter what smarty-pants Larissa Parish believed, she was trapped as thoroughly as he and his men.

Heading for the shoreline, he glanced at the camp's pit fire and saw the object of everyone's desire bending over the heated stones. She wore one of the long and lanky housedresses Flannery had given her. Her slim upper arms framed in frilly short sleeves, her tiny waist accented by the tied bow, and the v-neckline too low for her own good, she was a feminine treat for male eyes. Positively mouthwatering.

Also mouthwatering was the delicious aroma rising from the pit fire. After five years of seafood and roasted whatever, it took all his concentration not to grab the pot containing the freshly baked food and stuff it into his mouth. However, given a choice between the two treats, it was a certainty he would've chosen Larissa.

Flannery came up from behind carrying a net loaded with today's catch of fish. "Larry's something, isn't she? Did ya ever smell anything like her cooking? Golly, my mouth's watering to beat the band!"

"Hmmn," was all Jack had to say. "What's she making?"

"Go ask Larry. It's her concoction." Pulling out his large bowie knife, Flannery started cleaning the fish. "Y'know, it's funny. She kinda reminds me of my sister." He gestured with the blade. "Don't you go upsetting her none."

Warned off twice. Knowingly or not, she'd turned the twins into protectors.

Well, perhaps that was better than them turning into predators. "Okay, Danny." Jack strolled the short way over to Larissa, eyeing her pleasantly rounded bottom. "I think I'd kill for whatever it is you're baking."

She turned around to smile at him. "You needn't do anything so drastic! Besides, I don't know how it'll taste. Tern eggs, goat milk, coconut shreds, and ground nuts as a paste--really unorthodox ingredients.

Sounds yummy, doesn't it?"

"It'll do." He gazed down at her gaping neckline. All this and a good cook, too. She'd make some man a terrific housewife. So why wasn't she married? Women didn't want a career out of the home; that was a known fact.

When she stood, her wraparound dress opened to reveal one of those dynamite limbs of hers. Christ, the day just blazed a million times hotter. He walked away from the sights, sounds, and smells that were driving him out of his mind.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

He ran his hand over his hair. "Er, I thought I'd take a nap since I'm on guard duty tonight." Giving in to a devilish urge, he lifted his eyebrow. "Care to join me?"

She gave him a slow grin. "Sure! For the guard duty, of course." Then she left the hot stones to stand in from of him. Barefoot, she was just a little bit of a thing. Just fluff and hair and soft, pliant skin.

Hell, around her he could hardly even think. Rubbing the bridge of his nose, he prayed she'd take the hint that he was tired. "Listen, do me a favor, babe. No guard duty for you, okay? It's hard enough to concentrate without you flaunting yourself around."

Although her lips thinned, she maintained an even tone. "I'll take that as a compliment, Jack. Tell you what. Let's make a deal. I won't pester you to guard the cave if you'll show me the wreckage of your plane. Is it far from here?"

"Far? No. Fine. Anything to get you to stay away from the cave." He waved his arm. "C'mon, it's this way."

"Anything?" She hurried her steps to catch up with him.

He couldn't help laughing. "You are some piece of work, you know that? So why haven't you gotten married? You should have four kids by now."

"Four? That's a little excessive." She stopped to fuss at a tree branch caught on the frills of her neckline.

"Here. Let me." He reached over to remove the snag and was rewarded with the vision of her collarbone plus the rounded swell of her breast. The soft sound of her breathing, her floral scent, the inviting curve of her hip--holy Jesus. How was a man supposed to cope?

Muttering, he finished the job and tore himself away from her. With clenched fists, he continued his stomp through the jungle.

Again, she had to run to catch up to him. "As for marriage, Jack, I'm just not ready to take the plunge." She paused. "I told my grandfather that no one ever measured up to him."

"Grandpa Nat," he said for clarification.

Larissa lowered her voice. "Yes, Grandpa Nat."

Jack chewed on the coincidence of two Nats with green eyes. "He must've been quite an ol' cougar."

She avoided looking at him. "That he was."

Suddenly, inexplicably, an all consuming jealousy took hold of Jack. He hacked away at the hanging vines and vegetation as a way to exorcise his frustration. Reaching the B-17, he pocketed his knife and leaned up by the crushed wreckage of the plane. "Want to know something strange? I think I envy your grandpa."

Dames. Who could figure them out? By all that was holy, if she didn't have tears in those emerald orbs of hers.

Clearing her throat, she changed the subject by stating the obvious. "Um, so this is it."

Mangled almost beyond recognition, "Sweet Revenge" bravely rested amidst the heavy jungle growth of vines, moss, and palm fronds. Even the nose art had suffered damage; the "suggestive" stance of the little honey painted on the tip had long since disappeared. Amazing that none of the crew had died from the crash. Nothing more serious than a sore neck or wrenched back suffered.

Larissa patted the noble Flying Fortress' hull and did a brief walkabout 'round "Sweet Revenge." "Four engines, three bladed propellers, ball turret, large white star painted on the side. Well, it sure does look like a World War II plane, doesn't it?"

Now that was a strange thing to say. Narrowing his gaze, he folded his arms across his chest. "Yeah, it sure does."

Her color mimicking one of those rosy tropical flowers, she paced in front of the plane, every now and then glancing up at it and shaking her head. "Um, I need to tell you something, Jack. Something so incredible, that, naturally, it's going to be hard for you to believe."

"Naturally." He skewed his lips, trying hard not to laugh. She looked so serious, almost as bad as if Adolf Hitler had popped out from behind the trees. And after all, what could be as bad as that?

"Your plane disappeared, isn't that right? Or maybe a better way to phrase it is that the plane traveling with you, the 'Flying Mamba', vanished. One minute you were on your way to Bermuda, and then you had instrument trouble and ended up here."

He hadn't told her any of that, but most likely Baker had spilled the beans. "Yeah, what about it?"

Exhaling some troubled air, she rubbed her hands together as if to warm them. "This geologic area, from the Sargasso Sea to Miami and to Bermuda, is called the Bermuda Triangle. Or the Devil's Triangle. Hundreds of ships and scores of planes have been reported missing from these waters."

That was news to him. Instead of showing interest, though, Jack yawned. "What's that to me, babe?"

Christ, her eyes puckered up again as if preparing to cry. What the hell was bothering her?

"Jack, you don't understand. The 'Flying Mamba' didn't disappear. *Your* plane did. And the 'Adolphus' didn't disappear. *I* did. Under mysterious circumstances, don't you think? The Bermuda Triangle is one of the two places on earth where magnetic compasses actually do point true north, instead of magnetic north. There are tremendous magnetic field anomalies of unexplained origin in this area."

"So what does that mean in plain English?" He didn't like the sound of whatever she was talking about. The fact of it was, yeah, sure, he knew magnetic forces played a role in his plane's demise. Spinning gyros and compasses all indicated some type of magnetic disturbance.

Another thought intruded. "And where the hell are the other victims of this Bermuda Triangle business? Hundreds of ships? Scores of planes?" He held out his hands with palms open. "Just you, me, and the three bears, babe."

She shuddered. "I can't explain that, other than saying that there's a good possibility other survivors of the Triangle are still around...but someplace else. Look, I know this sounds outrageous, but I've read one physicist's theory that speculates these magnetic field anomalies might be caused by briefly-appearing mini-wormholes. You know about wormholes or black holes, right? They're like tunnels into another dimension of reality...as in a different time, a different place. I never put any stock in that idea before, but...what if it's true?"

Oh, Christ. Wormholes and black holes? What the hell were *they*? The poor girl was completely loopy. And that knowledge stabbed him as deeply as his entrapment here on the island. Gazing down at her crystalline eyes, he sighed, knowing he'd just lost the battle. "Larissa," he breathed, "just shut up now." He stepped closer and gripped her shoulders. Memorizing every feature of her adorable face, he leaned over and tentatively kissed her lips.

Hell, it was good, real good. A savage hammering pounded through his veins, urging him to do more, to go further. He could no longer deny himself. Curving his arm around her, he eliminated any space between them and kissed her full and hard upon her pliant lips.

She groaned. Reaching up, she entwined her fingers in his hair. Her rounded breasts flattened against him and her heart beat with the fury of jungle drums.

Dear Jesus, he was a man gone wild. Deepening the kiss, he savored her sweet honeyed taste, all the while smoothing sensuous circles on her back through the dress' thin material. His need for her burned his soul, just as his fears for her sanity rocked him to his very core. How could he help his perfect, troubled angel?

"Darlin'," he whispered, trailing his lips down the velvet column of her neck. The v-neckline easily slid down past her shoulder so he could continue his stream of kisses. "Let's forget about all this nonsense." Returning to the rapture of her lips, he murmured in between kisses. "There's just you and me here, alone. Let's make the most of this tropical paradise."

His fingers couldn't wait for her answer. With one arm still curved around her, he pressed his other palm over the sensitive swells of her breasts, caressing those delicious melons of femininity. Under the gauzy fabric of her dress, her nipples peaked from his touch. "Heaven on earth," he whispered into the shell of her ear. He grew impatient to experience all of her, plunging deep inside her soft inner recesses.

Wide-eyed, she pulled away, staring at him as if she'd never seen him before. "Heaven on earth! Oh my gosh, I...I'm confused." Her silken shoulder exposed to the tropical air, she stood with her breasts trembling, oblivious to her dishabille.

He moved to reclaim her but again, she scooted away.

"No, Jack. You don't understand. You're Gramps' friend! And you're so like him." She wildly darted her gaze, glancing at everything but him. "I'm scared. Really scared. I've never felt this way before."

"No need to be scared, darlin'. I'll take care of you." By all that was holy, he meant it, too. Somehow his unreasonable bitterness against women melted away. No longer was his bitch of a stepmother, nor his trashy stepsisters, nor anyone else of the female persuasion for that matter, of any importance. Finally, he was free from his past. All that he cared about was Larissa.

He itched to bring her back into the circle of his arms, but by her defensive stance, he knew she wasn't ready.

For some peculiar reason, she lifted her dress up to her knees--which distracted the hell out of him. "I...I'll get us out of here, Jack. I'll find a way. You'll see." Then, to his complete surprise, she sprinted from the plane, off into the dense rainforest without using the almost indiscernible path cut into the foliage.

"Larissa!" he yelled after her. Hell, what in blue blazes was she talking about and why did she feel she had to save his slimy soul? Following her into the jungle, he fought the heavy green growth blocking his way. "Larissa! You'll get lost. Larissa, come back to me! Christ, whatever I did, I apologize. Larissa!"

Hell. He'd done it. He lost track of her. Just a moment of time had passed, but he lost track of her. After traipsing around the rainforest for ten more minutes, he oriented himself to find his own path back. Then he could continue looking with the others.

Maybe she could find the trail back to camp. Maybe. Shoulders slumped, he wiped a bit of wetness from his eyes. Damn, a man wasn't supposed to cry, but in the space of a few seconds, he'd gone from tasting paradise, to losing the one thing good about this island. The one good thing about his lousy, wasted life.

"Larissa," he spoke softly as his eyes blurred with tears. "Why'd you run away from me?" He stopped by a thick tree trunk, and glanced helplessly at the surrounding jungle. "Why do you feel threatened by me?"

Suddenly, Larissa's earlier words replayed in his mind. What the hell did she mean about him being her grandfather's friend?

* * *

Larissa finally slowed her frenetic pace. Good thing, too, for jungle leaves and branches tore at her dress, her hair, her skin. Pulling tangled hair back from her face, she stopped to listen for the waterfall's mighty roar. From here, it was just a whisper, but she headed in its direction.

Back there with Jack, she'd panicked. She could admit that. Without thinking, she ran away from the only man who could turn her into the consistency of oatmeal: a quivering mass of soft, gooey mush. Not a romantic image, but accurate, all the same. All her life, she steered clear of relationships and getting emotionally involved with men. Affairs were just that: affairs. Nothing deep or forever. Nothing even approximating the "death do us part" kind of feeling. And that was the way she wanted it.

And that was still the way she wanted it, but Jack, oh Jack. He was different. She hugged her arms into her chest. His virile taste lingered on her lips. The touch of his heated hands continued to vibrate on her skin, igniting fires that refused to be put out. Her logical side screamed that he was a contemporary of her grandfather, that he shouldn't, in fact, even exist. Her emotional side countered with a very emotional answer. "Forget logic," her heart calmly insisted. "A miracle brought you two together. Don't waste it."

She took her heart's advice. Who knew what the future held on this tropical isle outside normal time and space? There were no guarantees she could ever return to her own world, her own life. What was important here was to try to escape. To help all these men escape. They'd been through enough torture. They depended on her. Everyone depended on her. Ever since she was a child, everyone always counted on her to have a clear, level head.

Well, she wasn't going to disappoint Jack. Approaching the cave, she spotted Sal watching the entrance while throwing pebbles into the lagoon. She slowed her steps to crouch behind a huge palm tree with branches extended like a fan. Inside the cave, a magnetic barrier separated two different worlds. Or maybe the same world but in two different times. She had to be there when the portal opened. She had to get to the other side and see if somehow, they could all go home.

Picking up a small, flat stone, she hurled it into the distance to distract her shy friend. Amidst the fall of rushing water, Sal heard it splash toward the other end of the lagoon. Curious, he got up and walked to the edge of the water.

Just the break she was looking for. She moved stealthily, ducking into the cave as he scanned the surface of the pool. Heart thumping up a storm, she inched her way inside, dreading the dark, darker, darkest interior of the tunnel.

Wow. She gulped down her fear. If only she'd brought a torch, or a match, or a knife to defend herself, for goodness sake.

Trying to remember the path, she made her way carefully until at last she reached Grand Central Station. As before, a strange glow vibrated within the chamber, centered around one particular limestone deposit. Touching the rock, she felt an electrical charge, but it was not as powerful as yesterday. Which probably meant it wasn't ready to yawn open to reveal what was on the other side. Meaning she'd have to be patient and wait.

Larissa sank down and leaned against the cold, intimidating stalagmite. She'd bide her time by reliving those last few minutes of heaven with Jack. A couple of hours still remained until he and Danny came to relieve Sal...and do the walkabout in the cave.

Crossing her fingers, she sighed. And prayed that she'd find the means for their escape before Jack found her.

* * *

Larissa hadn't returned to camp. And Jack hadn't found her. No one had. Lost in the maze of the jungle, she'd effectively vanished.

He rubbed his now-bristled chin. Vanished as "Sweet Revenge" had. Vanished as she had off the deck of the "Adolphus." Vanished along with hundreds of ships and scores of planes.

Not bothering to eat dinner, Jack went to his shack where her presence touched all his belongings. He needed to immerse himself in her any way he could. His comb contained a few of her precious hairs. His undershirt was imbedded with her special fragrance. He picked up her tiny swimsuit, crushed it to his chest, then carefully refolded it on the bed.

What had she said? "You're Gramps' friend." Grandpa Nat. The one that had just died. Her grandfather couldn't possibly be Nat Terrell. Hell, good ol' Nat was a year younger than him.

Jack violently shook his head. Funny thing was, though, she did remind him of Nat.

He shut his eyes, blocking out the sight of her as she had once stood in the shack. "Where are you, Larissa? Come back to me."

Straightening, he noticed her battered wristwatch lying next to his worn deck of cards. He hadn't really observed it before, but it was a damn peculiar timepiece. The words "Star Trek" were written on the face of it and the second hand was actually some kind of odd circular disk with cylinders. "U.S.S. Enterprise" it said at the bottom of an insignia.

Hmmn. The U.S.S. Enterprise was one of the Navy's top aircraft carriers. Damn fine combat record, in fact. Probably saw more action in the Pacific than the other carriers. This picture sure didn't look like the Enterprise he knew.

Pressing a knob on the side, he received the surprise of his life: a tinny tune warbled out from the watch. Damn peculiar. He'd never seen or heard anything like it...ever.

He flipped it over and read something about a quartz movement. Then his heart stopped. Registered and copyrighted by Paramount Pictures. Sure, he knew Paramount. One of his favorite actors worked for Paramount: Gary Cooper. The copyright date, though, froze his soul. Engraved in steel was the year: 1998.

1998. Christ, the year was only 1948. In 1998, he'd be...eighty-three. And hell, the watch looked as if a few more years had passed since newly minted.

His bones turning into the dust he'd probably be in 1998, Jack collapsed back on the bed. Nat would be

an old man too, certainly old enough to be a grandfather. Old enough to have a granddaughter scatter his ashes.

More of her words assaulted his memory. When asked about the war, she'd hesitated. "Um, that war? Well, we won," she'd said. And if she thought his best friend Nat was her grandfather, well, hell, of course that would explain her fainting dead away. What else had she said? Something about another dimension of reality...as in a different time, a different place.

Jack's blood ran cold. Icy. By all that was holy, he didn't understand any of this stinking business. All he knew was that he wanted Larissa. And Larissa--

"Wait one damn minute!" Jumping to his feet, he gathered up supplies that might come in handy for where he was headed next. That poor sweet babe wanted to save all their damn hides. And how? By going into that goddamn cave.

Running into camp, he spotted Flannery feeding the goat. "Danny! Where's Baker? I have an awful feeling Larissa's down by the cave."

Flannery dropped the goat's food, causing Nana to bleat in protest.

Fortunately, Baker trotted up from the beach, only slightly out of breath. "Then what are we doing here? C'mon!"

Urgency fueled their flight. Paying no mind to the hidden denizens of the forest, they single-mindedly traveled as one. At their less-than-silent approach, Scarpelli rose to his solid feet. "Did you find her?"

Jack quickly scanned the surrounding area. "I think she's already in the cave." A prickly feeling compelled him to glance at his watch. "Sweet Jesus! It's stopped."

To a man, they clambered inside, in formation. Reaching the chamber, an eerie cloud of olive green hung over the rock formations. But it was concentrated the strongest by the limestone protrusion where Larissa had been grabbed.

He spotted her dark hair swaying with her movements. She stood next to a shimmering, sparkling curtain of light, color, and static. "Larissa, don't!"

She bit her lip, maybe torn with indecision. "I have to. I'll be back for all of you."

Before he could move closer, she slipped her hand inside that mass of electrical confusion. Her hand disappeared, and then so did she.

"Larissa!" He didn't care who heard his pain--who sensed his need. Filling the space she so recently vacated, he could feel her spirit but not her body. Larissa was no longer in the cave.

Chapter Seven

"I'm going in after her." Jack took a step toward the iridescent doorway into...whatever the hell was behind it, but was stopped by a strong pair of hands.

"Captain, you should take the gun." Scarpelli reached in his pocket and pulled out the semiautomatic weapon. "You might need it."

Baker also had a few words. "Let's put a rope around you, mate. We'll hold onto it at this end while you go...explore, eh? Give us three tugs and we'll pull you in."

"Fine. Just hurry it up." There was no telling what lay beyond his arm's reach, so to speak. And once inside it, there was no guarantee he could return. Baker's rope idea was a good one. "Thanks, Ian." Jack shook the Aussie's hand, then Scarpelli's and Flannery's as well.

"Well, enough of this crap. I'll be right..." Jack's voice faltered. Staring at the pulsating, crackling curtain almost stole away his resolve. Just what had Larissa walked into? "I'll be right back."

"Godspeed," whispered Flannery.

"Take care," mumbled Scarpelli.

And Baker had the audacity to wink. "Have a bloody good time, mate!"

Jack laughed. "Right. Hell, I can't complain about being bored anymore, now can I?" Taking a deep breath, he gave a quick salute to his friends, then strode inside the magnetic field.

* * *

Making sure she arrived through the gateway in one piece, Larissa tiptoed cautiously out of the chamber. It looked the same, almost identical. The only difference she noticed was in the color of the formations. Instead of dusky greys to alabaster whites, the stalactites and stalagmites were earthy reds and browns.

She reached the mouth of the cave and glanced around at, again, similar surroundings. All evidence pointed to this portal opening up into the same place, but in a different time. Earlier in time? Or later--in the future? That was the two billion dollar question.

The sun had not yet reached the horizon, still casting orange and pink rays into a stack of fleecy white clouds. Turning away from the waterfall, she headed for the beach.

A callused hand covered her mouth, preventing her scream of surprise. "Not so fast, me liddle lovey!" The man wrapped his arm around her waist and hauled her over towards a huge mangrove tree.

Good God! He was one of those dreadful pirates! Imprisoned as she was, she couldn't see the man, but heavens, she could sure smell him. Flailing her arms and kicking her feet did nothing to free her from this reprobate.

"I'd save me strength if I wuz you, lovey!" He shoved a rancid cloth between his hand and her mouth to prevent her from biting him. "Yer gonna need it by the time us men are through with ya!"

Dear God, her eyes nearly popped out of her head. There could be no mistaking his intention.

"Gore! Gore!" The man yelled out close to her ear. "Guess wot I found, me laddie! It's the liddle lovey, 'n she's all ours."

Another man, dressed in rags from the eighteenth century, sauntered over to blast halitosis into her face. "Well, I'll be brooked! Gorbliney, she's prettier than Estrella, ain't she? And such rum rigging,

too. Never seen the like o' these clothes." He yanked on the housedress neckline until her shoulder lay exposed to his rheumy, yellowed gaze.

Fear could be a great motivator. And there were no ifs, ands, or buts about it now: she was scared witless. Struggling to find a weakness in her captor's grasp, she pulled twelve different ways--to no avail.

"A game one, eh, Reinhold?" The pudgy one, Gore, smiled, showing more gaps in his teeth than a jack-o'-lantern. "Tell you wot, lovey." Amidst his rows of wrinkles, he leered at her. "You should take a nap now." With that, he bashed a rock against her head.

Slipping into unconsciousness, she strained to concentrate on the positive. At least she'd learned one thing: the magnetic time portal had opened up into the past.

* * *

Jack barged through the barrier, or whatever the hell it was, as a quarterback forged toward the opposing team's end zone. "Larissa!" He glanced around the chamber, then quieted down as his voice reverberated off the stalactites and stalagmites. Such thundering would only upset the delicate limestone structures and possibly create a cave-in.

She couldn't hear him, anyway. He stood alone in the cavern, without his three friends who were now waiting on the other side. Hell, that little gal moved fast when she wanted to; he'd only been about three minutes behind her.

Sighing, he removed the rope tied around his waist. A person didn't easily give up a lifeline, but it had to be done. He retied the cord to a sturdy stone protuberance. Most likely Larissa had walked outside, well beyond the range of the rope.

"Larissa!" he called out in a more moderate tone. Quickly passing through the arched tunnel, he stepped outside into the early evening air. By all that was holy, this damn place looked the same as his own private hellhole. But how in Christ's name could that be?

"Larissa!" he hissed out again. "Where the hell did you go?" Scratching his head, he scanned the sandy path by the cave, hoping for footprints, inspiration,...something!

Hope sank. Nothing definite caught his eye. Which left only guesses. And his best guess was that she probably trekked her way to the sea.

Mouth grimly set, he maneuvered around a huge mangrove tree to head into the jungle.

A rustling noise stopped him, coming from the gnarled roots and branches of the tree. He gazed up to see a pair of bare feet, belonging to a child. As quick as a cat, the child--a girl--jumped off her perch and stared at him, even as he stared at her.

The girl had long, tangled hair the color of ripe blackberries, and a small, elfin face complete with wide, dark eyes. Smudged with dirt and dressed in a tattered old-fashioned gown, she cautiously circled him, sizing him up.

Amused, but pressed for time, he extended his arm to stop her movements, but she stepped away from him. "Er, hello there, little girl. Listen, did you see a woman leave this cave?"

She cocked her head to one side. "S."

Excitement flooded his veins. "Where the hel--I mean where did she go?" Could the child understand English?

The girl, small enough to be ten, but with mature wisdom sparkling in her eyes, asked, "Is she your

woman, señor?"

His mouth dropped. What the hell difference did that make? Feeling a flush rise up on his face, he stuttered, "Er, yes, she is. So where--"

She pulled on his arm. "Then you must come! Those inglés took her. They'll hurt her."

Christ! The pirates. "C'mon, you lead the way, kid." Moving fast, he then the gun to reassure himself that it still was stuck in the waistband of his shorts. "How many are there? And how long ago did they take her?"

"Two took her--Gore and Reinhold, pero, but, in toto there are five. As for time, señor, only seis minutos have passed. Six."

With every step he took deeper into the rainforest, he sweated. Six minutes. Maybe not a whole helluva lot could be done in six minutes. A tremor of apprehension rocked through him. Maybe. All this danger, and for what? There was nothing here that would help them escape. And now...and now...Larissa, why did you feel you had to do this? Christ, dear sweet Larissa! Innocent little fool.

The girl turned around, flashing a charming grin. "I am called Estrella. Estrella Mercado."

"Yeah, yeah." He impolitely pushed her ahead. Who cared about introductions at a time like this? "I'm Jack. Harrington. Hurry up."

She held out her expressive hands and fluttered them like birds taking a bath. "Por favor, please, one thing, Señor Jack. You take me back with you, sí?"

Poor kid. Trapped with a band of brigands. But the enticing sway of her small backside caught his attention, causing him to rub his chin. Hmmn, maybe she was older than ten after all.

He schooled his voice to filter out his concern for Larissa. "Sure thing, Estrella. Just help me find my, er, woman, okay?"

"Con mucho gusto, Señor Jack. Gladly. These inglés, I spit on them." And so she did. "English pigs!"

At a clearing up ahead, Estrella crouched down and placed her finger to her lips. "Your woman," she whispered, "she has been hit in la cabeza. The head. The two inglés, they fight over her."

Like an angel, Larissa lay on a mound of sand and dirt. If he hadn't been aware of the circumstances, or the blood spotting her temple, he would've thought she was sleeping. The even rise and fall of her chest was a good sign. Another good sign was that she remained clothed in her housedress. Thank Christ for that.

Indicating to Estrella that she look after Larissa, Jack turned his focus on the two men. Particularly grimy specimens of piratehood, these men both had loose paunches--evidence of a more prosperous time. One tall and the other one broad, they stood under a low hanging palm branch, brandishing short, single-edged swords at each other.

"Straws don't signify, Gore," the tall man growled from a mouth devoid of teeth. "That wuz for Estrella, anyways. I found this 'un 'n I gets to dip me wick first."

While the pirate named Gore replied, Jack formulated a plan. Shooting the pair was the last option, not only because a bullet wound meant instant death or death by infection, but also because the sound of gun shots would bring the other three running. So, the order of the day called for stealth.

Getting rid of Gore was easy. Large rock in hand, Jack sprung out from the bushes to whack the blighter on the side of the head. After a brief spastic dance, the man was out cold. And that left Reinhold.

"Lawd a-mercy!" The tall man gaped at his "friend," then narrowed his weathered gaze at Jack. "Where the devil did ya come from?" As he advanced, he flourished his cutlass. "Fighting for yer ladylove, I'll wager."

Jack grabbed a fallen tree branch to defend himself against the man's expert thrusts and parries, if those terms could be applied to a cutlass rather than a rapier. Positioning himself as a barricade between Larissa and the pirate, he itched to pull the gun from his belt.

Reinhold bared his blackened gums. "Well, she belongs t'me now, me fine fancy cove!" He beckoned with his left hand. "Come on then, let's have at it!"

The man was quick, leaving Jack no time to reach his pistol. Sometimes it was best to focus on only one thing at a time. Like now. Any break in his concentration might result in a savage swipe to his midsection with a bloodied, sharp sword. Damn! Too late to lament that he should've gone for the easier route and shot the blazes out of this bandit.

One minute and one mighty crack later, Jack's branch had been neatly cut in two.

"Now 'tis yer turn, me laddie." The pirate leered. "I've been told that a slice through the belly is not such a bad way t'die."

Suddenly, they both heard a breathless voice. "Reinhold." It was Estrella, looking much...different. The peasant top of her gown was pulled low, off her shoulders, to reveal a smooth expanse of tempting skin. Her long skirt had been ripped to expose a shapely young leg. The girl's childish features now curved into a seductive smile. "I have become a woman, Reinhold. I desire you to be my first."

Bless that child's adolescent heart. Reinhold's attention fleetingly darted in her direction, allowing Jack to batter his fist once, then twice against the hard bone of the man's jaw. Three times was the charm. Head lolling, the pirate sank to his knees, then joined his "brother" in the ignominious pile of dirt.

Jack wiped his forehead. "All my thanks, Estrella. Good job! Now let's get the hel--get out of here." Lifting a still unconscious Larissa, he once again was amazed at how little she weighed and how snugly she fit in his arms. Thank Christ he had found her. He turned to Estrella. "We probably don't have much time before those two come after us."

"I run like the wind. To la cueva del Diablo, sí?"

Jack grunted. If he were to name that cave, it would've been something much worse.

Darkness now loomed deep and thick over the jungle. As fast as they could, they reached the open archway of the cave. About to enter, he stopped when Larissa opened those lustrous eyes of hers.

"J-Jack!" With a glance, she took in their surroundings. "What are you doing here?"

"Saving your butt." He grinned to take away the sting of his words.

Estrella tugged on his arm. "Señor Jack! I hear the inglés. They are coming!"

Damn. "C'mon. Let's go inside."

Larissa struggled to get down, so he gently placed her back on her feet. Unsteady for just a second, she squared her shoulders, ready for the next step. What a trooper. And she placed her female curiosity on hold, not asking about Estrella.

Heading into the tunnel, he set a grueling pace until they reached the rope tied around the limestone protuberance. In the background, he heard unwelcome sounds of pursuit.

"Okay now, listen up. We don't have much time but all we have to do is walk through that barrier." He untied the rope. "Larissa, this is Estrella. She's coming with us."

Enthusiastically, Estrella hopped on one foot. "Sí! Muchas, muchas gracias!" She made a small curtsy to Larissa.

While Larissa spoke to the girl, Jack tugged on the rope three times to alert his men of their arrival. But, damn it all, the stinking rope wouldn't raise off the floor.

Hell, what was going on now? He sprinted over to the shimmering curtain of space only to find that instead of a tall column of green sparkles in the chamber, the flickering lights only flashed at the bottom, near the floor.

Fear, cold and deadly, cramped his stomach muscles.

Larissa ran over, leaned forward, and stuck out her hand at shoulder length. Nothing obstructed her path or his view of her slim fingers wiggling in the air.

"The portal!" she exclaimed. "It's gotten smaller. It's closing!"

True enough. He got on his knees to examine the hole too small for anyone to fit through. It was closing even faster than the distance remaining between them and the pirates.

For once, Jack kept his anger inside. Their only escape back to Baker and the others was now effectively blocked. And the unmistakable sounds of goons entering the tunnel assaulted his ears.

Sweet holy Jesus. What could they do now?

Chapter Eight

Larissa quickly measured the remaining space to the portal. "Estrella! You can fit through. Hurry!"

The poor child wailed her distress. "Madre de Dios, no! Not alone! Por favor, please...do not make me go alone!"

Jack glanced at Larissa, then bent down to look Estrella in the eyes. "We'll do our best to follow you, kiddo." He gave her a swift swat on the rump. "Now go! Follow the rope."

Sniffing, the girl got down on her stomach, began a litany of prayers in Spanish, then crawled, dragging herself to the hole.

Helping the child by pushing her feet, Larissa and Jack were rewarded with a soft whishing sound. Gone. Estrella had gone over to the other side.

Larissa sat back on her heels. Now what?

More noises--and foul words--penetrated the inner recesses of the chamber.

She felt Jack's hand on her shoulder. "Larissa, honey, I'm sorry--"

Inspiration flashed within her. "Dig! We've got to dig, Jack!"

Scooping loose dirt away from the shrinking portal, she gibbered on as fast as her thoughts flew. "Whatever we're dealing with here--you know, different dimensions of reality, a doorway into a different time or place--wouldn't be limited to physical obstructions, like a cave ceiling or floor. If we could just dig deep enough...."

"Understood." He shoveled out earth and stones; debris flew by at a fantastic speed. Together they managed to extend the hole by at least six inches.

"Aye!" Someone's raspy voice reverberated in the chamber. "There they be!"

Oh dear God. The pirates were here.

"Go!" Jack shoved her down into the hole. Strange tingles vibrated up her arms, almost as if the portal were welcoming her.

"But when are you--"

"Just go, dammit!"

Dragging herself forward, she inched her way through the green shimmering haze, barely fitting through the earthen sides of the opening. Dear heavens, would Jack be able to get through, too? One hand pulling on the rope, then the other, she blinked her eyes as her vision blurred, then stabilized. Never had she seen anything as beautiful as Ian Baker's craggy face and Danny's and Sal's--excepting, of course, for Jack's. But soon, he would appear. Soon. Staring at the hole, she bit her lip and began to pray. Dear God, the sparkling static seemed to fade in color.

Everyone spoke at once, but all she could really hear was the crackling from the portal. The only thing that was important was seeing Jack safely back.

Ian helped her to her feet. "Looks like you had a bit of a rough time." He fingered the wound on her temple. "Ran into those bloody pirates, this here ankle-biter was saying."

With a pouting lip, Estrella arched her back to accentuate her breasts. "No, señor, you are wrong. I am a woman!" She batted her lashes at Sal and Danny.

Larissa also blinked her eyes, but for a different reason: to prevent tears from falling. As for Estrella, most likely the girl had never wanted to call attention to her womanhood before. Not with those lecherous pirates around.

Sniffling, Larissa stared at the hole. Where on earth was Jack?

Unknowingly, Sal echoed her thoughts. "Where's the captain? Is he having trouble? We tried pulling on the rope, but the thing didn't want to budge."

Misery didn't adequately describe her emotions. Jack was gone because of her. If she hadn't taken it into her stubborn head to dash across time and space into the unknown, he'd still be here...safe. Blinking could no longer stop the tears, so she dabbed at her eyes. There he was--wherever there was--outnumbered five to one by bloodthirsty, angry pirates. Sure, Jack had a gun, but what good was any of it if he couldn't return?

Turning away, Larissa's lower lip trembled. *Oh, Jack. I love you.*

Love? Her logical side insisted she didn't know the meaning of the word. But her emotional side issued relief that she finally admitted the truth.

"Ho! No need to rent a hearse! Here's our mate now." Ian guided her face back toward the portal.

Elbowing his way out of the darkness, Jack poked his bruised, scraped head through the opening. "Would someone mind giving me a hand?" he calmly asked.

As Ian and Sal pulled Jack out of the hole, she ran to Estrella, giving her a hug. "It's Jack! Oh, dear God, it's Jack!" Then, like a hyper crazy woman, Larissa hugged Danny, then the other two before she could get her hands on Jack. Niagara Falls started to flow. He felt so good, so solid,...so alive.

"Oh, Jack, I'm so sorry," she sobbed into his chest. "I was afraid you wouldn't be able to get through. And it was my f-fault."

He slid his arms up her back, crushing her to him even as she clung to him. Resting his chin on the top of her head, he raised his voice, "Ah, if you boys would excuse us, Larissa and I have some unfinished business."

A chorus of hoots greeted his statement. And she flushed hot with what he'd just implied. Not that she didn't want the same thing. But for some strange reason, she felt shy. Pulling away, she couldn't even bring herself to look into his eyes.

"Actually, mate, I think you'd better take pashing on Larry elsewhere." Ian reached down and held up the rope. Frayed completely through, the remainder of it had been left behind in Piratesville. "Just in case the bloody door decides to open again."

"What's pashing mean, señor?" Estrella piped up.

Looking at Larissa, Jack answered instead. "Kissing."

"Oh." Larissa burned as hot as the midday sun.

Leaving the cave was a decided relief. A cool night breeze eased the fever from her cheeks. Now that her ill-fated adventure was over, all she wanted to do was sleep. But the sight of Jack's broad, muscular back teased her eyes. No, sleep wasn't all she wanted, but right now she churned with a zillion different emotions. She never felt as confused about anything in her life.

Jack dipped his hands into the pool of water and refreshed his face. "Okay, who's guarding tonight? Danny?"

"Yeah, I'll stand watch." Danny accepted the gun from Jack, then slapped Ian on the back. "D'ya want

to keep me company?"

"Lud, it's not like I have something better to do." Ian winked at Larissa. "No worries, luv. Everything will turn out in the wash. Be sure to tuck the ankle-biter in bed, eh?"

The girl in question huffed her displeasure.

Sal came to her rescue. "Estrella's not an ankle-biter, Ian."

"Muchas gracias, señor. Se llama usted Sal? You are called Sal, sí?" Estrella slipped her arm through his.

The darkness couldn't hide Sal's fierce blush. He nodded his response.

Larissa grinned. The little beauty worked fast, didn't she?

Positioning himself against a tree, Ian chuckled. "Ho, she's a lively one. That she is!"

Jack saluted Ian and Danny. "Thanks for your help. I'll relieve you in the morning." He allowed Estrella and Sal to walk ahead, and, to Larissa's discomfort, took her arm for a moonlit stroll back to camp. "So, it boils down to you, me, Sal, and our little hot tamale."

He was being so great about the whole thing. No incriminations. No shaking the finger and saying, "I told you so." She took a steadying breath to prepare for eating crow. "Thank you, Jack, for coming in after me. I...I guess I didn't really accomplish anything by going through the portal. Other than finding out it leads to the past. And it was foolish to even try."

He smoothed his roughened fingers over her hand. "Go easy on yourself, babe. We did a good thing by bringing back Estrella."

Oh goodness. Niagara threatened to flow again.

Up ahead, Sal escorted Estrella to Jack's hut. The girl slipped him a quick kiss, then ducked inside the shack. No doubt blushing redder than an active volcano, Sal headed for his own tent. Leaving Larissa and Jack almost alone...under the stars.

Jack gazed down at her, his eyes dark and intense. "I see Estrella will be sleeping with you." He lifted his lips in a knowing leer. "Or maybe you'd rather have me as a bed partner, hmmn?"

Or maybe I'd rather have you by my side for the rest of our lives. But that thought scared Larissa more than a boatload of pirates ever could.

She stepped away from his delicious nearness. "Um, I think I'd better turn in now."

He took hold of her elbow. "What, no good night kiss?" Pulling her closer, he curved his arm around her waist, sweetly entrapping her. "Even Scarpelli got a kiss, Larissa."

Oh, how her knees buckled. And her breathing quickened. And her heart did dangerous somersaults. With her fingertips, she traced a line down his cheek, now bristled with short, dark stubbles. "A kiss, yes, but not from me, Jack."

With a growl, he captured her lips with his own, and she surrendered to the paradise of his kisses. Deeper, firmer, and more completely than she'd ever thought possible, their mouths merged as one. They caressed each other even as the warm ocean breezes caressed the palm trees of this tropical island.

"He'd better not get one from you." Jack murmured into the shell of her ear.

Funny how those words thrilled her as if he'd just pledged his undying love.

A young voice traveled the distance to where they stood welded to each other. "Señorita Larissa! You

coming to bed?"

With regret, she moved away from Jack, hoping her eyes told him what her heart felt. "Be right there," she called to Estrella. Running the tip of her tongue over her lips, Larissa suddenly was shy again. "I'll...I'll see you tomorrow, then?"

Jack's gaze never left her face. "Count on it, babe."

Nodding, she walked to the shack. Before she entered, she looked back and saw him still watching. Maybe it was silly, but she blew him a kiss, then went inside the black-as-pitch hut. Silly, maybe, but love was love, and she reveled in it.

Of course she tripped on something. Heavens, it was Estrella! "What are you doing on the floor, Estrella?" Larissa reached down to smooth the girl's hair from her face. "The bed's only big enough for one. You take it and I'll--"

"No, no. I like it here, on el suelo. The ground." Estrella tucked her hands under her chin and stared at Larissa as she sat on the bed. "What is it like to be in love, señorita?"

To give herself time to think before answering, Larissa removed the housedress and slid into a t-shirt. "Goodness, aren't you a little young to be asking that question?"

Indignation swelled in the child's voice. "I have fifteen years! Soon I will have sixteen."

This little snip of a girl? Larissa eased down on the bed, resting her weary bones. "You sure fooled those pirates, didn't you? Smart cookie!"

The child-woman snorted. "Bah! Those inglés!" Her hardened tone carried a wealth of meaning. Then, she spoke wistfully. "Won't you tell me about love, señorita?"

"I don't know if I can really answer your question, sweetie. I--"

"But you must! You are Señor Jack's woman, sí?"

Jack's woman. A soft smile curved Larissa's lips. Yes, for right now and right here, she was Jack's woman. Maybe they'd be here for the rest of their lives. Suddenly that wasn't such an awful prospect. She stretched over to hold the girl's hand. "Love is deep. All consuming. To love is to place your trust, your heart, your future in another's hands." She gave a quick squeeze to Estrella's fingers. "One day you will find your love."

"As you have found yours, sí?"

Closing her eyes, Larissa smiled. "Yes. As I have found mine. Good-night, sweetie."

Her smile refusing to leave her lips, Larissa drifted off to sleep thinking about that new-found knowledge.

* * *

A dream--a terrible dream--shook Larissa to the depths of her soul. She was on one side of the magnetic portal, standing in the twenty-first century, while Jack was on the other, in the year 1948. Reaching through the barrier, she desperately tried to grab him, to pull him through. Somehow she couldn't quite hold onto him and he kept slipping away. The portal grew narrower and narrower until it was completely gone.

"No!" She sat up, slashing the air with her hand. Breathing hard, she glanced around the shack, recognition slow in coming. She gulped down hard and wiped perspiration from her brow.

That nightmare had seemed so real! Fortunately, Estrella hadn't been disturbed. She remained curled up

into a ball, asleep with the purity of youth.

But Larissa couldn't have been more awake. Getting to her feet, she tiptoed from the shack. A restlessness stirred her spirit, urging her to contemplate the sights and sounds of Mother Nature as the world slept. The star-filled night greeted her as did the breaking surf undulating against the sandy beach.

A gust of wind playfully rushed about her legs, circling up her t-shirt to cool her overheated skin. As one thing led to another, thoughts of overheated bodies gave rise to images of Jack.

Jack. As if she had inner radar, she turned her head and saw him, seated in the exact spot where they had been previously entwined. Like a silhouette against the darkness, he watched her, without making a sound.

Smiling, she hiked over to him, hips swaying. She knew what she had to do. What she needed to do. "Hello, Jack," she purred. "Couldn't sleep?"

He rolled something in his mouth. One of those sea grape leaves. "You could say that."

She stood in front of him, every sense enflamed by the sight of him. Woman's intuition told her he'd been sitting there the whole time. That he hadn't had even five winks, let alone forty. "You waited for me to tuck you in, didn't you?"

He threw the leaf down and looked away. "Hell, Larissa."

That was all he said. All he did. He didn't make a move to claim her.

"Okay, flyboy." She dredged up that expression from some antiquated movie. "I guess it's up to me." Slightly bending forward, she took hold of the bottom of her t-shirt, then started to take it off.

He was silent and motionless no longer. "Holy Jesus, Larissa!" Pulling her down beside him, he straightened her shirt. "Somebody might--"

Smiling with superior knowledge, she paraphrased his words. "Nobody here but you, me, and the nanny goat, Jack." No longer afraid of showing her love, she straddled his thighs, then completed her previous action by whipping off her shirt.

Whatever had held him in check, no longer lassoed him in. He crushed her to his chest, burying his face in her breasts. As he fondled all of her, loving her, she moaned from the absolute pleasure of his heated touch. Goodness gracious, she almost came right then and there.

With a quick flick of the wrist, he disposed of his shorts, and now, as bare as she, spread his length against her on the cool, accommodating bed of sand.

"Larissa, honey," he whispered through fevered kisses, exploring every part of her body. "You're so beautiful." Fingering her nipples, he stroked them until they peaked, painfully seeking release...as did the rest of her.

"Oh Jack. Jack, I want you." She arched up, pressing her hips against his, inviting him to enter, to know all of her.

Running her hands down his sculptured, muscled back, and stopping on the rock hard surface of his buttocks, she guided him toward her, needing to feel him--firm and stiff--inside her. Never before had she experienced this magic, this all encompassing desire fulfilling a man's God-given drive and a woman's sacred destiny. Love, pure and binding, reached out to envelop the two of them in its haze of sweet perfume.

With his knee, Jack swept aside her leg to claim what was rightfully his. Larissa gasped as he entered

her, savoring each thrust, deeper and stronger as he left his mark on her body and soul. Sweeping her hands up into the tangle of his hair, she clung to him, as love progressed, as they melted together. He tasted her; she tasted him. Drenched in love's embrace, they lifted up to the heavens, sparkling like fires burning brightly in the sky. As one, they climaxed, scattering those stars into the myriad of lights known as the Milky Way.

Larissa found her voice first. "My God! That was wonderful." She nuzzled his neck, now thickly corded with sweat. "You were wonderful."

Gently rolling together so now she lay on top, Jack smoothed his hands down her back to rest on the curve of her derriere. "I...I love you, Larissa Parish."

Surprised, she gazed up into his dark, complex grey eyes but she had no way of knowing what thoughts were passing through that thick skull of his. "Well, I love you too, Jack Harrington!"

Settling her head against the comfort of his chest, she listened to the even rhythm of his breathing. Without meaning to, she closed her eyes. Jack loved her! He really did. A man like Jack didn't volunteer personal information like that unless it was true. Feeling whole for the first time in her life, she drifted off to sleep.

* * *

Sleep was something Jack'd had plenty of over the past five years. So he wasn't interested in wasting any of this special time with Larissa by succumbing to nature's automatic call for repose. No, gazing at her as she slept was all the rest he needed. Her long hair tangled from their lovemaking, her dark eyelashes sweeping down against her cheeks, her sweet lips softly twitching to a dream only she would know--everything about her fascinated him. In the early glow of twilight, he devoured the ripe, full swell of her breasts, the concave curve of her taut stomach, and the sensuous sight of her curly, moist mound.

Sighing, he slipped into his shorts, then carefully eased her back into her undershirt, covering her perfection. Morning would soon arrive, bringing the possibility of Scarpelli or Estrella waking up for a stroll on the beach.

Jack smoothed back a strand of Larissa's hair, revealing the healed-over head wound from yesterday. Thank Jesus she hadn't suffered more hurt than that.

Her eyes fluttered open and she gave him a wide, dreamy smile. "'Morning, Jack." Yawning, she sat up and stretched. "Mmm, do you feel as fabulous as I do?"

He hardened at the sight of her. She certainly did feel fabulous! But that wasn't what she meant. "Yeah," he grinned. "I feel pretty damn good."

She snuggled next to him, watching the first rays of dawn approach. "You know, I've been thinking. Since we can't escape this place through the cave, we've got to find another way."

Given what had transpired between them, he was disappointed her words were not of love. Sliding his arm around her waist, he leaned his head against hers. "I don't know if I want to escape, Larissa. There's no place I'd rather be than right here, with you."

Her perfumed fragrance tickled more than his fancy. Too bad the sun was beginning to rise, removing the privacy of the night.

"But we can be together no matter where we are, Jack."

"Can we?" He stared out at the white-tipped waves lapping the shore. The unease that earlier weighed him down resurfaced. "Larissa, I saw your wristwatch. The year engraved on it was 1998." A shudder

refused to be suppressed. "It played some kind of damn music, for chrissakes."

She pulled out a coarse blade of grass and fiddled with it. "Actually, the year is two thousand and--"

"You're Nat's granddaughter." He said that as if it were an accusation. But, hell, she had no control over both of them falling into this limboland beyond the realm of understanding.

Forgetting her preoccupation with the grass, she turned his face toward hers. "Yes, that's right. Funny, isn't it? You were born in 1916. Old enough to be my Grandpa Jack!"

Funny didn't do justice to the situation. "Don't call me that," he snapped. "And, actually, the year was 1915. I am...I was a year older than Nat."

She rubbed her hand up and down his arm. "It doesn't matter, Jack. Believe me, you'll adjust to whatever changes there are. I'll help you. You can still be a pilot."

He grit his teeth. Who knew what differences awaited him in Larissa's world? If they could get to Larissa's world. A damn big "if."

Jack suddenly realized he'd never spoken truer words about leaving this island. He really wasn't interested in going back home--not if home meant the twenty-first century.

Standing, he lifted her to her feet and hugged her tightly into his chest. He couldn't think about this bizarre business anymore. "Well, babe, this all is a moot point anyway. We're here and the real world is out there." He gestured with his hand out into the ocean. "Tell you what. Let's grab some shuteye for another hour or so. We can continue our debate later in the day."

She rose up onto her toes to kiss him solidly on the mouth. Heaven on earth! "We'll do that. And maybe tonight, we can...you know, take up where we left off." Stepping back, she blew him a kiss, then walked back to the shack.

The fire she had so unknowingly raised abruptly turned ashen cold. Her teasing words replayed in his mind. Grandpa Jack. Hell, the last thing he wanted was for her to see him as an antiquated, decrepit old man. A relic from the past.

For the first time in five years, he changed his prayer. He did not want to be rescued from this island.

Chapter Nine

Preparing breakfast was easy. As Estrella gathered fresh fruits, Larissa concentrated on scrambling eggs. It was an undemanding activity to focus on while she formulated her plan. Thankfully, last night's lack of sleep hadn't dulled her brain. Perhaps the realization that Jack loved her sharpened her wits for after analyzing the data from many different angles, she finally came up with a solution. A possible solution. No guarantee, of course. But sometimes, the simplest answer was, in fact, the correct answer.

Fingers crossed on this one. She placed an aluminum dish over the pan of eggs to keep them warm, and grabbing the rest of the utensils needed for the meal, called out to Estrella. "I've got everything, sweetie. You go wake up the guys and I'll meet you at the cave."

Following the path out to the waterfall, Larissa indulged in a delicious daydream. If she'd had her druthers, she would have been the one to wake up Jack. Nibbling on his earlobe, raining kisses against the bristles of his jaw, licking his taut nipples...and more. Yeah, he was one mouthwatering hunk, and he depended on her to get them off this island. As they all did.

Straightening her shoulders, she ignored the pebbles and twigs biting into her bare toes. Four days of island living had toughened more than the soles of her feet. She couldn't fail. She wouldn't fail. So now all she had to do was convince everyone to give her scheme a try.

The sound of rushing water indicated she was almost at her destination. Stepping into the clearing, she smiled at Ian and Danny, then almost dropped the food. Instead of sleeping in Ian's hut, Jack was already by the cave, taking a dip in the clear pool of water. And the flash of a white full moon told her he swam without a stitch on.

She licked her lips. If only she could join him!

"Harrington!" Ian shouted out. "Best beware. Larry's caught you in the nuddy!"

No response from Jack other than a splash in the pond.

"Morning, guys." She placed her load down and faced Ian and Danny instead of Jack. "Estrella and I prepared breakfast. We need to talk about a few things so we brought everything here. It's a perfect place for a meeting."

Sniffing the air, Ian rushed over. "Luv, I can't tell you how much I've missed a real home-cooked meal! This smells absolutely smashing. No offense to your cooking, Harrington."

Behind her, Jack got out of the lagoon. She imagined how droplets of water clung to his masculine form, glistening in the morning light.

Too bad they weren't alone!

"None taken, Baker."

Goodness, the very sound of his voice gave her goose-bumps of pleasure.

Now somewhat towel-dried and dressed in his shorts, he moved in front of her to also smell the eggs. "Mmm," he murmured. "Heaven on earth." He winked at her.

Oh, she almost melted!

"Quit your drooling, Jack." Danny handed him a dish. "Here's Sal 'n that little honey wearing my sister's dress. Funny, on her it looks like a gown." His stomach emitted a large growl. "Hey, let's dig in!"

Food was a good way to win men's hearts. And, Larissa hoped, with a full belly, they'd be mellower and more inclined to take her words seriously. She listened to their banter, and even crossed her toes for luck. As far as she knew, only Jack was aware of the discrepancy in their time periods. How would the others take the news?

"Estrella." Ian finished his meal, then smoothed crumbs from his mustache. "Means star, doesn't it? Where are you from, luv?"

The girl had taken pains to look older. She'd pulled her thick hair back and twirled it around into a heavy bun. She also projected a new maturity, wearing a polka dotted, long skirt with the matching bolero top. On her, though, the hem reached the ground, as Danny had said. "From Caracas, Venezuela of the republic of Gran Colombia, señor."

"Gran Colombia?" Sal lowered his bushy eyebrows in thought. "Didn't that have something to do with that Spanish guy, Simon Bolivar?"

Sitting up ramrod straight, Estrella flared her nostrils. "Not a Spaniard, Señor Sal. Señor Bolivar was born in my city, Caracas. My dear sainted mother knew him."

The proverbial pin could've dropped. Larissa glanced at Jack to see if he understood the implication of Estrella's words. He did. Folding his arms across that magnificent chest of his, he lifted the corner of his lips in a quirky smile. "The ball's in your court, babe," he commented to her.

Larissa nodded. It was a good introduction to what she wanted to talk about, anyway. "So, Estrella, that means the year for you is around 1810?"

"Eighteen thirteen was when I was captured, Señorita Larissa. How long I have been on the island, Madre de Dios, no lo sé, I do not know."

Ian threw back his head and laughed. "Ho! I think this ankle-biter has sunbaked on the island too long. She's crackers!"

Larissa held out her hand to forestall the girl's angry outburst. "No, no, Ian...and all of you. Try to keep an open mind." She inhaled deeply, then began. "This is exactly what this meeting is about. The year Estrella arrived on her island was about 1813. For the rest of you, the year was 1943." Larissa glanced at Jack to gauge his thoughts but he gave no outward clue to what was seething inside him. "For me, the year is two thousand and--"

Pandemonium broke loose.

"Naw, you've got to be crackers, too!" was Ian's input.

"That don't make no sense," offered Danny.

And Sal's contribution was stone-cold silence. But his face did turn beet-red.

Larissa held up both hands to try to placate them. "Okay. Listen. I know it sounds crazy, but, as I've explained to Jack, this area of the world is known for enormous magnetic field irregularities that we don't understand. People, ships, and planes disappear over these waters and are never seen again. Like Estrella...like you, Ian...and like me."

She spoke faster so she wouldn't lose them. "You've got to admit something really strange is at work here. You've never seen a boat or plane out searching for you. Not once, in five years. This cave, or la cueva del Diablo, as Estrella calls it, has more potent "magic" in it than one of..." She strained to think of a magician they would know. "...um, Harry Houdini's amazing feats."

Pausing to wipe perspiration from her brow, she shivered slightly. Five pairs of cynical eyes gazing at her shook her to the very core.

"Anyway," she continued, "that's why I was so determined to go through that portal. As odd as it sounds, under certain magnetic conditions, the flow of time somehow gets distorted. But...what we found was the shimmering haze leading back to the past, not the present."

Estrella jumped to her feet and shook her fists. "No! No es verdad! It is not true!" She wildly looked around. "You are all inglés? Is not your king George III?"

Jack easily scooped up the girl, then settled her in his lap. "Hush now," he soothed. "It'll be all right. And actually, we're Americans. North Americans except for this ornery fellow." He hitched his thumb at Ian. "He's an Aussie."

"From the lucky country." Ian winked at her.

Her dark eyes as wide as an owl's, she bit her lip, then quietly sat, content in the comfort of Jack's arms.

Who wouldn't be content? Larissa sighed. She almost envied Estrella. To be tenderly cradled by "tough" guy Jack Harrington! Who would've guessed he had such a way with children?

Giving him a brief smile, Larissa took another breath. "Believe me, I know this is hard to accept as true. But it fits all the facts we have." She cleared her throat. "I've been racking my brain to come up with a plan. Then something Jack did yesterday gave me an idea."

Lifting his eyebrow, he grinned. "Is that so? Do tell," he prodded.

She ignored him. "He stated, 'We're here and the real world is out there,' pointing toward the ocean."

Both Sal and Danny scratched their heads.

She hurried to explain. "You see, very often, the solution to a problem turns out to be right under our noses. We all arrived on the island after going through peculiar storms in the sea, right? Most likely those were magnetic storms. If maybe we could wait until conditions were the same, until a storm appeared again, then we could just go back into the sea the way we came. And maybe, fingers crossed, we'd come out on the other side of wherever this place is."

Phew! A grueling twelve hour day at work wasn't as hard as convincing this audience.

For some reason, Jack frowned. A terrible frown. It curled her toes, causing her to shudder. "I guess you don't think much of my idea, Jack. But it's the only way out for us that I can think of."

He almost grunted. "Why do you think it's your job to come up with an escape?"

Danny punched his captain's arm. "What difference does that make? Hey, I'm tired of waiting. It might work. It might be a real chance to go home. I can't wait to see my family!" His Adam's apple bounced up and down. "Is there anything we can do to bring on a magnetic storm?"

Sadness filled Larissa's heart. She didn't understand Jack. He should've been ecstatic at such a simple plan. Sure, it had risks, but wouldn't he rather try to escape than continue on here...indefinitely?

She started cleanup duty to busy her hands. "Well, every now and then, the sun goes through a cycle which affects the magnetic field on earth. Sometimes the "sun storm" that's created is carried by solar wind, hitting our planet and disrupting electronic transmissions. We're in such a cycle now, so maybe we should be on the lookout for that eerie fog."

Danny furrowed his brow. "Electronic transmissions? You mean like our radio dispatches?"

Nodding, she washed her hands in the lagoon. "And phone calls, and television signals, you know--"

Ian crinkled up his face. "What's television?"

Oh goodness. She bit her lower lip. How could she have forgotten television was in its infancy in 1943?

In fact, it only was officially "born" in 1939 at the New York World's Fair.

Guiding Estrella to her feet, Jack also rose. "It's no big deal. Television is just a big wooden box with about a seven inch viewing screen showing moving images and sounds. Kind of like a miniature motion picture theater."

Estrella wrinkled her nose, obviously not understanding, but Ian made a low whistle, staring at his captain.

Jack continued, "Yeah, I was at the '39 World's Fair, at the RCA exhibit, and watched the president..." He darted his gaze to Larissa. "...Roosevelt, you know, give a speech at the opening ceremony." Then he slid his gaze away.

Something very odd was going on, but whatever it was, she had no clue. "Is that where you're from, Jack? New York? Like Danny and Sal?"

"No." His enigmatic grey eyes reflected pain. "I'm from nowhere in particular. My father was always on the move."

Danny jumped up, eager for action. "Hey, speaking of move, we'd best start getting prepared. We've been sitting on our...rear ends here long enough."

Larissa looked back at Jack. "Right. Do you have a raft that will fit all six of us? When the time comes?"

"In the bomb bay of the plane." He shrugged, turning away. "We can inflate it at any time."

And that was that. Nothing remained of last night's lover. Had she imagined their passionate night locked in each other's arms? "Jack, I don't understand--"

"Take Estrella back to the camp, would you?" He helped the girl over to Larissa. "Poor kid's had a bad shock. Sal and I will be here, guarding the cave. I'll..." Jack took his position by the entrance. "I'll see you later."

Following behind Ian and Danny as they walked into the jungle, Larissa's shoulders slumped. It had to have been a toss up as to who felt worse, her or Estrella.

* * *

Jack was a coward. Okay, he could admit that...to himself, at any rate. A selfish, damn coward. After all, he was the only one who wanted to remain on the island, wasn't he? While everyone else burned to escape, he took the yellowbellied approach by digging his heels in tropical sand. Even though none of them understood what waited for them in Larissa's world, he had to give them credit for facing the unknown. He couldn't stand in his crew's way.

He took out his frustration by doing a quick survey of the cave. Yesterday's coil of rope still remained on the ground, half here in the present, and the other half trapped in the past.

Just like he and his men were. Jack suppressed a shudder. Only in their case, they were caught between the present and the future; time had marched on without them.

Completing his examination, he left the cool interior and stepped out into the heated oven, otherwise known as noontime.

"Find anything, Captain?" Scarpelli called over to him.

"Not a damn thing." Which was good news, to be sure, but Jack made it sound as depressing as his current thoughts. He gestured to Scarpelli to join him by the lagoon's edge at a spot where they both could keep the cave under surveillance.

Jack had no cause to be down in the dumps, not after touching heaven with Larissa. And he owed it to his men to mask his fear of the future. As for his future with Larissa, well, that remained to be seen.

"Captain, er, can I ask you something?" Scarpelli heavily sat down by the water and picked up a smooth stone.

"Sure, shoot."

"Y'see, all this talk about past and future. It kinda confuses me."

"Join the club, Sal." Jack slapped the man on the back, which sent the stone in his hand skimming out onto the water. They watched it hit with a plop, then gracefully sink out of sight.

"Well, I don't care any about that, Captain. It's just that little girl. I'm worried about her. If we do escape, how is she going to manage in such a strange, new world?"

Conjuring up the child's pixie face, Jack smiled. "Actually, Estrella's not so young, and you know, she's one tough cookie. Outwitting those pirates like she did. Keeping them at bay. I bet our Estrella will do just fine..."

The lush jungle growth had parted to reveal Larissa heading toward them. Or rather him. By all that was holy, he damn near salivated just looking at her. "...just fine out there," he finished.

Wiping his forehead, he worked to steady his emotions. It wouldn't do to flaunt their affair in front of the others. The hard glare of her eyes, though, told him she wasn't here for a lovers' chat: what she wanted was a showdown.

Scarpelli must've picked up on the tension. He gave a quick grin, then headed for a leafy palm tree some distance away. "I'll just watch the cave from here, Captain. Looks like you two...need to talk."

"Right." Jack waited until Larissa sat on her heels by his side. "What's up, babe?"

She took a deep breath, which caused her breasts to strain against the ragged t-shirt she wore. "A better question would be 'what's wrong?' I guess you're not riding the waves of euphoria, as I was this morning. In fact, at our meeting you were almost antagonistic." Laying a hand on his thigh, she asked, "Are you regretting what happened between us last night?"

His surprise at her words caught in his throat, causing him to have a coughing fit. "No! Hell, Larissa, of course not!" He covered her hand with his own. "No, it's not you, it's me. Look, if, by some miracle, we do escape from here, I don't want you saddled with an ol' geezer."

There was much more to say, so much so that his heart felt close to bursting. But he couldn't get the words out. Instead he just squeezed her hand.

"Jack! Is that still bothering you?" Her shoulders relaxed and she scooted closer to him. "Don't worry. Everything will work out. You'll see."

Christ, if he could only kiss her now. Glancing over at Scarpelli, he saw the man's attention on everything but Larissa. Jack smiled, then brushed his lips over hers, savoring her sweet taste. Later, tonight, he would continue their island honeymoon.

"Sure," he agreed, feeling much better. She was right. Why should he worry? After all, he had five years under his belt foraging on these sandy beaches. Chances were infinitesimally slim that they'd ever be able to leave the island--damn magnetic storm or not.

Chapter Ten

The day was almost a carbon copy of that deadly day six months ago. Avery Abernathy gripped the railing of the "Adolphus," leaning into the salty breeze. Clear azure skies and calm, friendly waters. Fine boating weather. But then, without warning, all hell had broken loose, claiming Larissa Parish as a casualty.

"I still don't understand why you insisted on traipsing out here, Abby. Right in the heart of hurricane season." He couldn't help the vein of annoyance running through his words. In the middle of some very delicate negotiations, he had no time to drop everything and get sentimental over a dead woman. Morbid thought, anyway, to follow the same course as that awful day and then dump arrangements of funerary flowers over the site of Larry's disappearance.

But his sister would not be denied. "Honestly, Avery, you have all the compassion of a...a dried egg."

Dried egg? He rubbed his chin. What the blazes was Abby talking about? Gazing at her as she stretched out on a chaise lounge, he took stock of the differences in her appearance. Still a bimbo, of course. However, a shadow seemed to haunt her vibrant hazel eyes. Her hair, so curly short before, now hung longer and smooth in a pageboy style just brushing her shoulders. However, the bikini was the same as six months ago, giving the viewer much more than an eyeful. But her previously come-hither expression to any eligible male, had changed into one of intense concentration. What few brain cells his sister possessed now worked at full tilt. On what, though, or on whom he couldn't even begin to guess.

She lowered her sunglasses to give him a quelling stare. "You know I've spent months in therapy over what happened. But nothing helped. Then I talked with a psychic, and she suggested a special ceremony out on the ocean would give me a sense of closure." Sighing, she adjusted her position on the lounge. "I still can't believe Larry's really dead."

Avery turned away to again face the open seas. All this psychic bullshit. Nutty as a fruitcake, that was what Abby was. But just the same, she sometimes balked at repeating conversations from work. "Why do you want to know?" she'd insist, badgering him until he'd have to think up a false reason. So when she demanded he take her back to the Caribbean, he reluctantly agreed. He'd lucked out with the National Security Agency not casting any blame his way, although things had been tense for a few weeks. All in all, if this trip could make Abby forget her newly-found scruples, well then, it was time and money well spent.

A signal from one of his crew alerted Avery that they neared their destination. "We're almost there, Abby. Why don't you get that funeral wreath ready so you can heave it over?"

Sitting up, she pulled on her bikini top, making sure her nipples remained hidden. Peculiar swimsuit to wear on a yacht containing just her brother and two misogynist seamen.

Women. Who could figure them out?

She curved her lips into a sneer. "Remind me to also heave your wreath on top of you when you die."

As she walked down the deck into the cabin, her bottom vigorously wiggled. He shook his head at her seductive form...and her outrageous statement. Bimbo--in capital letters.

But then, his attention was caught by a sight far more mind-boggling than a jiggly ass. The wind had picked up, bringing in a huge, evil, grey cloud. And with the cloud, came jagged lightening with deep purple flashing beams.

Shit! "It's coming," he yelled out to the others. "God help us, but it's coming again."

Jack's days in paradise were about to end. Almost three weeks worth of blissful nights spent in the haven of Larissa's velvety arms. Gone...soon to be gone. And to be replaced by...who knew what?

He sighed. The rumble of thunder couldn't be ignored. Jack got to his feet and stared past the thick growth of trees to the skies beyond. A smoke-grey cloud was forming in the distance...and most likely it headed this way. Which meant soon Larissa would arrive, clamoring to inflate the raft.

He gathered up the few supplies they had by the cave. Her plan, which she had repeatedly talked about over the last few days, contained enough holes to sink a flotilla, but he had to give Larissa her due. It did make sense. It might possibly work. Of course they all might end up drowning in the tempest tossed seas as well. But if they did succeed in getting to the other side, they'd still be stuck in the middle of an extremely vast ocean, no matter what the year...what the century.

But that wasn't what gnawed at his gut. Risk was part of his job, part of every man's job, except they were also responsible for two civilians. Two female civilians. Not that foolhardy Larissa would see it that way.

No, what scared him to the very core of his existence was her words of this new future world that awaited them. A world where fighting the Axis Powers was just a distant memory. No matter what she said, Larissa would have no use for a man handicapped by decades and decades of lost years. She was smart, the smartest woman he'd ever known. She'd grow weary of spoon-feeding him basic information. Oh yeah, she'd be kindness itself for awhile, but sooner or later she'd regret tying herself to him. He'd be a huge liability. A stupid old man yanked out of his own time and thrust into another.

Jack grimaced. Grandpa Jack. That was how she'd see him.

Just as he woke Scarpelli up from a nap, Larissa came bursting into the clearing in all her glory. Her hair cascaded about her slim shoulders, her cheeks flushed pink from running, and her lips sinfully curved into a smile. Yeah, she was an island goddess all right. Jack could worship her, but he could never own her.

"Sal, Jack, I think the storm is coming!" Excitement animated her sweet form. Even his undershirt that she wore seemed to wiggle with emotion.

She reached Scarpelli first, giving him a hug.

"Gee," the navigator said slowly. "It should storm more often!"

Wincing, Jack turned away from the sight of her melting against another man. No, he could never hope to keep her for himself.

She rushed over to him. "Jack! You know what I mean. It looks like a magnetic storm." Briefly enfolding him in a hug, she bounced away with more pent-up energy than a boiling teapot. "Goodness, this is so wonderful! We'll have to get the raft and inflate it."

Watching her dash around the entrance to the cave, obviously looking for things left behind, he sighed more deeply than he'd ever thought possible. He'd lost her already.

"We can only take things that are absolutely necessary." Larissa waved them on. "C'mon, we need to hurry."

"But, Captain." Scarpelli's bushy eyebrows drew together. "Is it safe to leave the cave unguarded?"

Clapping him on the back to urge him forward, Jack nodded at Larissa to lead the way. As much as it pained him, the course was set. They had to try her plan. "We'll still be on the lookout, Sal, but our first duty is to escape."

Allowing Scarpelli to walk by her side, Jack fell behind. Each step took him farther away from her, at

least it seemed that way. If they were successful, then...well, then that was that.

Estrella thrashed through the jungle brush to claim Scarpelli's arm. Over the past two weeks, she had gotten close with the lieutenant. "Senóor Sal" had given way to "Querido" or dear one. To give Scarpelli his due, he always treated the young girl as a sister. The expression behind his eyes though, revealed his true feelings.

"The storm, it comes." Estrella stated the obvious. "What will we do about Nana?"

Sal stopped suddenly and raised his bushy eyebrows. He probably hadn't thought that far ahead about his beloved goat's fate.

Larissa cleared her throat. "Well, um, Nana really would be better off staying here, don't you think?" Turning around to Jack, her green eyes blazed at him to agree.

They were in accord on that issue, anyway. "Yeah, Sal, you wouldn't want to scare the goat silly."

Scarpelli chewed on those words, while Jack chewed on his own thoughts. More clouds rolled in, clashing lightning with thunder. It would be a first-class storm, all right, but would it be the type needed to exit this island Shangri-la?

Reaching the shoreline, he spotted Baker and Flannery readying the inflatable. A small package of supplies was already placed inside the raft. They wouldn't need much, that was certain. This was a one-way trip. Lifting his face to heaven, he said a silent prayer. They all had suffered too much to be defeated.

While Scarpelli took Estrella over to free the frightened goat, Larissa stood next to Jack. A ripple of purple lightning slashed the sky, followed by the resonant roar of a million bass drums. "We probably need to launch it pretty soon, Jack. Do you want to get anything from your shack?"

He looked down at her, loving every exposed inch...and then some. Despite his previous resolve to release her, he couldn't help revealing his true feelings, at least one last time. "No, everything I want is right here."

Her eyes widened, then she leaned closer as if to kiss him.

Baker interrupted, as he usually did. "Time's a-wasting, children. Here's a life preserver. Put it on and we'll be off."

Thankfully, they had enough preservers for all six of them. Jack slipped the white device over her head, then pulled the t-strap from the backside through those curvy legs of hers to attach to the front of the preserver. Hell, how could he resist her? He stepped closer and murmured, "I envy this t-strap."

"Jack?"

She didn't understand what he meant. Maybe she was more innocent than he thought. "Being in between your legs, babe."

He was rewarded by the sight of her blush, then her tongue quickly flickered over her lips. "I want you too, flyboy."

"Here, here, come on then." Baker returned from passing out all the preservers. "The rain's starting to get so thick, we won't feel a little dowsing from the ocean."

"Time to heave ho." Flannery got into the surf now crashing with a fury against the sands. "Let's get this sucker afloat."

As he and Baker steadied the raft, Scarpelli lifted Estrella up and set her down inside. Shivering, she made the sign of the cross, then sat quietly, her face dominated by her large dark eyes. Jack helped

Larissa in, then the four men further eased the raft out into the wild seas. One by one they climbed aboard, not a dry patch of skin remaining on anyone. Scarpelli and Flannery paddled the inflatable, while Baker and Jack bailed water from the inside.

"Which way?" Flannery asked, his voice dying over the wail of winds.

Her long hair soaked around her face, Larissa worried her lower lip with her teeth. Maybe the enormous risk they were taking finally hit her. Her teeth chattered. Yeah, it hit her hard. Seeing her so indecisive tore at his gut. He stopped his actions for a moment, then reached over and patted her hand. "Danny, I say we head for the darkest part of the fog. What do you think, Larissa?"

Through the torrent of rain, she smiled at him. "Sounds like a good idea."

"Let's do it," Baker agreed.

In his or her own way, everyone prayed. Jack didn't need to be a mind-reader to know that fact. Lavender and indigo bolts of lightning danced closer and closer around them, and the heavy buzz of electricity lifted the small hairs on their skin.

And as he remembered all too well, the acrid stench of burning ozone singed his nostrils.

"This is it!" he cried as the raft lifted up in the water. "We're coming through!"

Whether the raft hit the water again, he didn't know. As it had happened five years ago, a surge of nausea struck him. Unconsciousness would momentarily follow for all of them. Reaching out his arm, he strove to keep awake until he linked hands with Larissa. He accomplished his wish, then blacked out. At least he knew they were together.

Chapter Eleven

The first thing Larissa heard was a scream. Quickly shaking off the languor that had infiltrated her limbs, she turned in the direction of the clamor.

"Oh God! Oh God! Oh God!" came repetitious yelling.

Larissa squinted her eyes to see a boat...a large boat with a woman hanging onto the railing, frantically waving.

"Oh, thank God!" Larissa almost repeated the chant. "It's Abby!" Forgetting everything, she made a move to lift up from the raft, but the next second was pulled back down.

"You can't stand up, Larissa. Not without overturning this blasted thing." Jack released her to check on the others. Of all of them, Estrella still remained listless, shivering from the cold or from her fears. Sal curved his arm around her and she snuggled against him. The sun, previously hidden by the storm and rain, now smiled approval on them, returning to bathe them all in its life-giving warmth.

"Your friend sees us," Jack continued. "They'll be here soon."

Larissa sat down, and vigorously waved back at Abby. "Oh, Jack! It worked! We did it!"

Ian peered out into the distance separating the yacht from the raft. "Yeah, looks like we found your friends, Larry. The side of that ship reads 'Adolphus,' all right. But, what the bloody, er, heck is that woman wearing?"

Estrella stared, then blushed pink. "She wears nada. Nothing."

Feeling everyone's gaze on her, Larissa also flushed hotly. "Well, um, that's just a bikini. You know, a swimsuit." A very skimpy swimsuit only Abby would dare wear. Oh dear. Culture shock was starting already.

But that wasn't important right now. Spotting Avery Abernathy on deck, she waved at him too. He gave orders to his crew, causing the yacht to slow down until they were near the raft. To bring them closer, he threw a rope, and Sal pulled on it until the raft was positioned next to "Adolphus" side.

"Larry!" He shouted as he steadied a rope ladder for them to climb. "By all that's wonderful! Geez, this is a miracle!"

Jack nodded at her to go first. When she reached the top, Avery lifted her over and swung her around several times. "Man, oh man! I can't believe it!"

Abby joined him, crying so hard her mascara ran in blackened streaks down her cheeks. "Oh, Larry. Honestly, we thought you were dead."

Talk about a from-the-heart welcome! She gently eased free from Avery's unexpected embrace. Funny how intense emotional events usually broke through a person's reserve. Avery had never touched her before.

She smoothed back her wet hair and gave a little laugh. "Well, it's been an experience, but not the life-after-death kind!" Looking down, she saw no one else had left the raft. "C'mon up, you guys. Don't be shy."

Jack silently regarded her, then helped Estrella over to the ladder. Why were they all so quiet? Wasn't Jack happy now that they were finally off the island?

Larissa turned back to Abby. "You're not going to believe everything that's happened in these past three

weeks. My mom didn't give up hope, did she?"

Brother and sister slid each other a troubled glance, but didn't answer. Why?

Estrella jumped down on deck and stood with her eyes popping out of her head. "Madre de Dios," she muttered staring at sights a nineteenth century person would find unusual.

Larissa took the girl's hand. "Abby and Avery, this is my young friend, Estrella Mercado. She's from Venezuela."

The girl made a sweet curtsy. "Señorita, Señor." She kept her gaze lowered to the deck.

Sal, then Danny, lumbered over the side and Larissa introduced them. Bless them, but they tried hard to avoid feasting on Abby's voluptuous, exposed flesh.

Next came Ian. He mumbled a few words and also stared down at his feet. No doubt the Abernathys thought Larissa's friends were extremely bashful.

At last Jack climbed aboard, carrying the few supplies they'd brought with them. Still unsmiling, he seemed particularly interested in Avery.

"And here's Jack. Captain Jack Harrington." She stood by his side. "They, um, they're in the Air Force."

Avery couldn't hide his surprise. His low brow deepened with puzzlement. "Welcome aboard the 'Adolphus.' We're pleased to meet you all, of course. Pardon me for asking, but where did you come from and how did you find Larry? The nearest island is miles away. I should know; I searched, along with the Coast Guard, for four solid weeks."

Abby solemnly nodded in agreement. "Oh Larry. I'm so glad to see you." Her eyes puddled with tears again.

Four weeks? Larissa shook her head. But she was gone closer to three. Glancing at her friend, she noticed Abby no longer had her hair styled in a cap of curls. Her golden hair was now curved in a much longer, pageboy style. Hair didn't grow to that degree in only three weeks.

Larissa tightened her hands into fists. "How long...was I gone?"

Sniffing, Abby wiped at her eyes. "Six months. This trip was to be my final goodbye to you." She glanced down and adjusted her bikini top.

Ian's normally good natured face frowned in disapproval. He whipped off his t-shirt and handed it to her. "Go cover yourself! We have a child here, don't you see? Those togs barely cover those white pointers of yours."

Oh good gosh. Six months! It was now October? For a second she froze with the enormity of the news...and its implications. But she couldn't think about that right now, not with Ian doing a slow boil over Abby's state of undress. Larissa took her aside next to the cabin and whispered, "Just do it, okay? These men have been stranded...without women for a really long time."

"But how--"

"Never mind that. We'll talk later." She waited until Abby slithered into Ian's shirt. Diplomatic skills were really going to be put to the test here. Did the Abernathys' need to know just who their passengers were? Or rather where they were from? Or, more correctly, *when* they were from?

Once Abby covered herself, Estrella left her shyness behind. She walked away from the men to stand next to Larissa. "I am not a child, as Señor Ian says. Por favor, please, show me this future world of yours, Señorita. I have much to learn of your strange ways."

Abby pursed her lips. "Future world?"

"Difficulties in translation, that's all." Larissa shooed them below deck. "Why don't you show Estrella around while I talk with Avery?"

His sister arched a tawny eyebrow. "And flirt with the other men, too, I bet. Avery won't like that, Larry. Honestly, it's not been ten minutes since we rescued you and you want me out of the way already! Too mean of you!"

"No, no. You mistake. Señorita Larissa is Señor Jack's woman." Estrella stamped her small foot.

Out of the mouths of babes. Larissa grinned.

Abby arched her other brow. "Really? He's the tall one with the bedroom eyes, isn't he? Tasty! But such a serious manner." She shrugged. "Well, I don't mind that. Care to share, Larry?"

"Some other time, Abby. I need to defuse World War III in the making over there." Larissa leaned down into the cabin to give her friend a kiss. "Thanks for coming back for me."

Abby uncharacteristically blushed. "Don't mention it. I missed carpooling with you to work." She playfully punched at Larissa's arm. "Avery won't like this, though. You being Señor Jack's woman, and all."

Why would Avery care one way or the other?

His sister flounced down the steps. "You can't have all the fun. I get to pick from the other three." She made a face. "Other two, actually. That prune-cheeked Australian dude could pickle an egg with that sour expression of his."

If Larissa had to choose a synonym for Ian, it would've been sunny, not prune-cheeked, but her friend did have a point. Glancing over at him, she saw the glare of his blue eyes narrow in Abby's direction.

Brrr. The Aussie skies were cold today. "Okay, fine." Larissa turned to go back to the railing. "You can have Danny or Sal."

After being quiet during this exchange, Estrella piped up. "But I like Sal. He's my querido."

Abby snorted. "Great. I get the leftovers!" She herded the girl down into the lower levels where the bedrooms were.

Danny and Sal had wandered into the bridge of the yacht to marvel at the controls. No surprise there, with Sal being a navigator. Ian and Jack remained on deck with Avery, and the three of them stood with arms antagonistically folded across their chests. Not a propitious beginning.

Larissa sighed. Sometimes men could be remarkably...pigheaded. Walking over to them, she smiled particularly for Jack. "Um, hi." Brilliant opening line. "You, um, probably have a lot to talk about."

"Not really." Jack brushed a bit of seaweed off his sleeve. "I explained how my men and I've been stranded for some time."

Avery gave him a piercing glance. "But that's peculiar, isn't it? Why haven't military search and rescue teams found you?"

Larissa had to butt in. "For the same reason you couldn't locate me. Malfunctioning equipment in the mysterious Bermuda Triangle!" By saying that in a joking manner, she downplayed the truth. But her stomach churned just thinking about what lay ahead for Jack and the others. Their identities and their lives were in the past. In a bizarre situation like this, what should the next step be?

"New Age nonsense." Avery curved his arm around her waist. "But forget about that. Larry, you are a

sight for sore eyes. I hear tell your cryptography division at Fort Meade just hasn't been the same without you." He nuzzled the top of her head. "I've missed you, too."

Oh, boy. Avery's attentions made her uncomfortable. Very uncomfortable. She could readily admit that. In all the time she'd known him, he never behaved in a proprietary way toward her. Polite and proper was about the size of it. And now, here he was, acting like a long-lost lover. And in front of Jack! She smoothed embarrassment from her cheeks. Sure, she was very, very grateful to be rescued by Avery, but no man other than Jack interested her. She'd finally found true love.

Jack eyed Avery's actions but didn't say a word. Goodness, he didn't even curse, which, knowing him, was like a fish forgetting to swim.

She slipped away from Avery's grasp. "I've, um, missed everyone, too. But I'm sure life goes on down in Crypto. The jumble of words, reams of computer messages, and interpreting foreign symbols....Day after day is the same, only the translations are different."

"Cryptography, eh?" Ian sighed as he reminisced. "I had my chance at decoding messages. Missed the opportunity of a lifetime, you know. Was to be housed at Bermuda's Hamilton Princess Hotel, way back when. Me and some twelve hundred Brits to decipher microdot messages between you Yanks and--"

"Microdot messages?" Avery's lanky shoulders shook with amusement. "Pardon me for laughing, but you'll have to update your tall tale if you want to impress the ladies, Ian. That's World War II history you're talking about. Next thing you'd probably mention is how that Bermudan project saved Impressionist paintings stolen by the Nazis in France. You don't look old and decrepit to me!"

Jack raised an eyebrow. "He doesn't look old to me, either. But looks can be deceiving, Abernathy."

Larissa bit her lower lip. Defusing the situation, as she mentioned earlier to Abby, wasn't as simple as she anticipated. "Gosh, Avery. How do you know so much about intelligence operations from, um, WWII?"

"Just a hobby, Larry." He spread out his hands and smiled. "No other reason."

Rubbing his mustache, Ian muttered, "Think I'll go below deck now, if it's all right. All of a sudden, I'm bloody tired."

"Good idea, Baker." Jack slapped him on the back. "I'll join you."

"But, Jack." Larissa heard the panic in her voice, but she was powerless to conceal it. "We...we need to talk."

"Later, babe." He lifted his hand as if to halt her words. "Right now, talking's the furthest thing from my mind." Jack nodded at their host. "Abernathy, thanks again for your hospitality."

"My pleasure," was his reply.

With both Ian and Jack gone, Larissa was now alone on deck with Avery. Why oh, why did she feel lower than a hole?

The answer to that question was easy. Because something was wrong between her and Jack. Somehow, something had happened, changing him from a caring lover to a distant stranger. And she couldn't bear it. She had to make it right again. But how?

Slightly trembling with worry, she turned to Avery. "I hope you don't mind, but I'm rather tired, too. I should see if Estrella is okay."

Tears welling up in her eyes, Larissa made her way into the cabin.

* * *

After only a short time below deck, Jack returned outside to the open seas--surroundings he knew something about, anyway. He stared at the endless expanse of ocean and sky. What lay beyond the vista was a mystery he couldn't hope to comprehend. This new century of Larissa's included strange things like microwaves which used electromagnetic energy to cook foods, personal computers to conduct stock market transactions, and video games on television sets to amuse young and old alike.

He shook his head. Hell, television was nothing like he remembered from the 1939 World's Fair, either. Instead of being in black and white, or more correctly black and pale green, the picture bounced off the huge screen in bold, vivid colors. And the quality of it was so clear and the sound so crisp. But what did this technological wonder do? Damn it all, it hawked products. Products of such a personal nature, he almost blushed in shame watching the images flit by on the screen. Christ, he'd just watched a so-called commercial blasting over the airwaves with an announcer talking about erectile dysfunction. Impotence, for chrissakes! What kind of society openly broadcast drugs to improve a man's response to sexual stimulation? Help him get a hard on?

Holy Jesus. What had the world come to?

Fortunately, some things hadn't changed. Baseball was still baseball. The New York Yankees were leading contenders to play in this year's World Series as were their long-time rivals, the St. Louis Cardinals. In the last Series he listened to--back in 1942--those two teams also played, and the Cardinals won, four to one. Still great teams, only the names differed. No Stan Musial or Joe DiMaggio to thrill to. Everyone was unknown to Jack. Everyone in this whole stinking world was unknown.

Except Larissa. Leaning on the railing, he sunk his fingers into the thick of his hair. What the hell was he going to do about beautiful, desirable Larissa?

Of all people he did not wish to see right at the moment, Avery Abernathy strolled on the deck. Sleek and smarmy, the man oozed snake-oil charm and damned self-assurance. Even if he hadn't fondled Larissa, Jack would've hated the sight of him. But he was a contemporary of hers, while Jack was hopelessly outclassed and outdated.

"Jack," the narrow chested viper called out cheerfully. "Here you are. I've been looking for you. I found a few clothes that might fit you."

Jack glanced down at his tattered shirt and frayed fatigue shorts, then shrugged. "Thanks, but these'll do 'til we reach shore."

Silence hung heavy on the white capped seas. "So, you must be looking forward to getting back to the States, Jack. I take it your plane crashed? Danny said it was a B-17."

"Yeah."

"How long have you been stranded?"

Just standing next to this modern day Lothario heaved waves of turmoil in Jack's stomach. "Hard to keep track." He shrugged again. "One day rolls into the next."

An inner sense warned him not to reveal the truth, at least to Avery Abernathy, anyway. Putting it mildly, Jack didn't like the guy. At all. He'd already warned his crew to avoid talking about their former lives. And Larissa was on her guard to monitor Estrella. Obviously Flannery had a bad case of motormouth. Any evidence of time travel was bound to be sensational; who knew how the masses would react? Jack still remembered the near-panics caused by Orson Welles' radio broadcast of The War of the Worlds back in '38.

Besides, Jack's sorry ass still belonged to the United States Army Air Force. He'd tell his tale to the

proper authorities...and not one minute sooner.

"Where are you stationed?"

Abernathy's question irritated. But the answer was easy to avoid. "Actually, we were in between assignments."

The man continued to annoy. "Danny mentioned you were to be stationed in Ridgewell, England. The 381st Bomb Group."

"Hmmn." Flannery needed to keep that trap of his shut...tight. But the best defense was taking the offense. "Nice yacht you have here, Avery. What line of business are you in?"

Abernathy's meager chest swelled. "I'm what you call an information broker, working with international corporations. I do a lot of traveling."

Jack chewed on the man's occupation. Information broker. Somehow, it sounded...shifty. "Lucky for us you were in the area."

Abernathy splayed out his bony hands. "I've been frantic about Larry, of course. I still have nightmares about that awful day when she was, well, kidnapped by the sea. She'd asked me to take her out here in the Caribbean so she could scatter her grandfather's ashes."

"Nat Terrell." Without meaning to, Jack uttered his friend's name.

Abernathy lowered his already low brow. "That's right. How did you know?"

Jack's smile contained no mirth. "She told me."

"I see," Abernathy said slowly. "Been meaning to ask Larry out for some time." He narrowed his hazel eyes at Jack. "Now I'll get the chance."

"Yeah, I suppose you will." Jack clenched his fists. *And I suppose she'll jump at your asking, too.* His inner thoughts tormented him. An intelligent woman like Larissa would be drawn to an information broker over a broken-down pilot--hands down.

He exhaled his regret. Never in his life had he been so captivated by a female, so filled with desire...and more. He'd even contemplated giving up his loner status and taking on the responsibility of a wife. But that was all in the past, as far back in time as his own distant birth. Right now he had to concentrate on getting his crew acclimated to this strange new world. Larissa Parish and her honeyed body had been a brief, pleasant diversion--nothing more.

Yeah, right. So why did it hurt like hell just thinking about her?

Because you love her, Jack Harrington, he taunted himself. *And you're a big, stupid fool.*

Avery Abernathy pulled away from the railing. "I've got some business to attend to so if you'll excuse me?" By all that was holy, if he didn't grin as if he knew exactly what was passing through Jack's mind. "See you at dinner, Jack."

Jack didn't bother replying. The other man had won. There was no way he could compete in this twisted world where he had no idea of the rules. He'd lost the woman of his dreams to this...information broker.

As the pain of denied passion stirred him, he groaned, then smiled grimly. Whatever this crazy new society had to offer, there was one thing he certainly didn't need. And that was the advertised drug to improve erectile dysfunction!

* * *

One would think that it would be easy to keep track of a person on a boat, even on a forty-three foot yacht, but Larissa definitely had a difficult time locating the one person who mattered most to her: Jack. He might've been avoiding her, but why? Why? Returning once more to the deck, she spotted his tan, muscular body leaning into the wind in the front of the ship--a lone, proud figure.

Dressed in a low-cut black dress borrowed from Abby, and her hair combed neatly into a ponytail, Larissa walked over to him and stood quietly by his side. "Jack." She smoothed her hand down his arm, enjoying the feel of his skin. "I've been looking for you."

He glanced at her, taking in the revealing neckline. "Nice dress." But, evidently the dress wasn't nice enough to keep his interest for he immediately turned back to watch the advancing sunset.

"Jack!" She didn't understand him. She really didn't. "I borrowed this from Abby. There's not a whole lot in her wardrobe suitable for a nun, believe me."

"Hmmn" was all he deigned to reply.

Larissa stamped her bare foot. "Jack. Please. I know you're worried about the future. About you and me." Biting her lip, she reached up and curled a lock of his dark hair around her finger. "I don't want this to end. Somehow we'll work everything out. You'll see."

He clenched and unclenched his jaw, over and over again before he spoke. Gazing down at her, he murmured, "Sweet Larissa."

All at once, every blessed inch of her started to tingle, reliving their lovemaking. She licked her upper lip. "Jack, maybe we could--"

"Larry!" Abby's loud voice cut through the hum of the ship's engines. "That man is impossible! I can't stand him." As she stomped on deck, the intimacy of the moment vanished.

Larissa felt her shoulders noticeably droop. "What man, Abby?"

Her friend huffed and puffed in front of them, showing the degree of her exertions. She was a tantalizing sight, wearing short shorts and a see-through crochet blouse which left little to the imagination. In addition, her nude colored bra underneath teased the eyes into believing she wore no bra at all.

Abby wrinkled her pert nose. "That Australian guy. He made comments about my 'white pointers' again." She gestured down at her bosom and flashed an appeal at Jack. "Do I look half-naked to you?"

He gave her a slow smile. "On the contrary. I'd say half-dressed."

Larissa grinned. What a kidder. But a twinge of jealousy did manage to weave its way into her heart.

"Ooh, I like you, Jack." Abby preened. "Larry, remember your promise to share?"

As he narrowed his gaze at Larissa, a certain tightness pulled down on his firm and kissable lips. "Is that so?"

Embarrassment burned her cheeks. Never in her life had she felt as prudish as she did right now. All this talk about breasts and sharing men. If only she could whisk Jack away from here, so it would be just the two of them. Like being stranded on a deserted island.

Ha! She held her hand over her mouth to hide a giggle. Now how silly could she get?

The object of Abby's wrath suddenly sauntered out from the cabin. He tipped a baseball cap at Larry, then with a hardened gaze, glared at Abby. "Miss Abernathy, er, young Estrella said I should apologize to you." He bared his teeth. "So I apologize."

Abby folded her arms across her chest. "Who cares? It doesn't make a bit of difference to me."

Even Ian's mustache bristled his indignation. "Ho! Well, maybe it bloody well should. I'm saying you look like a tart who charges sixpence!"

Not that the amount signified anything, but sixpence was about five cents. Both she and Larissa flushed.

Jack rolled his gaze. "Hell, Baker. In case you've forgotten, we're guests of the Abernathys."

Ian turned away. "Yeah, and we're getting a bloody eyeful, aren't we? How far does her hospitality extend?"

Larissa gasped. What in the world was bothering Ian? He always seemed so even-tempered.

Tears trickled from Abby's hazel eyes. "Honestly, I...I've never been more insulted." Brushing past them, she hurried down the deck into the lower levels below.

The silence was only broken by the lonely caws of seagulls.

"That was completely uncalled for," Jack finally said.

Ian held out his hands, palms up. "I know. And I'm sorry, Larry. Really I am. But seeing that woman display all her wares, well, it makes me a bit cranky, is all."

Larissa tapped him on the shoulder. "A bit?"

His smile revealed deep cut dimples. "Okay. A lot. Do me a favor, eh? Tell your friend to put some clothes on."

Maybe there was another reason he protested to extreme about Abby's state of undress. Maybe he was truly attracted to her. "No problem, Ian. How about if we all go down below and--"

"Bloody, er, heck! Look! There's a cutter heading this way."

Larissa squinted her eyes in the direction Ian pointed to see a white Coast Guard cutter complete with side red stripe. She tilted her head, puzzled. "That's odd. Why is it coming toward us?"

A horn sounded, catching everyone's attention. Over the airwaves, a man's amplified voice breached the distance. "Come in, 'Adolphus.' Come in, 'Adolphus.' Stand and prepare to be boarded. We're looking for Captain Jack Harrington."

Even without her glasses, she saw several men on the cutter, all wearing life jackets and gazing through binoculars, looking at them.

Jack's smile was grim. "A welcoming committee," he spat. "How very...convenient."

"Jack! Goodness, I don't understand." Panic zigzagged a path through to her backbone. "How did they know you were on board?" The cutter's arrival was too much of a coincidence to dismiss.

Instead of answering her directly, he lifted an eyebrow, and glanced at Baker. "I detect the fine hand of Mr. A., don't you agree?"

"Bloody right. Avery Abernathy and the audacious Abigail. Damn their hospitality! Lud, I need a cold one. Find me a pub...and fast."

Everything was happening so quickly. Larissa leaned back against the railing to take a breather. For once in her life, she felt bewildered and unable to process more information. Her mind had simply maxed out. For someone who always was in charge of the situation, it was an awful reality check. A slap in the face.

With a spring in his step, Avery quickly advanced to the bow of the yacht. He slid his hazel gaze over her, then onto Jack. A frown pulled down the corners of his mouth, and yet for some reason, he appeared to be smiling. "Well, what do you know. The Coast Guard's here already."

Both Jack and Ian remained quiet, accusing Avery with their eyes.

Larissa, however, wasn't speechless. "Avery, you called them? Why?"

The man shrugged his padded shoulders. "Protocol, Larry. The Air Force has to be notified about missing personnel. Otherwise I'd be knee deep in hot water. You understand, don't you, Jack?"

Jack and Ian traded looks, a wealth of meaning behind the exchange.

"I didn't expect them so soon, though." Avery rubbed his hands together, almost as if he relished everyone's anxiety. "Funny thing how they reacted when I told them your names and ranks. I'll be a monkey's uncle if I didn't hear whispers mentioning the Pentagon plus a whole slew of acronyms in the background."

Oh no. Larissa was all too familiar with acronyms like NSA, CIA, and FBI. And it wasn't an unusual occurrence for anything controversial, living or otherwise, to disappear into the bowels of the Pentagon, to be lost in military secrecy for a very long time.

Jack turned his back on Avery. "Baker, get Scarpelli and Flannery on deck, would you?" As Ian left to comply, Jack took her hand. "I was hoping to delay the inevitable as long as possible, but it seems time has run out." He sighed. "Whether I'm ready or not, duty calls."

The cutter pulled alongside the yacht. In addition to Coast Guard uniforms, Larissa spotted the sky blue of Air Force shirts. Why did they have to come take Jack away now? Today? "But where will you go? How will I find you?" Inspiration, slow in coming, finally hit. "Wait! Let me give you my telephone number."

Dashing into the cabin to get a pad of paper, she frantically wrote her number down, then sprinted back by his side.

Everyone now stood on deck with somber expressions. Except for the Abernathys, of course. But even Abby, who had slipped on a long sleeved shirt, wore a puckered frown.

All too soon, an officer boarded. By the single silver bar on his shoulders, Larissa identified him as a first lieutenant. "Captain, sir," he spoke to Jack. "I'm honored to meet you. To meet all of you." A look of wonder crinkled the man's high forehead.

Salutes were exchanged all around.

The first lieutenant gestured toward the cutter. "We need to go now, sir."

Estrella's dark eyes glistened with tears. She looked so small and pitiful standing next to Sal. "Sal, querido," she sniffed. "Do not go. I will miss you."

Sal's blush might have denoted awkwardness. Or maybe the redness was from anger. Anger at being separated in this cruel fashion.

In any event, Estrella spoke for all of them. Heartfelt goodbyes came fast and furiously. Promises to talk soon also followed. Then came the silence. The silence of watching loved ones depart.

And then they were gone. Her throat thickening, Larissa watched the Coast Guard cutter speed through waters toward the great horizon, away from the "Adolphus." A feeling of dread settled deep within her soul. As much as she would've liked to ignore it, she had a terrible premonition she'd never see Jack again.

Chapter Twelve

One would think coming back from the dead would be a joyous event, but it had its drawbacks, too. Sure, everyone was ecstatic to see Larissa, but the red tape headaches involved with resurrecting herself were almost insurmountable. Things like convincing the Social Security Administration that she hadn't breathed her last; reclaiming her job; undergoing another security clearance for the six months she'd been "missing"; and moving back into her vacant apartment, just for starters.

Hunched over on her comfy loveseat now situated in its old spot by the large bay window, Larissa stared out at a nearby maple tree. Its foliage was halfway through the autumn metamorphosis of changing colors. The beauty of the display grabbed at her heart, but also put her in a thoughtful mood. After all, autumn could be construed as a time of sadness. A cycle of death and rebirth--that was sort of what she was experiencing.

Her rebirth could've been worse, though. Fortunately her apartment hadn't been rented, plus Mom had ordered Larissa's belongings packed in storage until further arrangements could be made. Bank accounts were reopened, insurances reinstated--everything was pretty much back to normal. She even visited her family in Montana for a week...and truth be told, the reunion turned out to be quite an emotional wringer.

As she watched a crimson maple leaf detach from its branch and slowly drift downward, she sighed. Quite a few leaves already dusted the ground--a portent of barren branches soon to follow. She felt detached from life as well. Without Jack by her side, unhappiness almost consumed her.

Caught up with all the mundane details of reestablishing herself, she'd completely lost touch with Jack. The whole crew, actually. Her telephone number had been disconnected in her absence, and now was assigned to a new customer. And despite her restored high security clearance at the NSA, she was denied access to any information on the men's present location. No word, no clue, nothing. As far as she knew, Jack and his three crewmates had disappeared as completely as if they'd been sucked back into the Bermuda Triangle.

What a horrifying thought. A chill penetrated the warmth of her sweatshirt, causing her to shudder.

Estrella entered the living room, wearing that cheerful smile Larissa had come to love so well. "Larissa, mi amiga, my friend. I see you are thinking about Señor Jack, such as I languish over my querido, Sal."

Larissa returned the smile. Things would have been much harder if she hadn't had Estrella for company. "Languish, Estrella? A new word for you?"

The girl made a sweeping curtsy. "Sí, cómo no. Yes, but of course. The school you have put me in stuffs my poor cabeza, my poor head, with facts only a scholar should have to know." She twirled the tip of her dark braid around her finger. "Madre de Dios! I have no use for such extensive knowledge."

Patting the cushion beside her, Larissa invited Estrella to sit. "Is it so bad, sweetie? You do have so much to catch up on."

"I do not mind, truly, but how I long for Sal." She sighed forlornly. "Will we ever see him again?"

Will we? That was the two million dollar question.

On the bright side, Larissa had been fortunate in convincing the Immigration and Naturalization Service to allow her to keep Estrella. As an orphan under the age of sixteen, the child was eligible to apply for immigration benefits. One of the first things Larissa did on returning home was to file an

orphan petition on the girl's behalf. Of course strings had to be pulled to keep Estrella's identity under wraps, but somehow, things went smoothly. Most likely, the INS didn't know what to make of an applicant whose date of birth caused hiccups in their computer system.

But if Larissa had been lucky with Estrella, the situation was just the reverse with Jack. No one, from the Pentagon, to the Air Force, to the Coast Guard admitted the existence of four B-17 crewmen from World War II. But Larissa wouldn't give up. One way or another, she'd find him.

Estrella pulled on Larissa's sleeve. "Lo siento. I am sorry to grieve you. I am certain we will get our men back. Most assuredly!"

Larissa leaned over to kiss the girl's forehead. "I'm sure you're right." Now, all she had to do was make it happen.

Standing, she headed for the bathroom to collect dirty laundry. This being Saturday, Larissa faced a whole week's worth of wash. She still hadn't adjusted to her new role as guardian. But with everything that she'd just been through, she wasn't too hard on herself.

Arms deep in the hamper, Larissa dropped everything when she heard the telephone ring in her bedroom.

It was Abby. "Hi! Quit doing the laundry."

Larissa had to smile. Had she become that predictable?

"I've got a great idea," Abby continued. "Just found out the Smithsonian has an exhibit on the Flying Fortress--B-17s--at the National Air and Space Museum. It's in one of the galleries near the World War II section. Wanna go?"

Surprise chased away Larissa's voice. She cleared her throat. "A--Abby? Is this really you? Since when are you interested in bomber planes?"

"Since, oh, I don't know." Abby probably shrugged her plump shoulders as she answered. "Listen, Avery just got back from his business trip and he offered to drive us into D.C. He said he missed you, Larry."

"He did?" Well, that was strange because she certainly hadn't missed *him*. But never mind Avery. B-17s brought Jack to mind. Maybe she should go. "Let me ask Estrella, okay?"

Estrella zipped into the bedroom, her black eyes shining with excitement. Obviously she'd listened in on the kitchen extension. "S! Let us go! I want to see Sal's plane. Can we, Larissa? Please?"

Oh, to be young and full of enthusiasm! Larissa grinned. "Count us in, Abby. How about we come over in an hour?"

"We'll pick you up. And Larry," Abby's voice contained a snicker. "Avery wants you to sit next to him. See you." The line went dead.

Hanging up the phone, Larissa puzzled on that tidbit of information. With no encouragement whatsoever, Avery had taken it into his head that he and she were an item. Or *could* be an item. But he was wrong. Totally and completely wrong.

She shooed Estrella out of the room to get dressed. Slipping into a bulky knit sweater and tight blue jeans, Larissa prepared herself to be blunt with Avery. The sooner he understood that they were just friends, the easier it would be for both of them.

* * *

Three blocks long, the National Air And Space Museum glistened in the early afternoon sunlight.

Constructed of huge concrete blocks connected by vast galleries of glass, the Museum was an impressive sight for anyone from this century, as Larissa, Abby, and Avery were..., but for Estrella, it was absolutely overpowering.

"Madre de Dios!" she murmured as she bent back her head to stare at overhead exhibits hanging from the ceiling. "These planes. They are so heavy. How do they not fall down on us?"

"We're quite safe. Really." Larissa steered the girl away from other museum gawkers with their gazes up instead of watching where they were going. "It's traffic on the ground that's dangerous!"

Avery's laugh sounded a little strained. "And that's exactly why our Spanish friend should explore the Apollo To The Moon exhibit down the hall. Everything inside deals with space travel, not ground traffic."

Estrella proudly straightened her slim shoulders. "I am Venezuelan." But then her girlish enthusiasm showed. "Travel to la luna? The moon? Can this be? Is it not impossible?"

Hooking arms with Estrella, Abby fluttered her other hand at her brother. A picture in conservatism: high turtleneck sweater and crisp chino slacks, she was almost unrecognizable. "You two go on. I'll show this little one the wonders of the universe." Abby gave Larissa a wink. "Sister," she mouthed.

Understanding the message, Larissa shook her head. No, no earthly way would she ever marry Avery.

Alone, she and Avery sauntered into the World War II Aviation Gallery on the corner of the second floor. From the start of the trip in Odenton, Maryland to its end in D.C., he had been a polite host, answering a spate of questions from the ever-curious Estrella. Larissa appreciated his patience. But now was as good a time as any to set the record straight between them.

Stopping before a wall mural of a B-17, she flashed back in time to when Jack first kissed her in front of his Flying Fortress. The taste of his lips, his firm, powerful arms, his--

"At last! We're finally alone." Avery intruded on her memories. "Larry, I brought you something back from my trip." He pulled out a fuzzy, rectangular box from his blazer jacket. "I hope you like it."

Opening a snap on the turquoise box, she saw a large bottle containing an expensive brand of French perfume. "Thank you very much, Avery. You didn't have to." She took a sniff. "Smells sweet. Where did you go?"

"Europe," came the quick reply. "Several places. But never mind that. What's been going at work? Abby says things have been hopping lately. Decode any interesting transmissions?"

"If I did, you know I couldn't tell you." Spotting a display showing artifacts from WWII pilots, Larissa studied the pair of goggles and old-fashioned flying helmet. She could picture Jack wearing those things plus the leather jacket also exhibited. Actually, transmissions had been "hopping" about a certain military aircraft deal concerning various European countries.

She tapped her finger on her chin. Hmmn.

Narrowing her gaze, she focused on the dapper cut of Avery's navy blazer and found it wanting. "So what exactly are you working on now?"

"It's just a simple business deal, Larry. Between my client and some international groups. Nothing I don't usually handle." When Avery shrugged, the padding of the jacket shoulders didn't fall back exactly into place.

She withheld her grin. Jack would have no need of shoulder padding.

For some reason, Avery glanced over his bumpy shoulders as if to see if they were alone in the gallery.

She also darted a quick gaze around. They were alone. Alone with mementoes from a bygone era.

He came closer and swung his arm around her waist, holding her against his bony frame. "Larry, I've wasted so much time. I'm crazy about you. But you know that, don't you?" He leaned in to kiss her. "You and I are made for each other."

Whoa. His embrace was like a boa constrictor's coil, squeezing the very life from her. "No, Avery." She struggled to free herself. "I like you as a friend, but--"

"Larissa!" A very welcome interruption from Estrella sliced through the stagnant gallery air. "You will never guess who we found!"

Thankfully, Avery released his grasp. Larissa took a step away from him and straightened her sleeves. No more isolated t'te-t'tes with him, that was for sure. She waved Estrella to come nearer. "Who did you find? Who...."

Walking around a museum pedestal came Abby, now talking in earnest whispers to...Ian Baker!

"Ian!" Larissa exclaimed with delight. Not only at the sight of that sunbaked Aussie, but also for an ulterior motive. Ian had to know Jack's whereabouts. She could hardly contain her excitement.

Avery, however, grumbled something under his breath, while Estrella started browsing the exhibits.

"Larry!" Ian's smile blazed with incandescent light. "By all that's wonderful!" He wore a brimmed hat, and he tipped it at her. On spotting Avery, the Aussie's smile dimmed. "Abernathy," he acknowledged.

Larissa was in no mood for unpleasant undercurrents. She hurried over to Ian and hugged him. "It's so good to see you! We've been looking everywhere for you."

He lifted his blonde eyebrow. "You have?" Although he spoke to Larissa, his piercing blue gaze rested on Abby.

And Abby actually blushed. How very, very unusual.

But Larissa couldn't waste time deciphering what passed between him and her friend. "Ian, how is Jack? Where is he?"

"Er, well, he's fine." Ian smoothed down his still-briskly mustache. "In fact, he's, er, right over there."

Her heart stopped. It took a moment...or an eternity to unfreeze her limbs. "He's here?" she squeaked.

Turning around, she saw Jack, standing by some old warplanes. He seemed particularly interested in a German ME-109. He hadn't changed a bit, and yet he looked a million times better than her memory of him. Black hair curled enticingly over his collar, he wore a brown suede jacket and dark stonewash pants, completely at home in the twenty-first century.

"Jack," she whispered, taking a step toward him. This was the moment she'd dreamed about ever since he left on the Coast Guard cutter for parts unknown.

Then something awful happened. Something she never would've imagined even in her worst nightmares. A young woman with flaming red hair walked around from the other side of the plane to take Jack's arm and gaze into his eyes. And he greeted this blasphemy by leaning over and kissing her.

Kissing just her cheek, true, but Larissa swayed under the heavy emotion of jealousy. Part of her died, right then and there. How she managed to correct her faltering step, she would never know, but she somehow closed the distance between them and pasted a false smile on her lips. "Jack. How nice to see you."

Her voice sounded flat; it was the best she could do under the circumstances.

He turned to face her, no surprise, no pleasure, no nothing animating his beloved features. It was almost as if he knew she was there at the gallery. But, of course, if he'd seen Estrella, he would've surmised her presence. Under his hooded gaze, he nodded at her. "Larissa."

Oh, to be stabbed again in such an indifferent fashion! His date's brown eyes turned in Larissa's direction and she made a move to speak.

Jack spoke first. "This is Larissa Parish, Denise. Remember I told you about her?"

If possible, the woman's eyes grew larger. "Really? I'm so thrilled to meet you!" She took Larissa's hand and pumped it.

Well, the feeling's not mutual, Larissa thought unkindly. But she had to let go of her jealousy. What difference did it make, anyway? Jack had made a choice, and obviously she played no part in his new life.

Dear God, how that hurt deep down to her bones.

"Denise," Jack murmured in a soothing way. "Would you give us a few minutes alone?"

"Sure thing," the carrot-topped beauty gushed. Then, walking toward Ian, she had the audacity to grin at Larissa.

Larissa's knees sagged. A headache the size of the Washington Monument hammered inside her skull. Knowing she'd lost Jack forever was like a death blow. Goodness, it was a death blow. Why keep up the masquerade and pretend all was well? Nothing would ever be well again.

But somehow she managed. "So how have you been?" She stared up at the overhead Japanese warplane hanging over them. Maybe, contrary to what she'd said to Estrella, it would fall down, putting her out of her misery.

Gesturing toward the gallery door, he jammed his hands in his pants pockets. "Let's get the hell out of this mausoleum and talk."

Although her head throbbed and her heart ached, she couldn't help smiling. "Still haven't curbed that habit of swearing, I see."

He led the way into the corridor. "Christ, my words are damn clean compared to what I hear on that stinking television box."

They walked down past the Albert Einstein planetarium, toward the Apollo exhibit. He glanced over at her, then looked away. "To answer your question, I'm doing fine. Everyone's...adjusting. The brass poked and prodded us like pincushions, and in the end, let us go back to our jobs, in a manner of speaking."

She'd made a promise that she wouldn't ask him, but she couldn't help herself. "Did you call me? My old phone number was disconnected. But I tried to find you, Jack. I left messages all over the Pentagon, for goodness sake."

He stopped in front of the moon gallery to gaze silently at the displays inside. "I know. I got them." Jack's grey eyes revealed inner torment. "Hell, at times I feel I belong in this damn Museum. Not here, but back there." He jerked his thumb toward the World War II room.

"The bottom line is..." He grinned, but the smile didn't reach his eyes. "Folks here like to say the bottom line, don't they? Anyway, what we had, Larissa, was brief." A pulsing at his temple disturbed his emotionless face. "Too brief, but there it is. It's over between us, so I thought it better not to contact you."

She bit her lip to keep from crying out. "Fine." The word echoed hollowly in the air. "If that's what you want." Inside though, in her own private hell, she screamed a thousand screams.

"It is," he agreed. With his index finger, he scratched his nose. "What the hell are you wearing? You smell like a damn funeral parlor."

For a moment, she had no idea what he was talking about. She hadn't put on perfume today.

Remembering, she pulled out the turquoise box from her handbag. "It's this. Just a fragrance Avery gave me."

Jack's lips thinned. "The bottle stinks like he does." He shrugged rather bleakly. "Don't mind me. Got up on the wrong side of the bed, I guess." He paused. "I've got to get back to...you know. Take care, Larissa."

She didn't understand. She didn't understand any of it. As she watched him walk away, she puzzled on his odd behavior. Why was he filled with despair? Why hadn't he let her help him?

Tears threatened to make an appearance. Rubbing her aching temples, Larissa quickly made her way to the nearest restroom to compose herself. Why did Jack insist that what they had together was over, when in fact, it had hardly even begun?

* * *

Coward. Damn, stupid coward. As Jack cursed his very innards, he marched away from the only woman he would ever love. Hell, he hadn't realized how gut-wrenching it would be to see her again.

Running his hand through his hair, he cursed himself again. Oh yeah, he knew how difficult it would be to look at Larissa's mouthwatering loveliness again. To gaze upon her in the flesh--her soft, smooth, velvety flesh.

With teeth clenched tightly, he rammed his fists into his pockets and stormed into the Museum's War exhibit. She belonged to the world of today, while he was chained to yesterday.

Baker took one glance, left Abby's side, and cut off Jack's progress. "You look like bloody hell."

"That's how I feel." Jack scanned the WWII relicts until he spotted what...or who he was looking for: Avery Abernathy, now talking with an attentive Denise.

"The man's a snake," Jack said bluntly. "What can she see in him beside his slimy charm?"

"Who, Denise?"

Jack snorted. "No, Larissa. Are you going senile in your old age?"

"Ho!" Baker smoothed back his thinning blonde hair in a preening gesture. "If I say so myself, I don't look half bad for a near-ninety year old coot."

"Hmmn." Jack didn't pay attention to his co-pilot's glib comments. Instead he watched Abernathy ply his unsavory trade with the wide-eyed Denise. And Jack had promised her uncle, or rather great uncle, Danny Flannery, that he would take care of her on this visit to the Smithsonian.

Baker issued a warning whistle. "Before you go stomping on that critter, I still don't understand why you and Larry don't make a go of it. She's crazy about you. I can tell."

"I don't want to talk about it."

"You don't, eh? Well, that's your bloody business, Harrington," Baker replied. "But the way I see it, we've all been given a second chance, and it's up to us to make the most of it."

He was right, of course. However, Jack was in no mood to admit it.

Baker cleared his throat. "Er, I've been talking with Abby for awhile now and--"

Jack raised his eyebrow. "So it's no longer Miss Abernathy, but Abby?"

The man took a leaf from Scarpelli's book and blushed beet red. "Go to hell, mate." The words were said without rancor. "Anyway, the short of it is, I've been thinking a lot about her, and evidently, she's been thinking of me as well. Get this, once she learned I was going back to the lucky country, she said she might want to come with me."

"You and Abby? Isn't this sudden?" Another loss then lanced Jack's heart. Christ, on a world filled with over six billion souls, he never felt more alone. "You going back to Australia for sure?"

Baker paced in front of the German warplane settled on the side. How eerie to see it inside, in a museum far from its homeland. "Well, since I'm in my eighties, I reckon I have to act fast! But seriously, yeah, I'm going back. All that's left are my younger brother and sister, but they have a passel of family." His grin was almost infectious. "They want to see me, and who am I to disappoint them, y'know?"

A devilish twinkle brightened his blue eyes. "Abby..." Baker took a long look at her as she fussed over Estrella's exuberant actions. Then he tore his gaze away. "I hadn't counted on her being interested in my old sunbaked hide. So I guess I'll postpone my flight for awhile and see what develops, eh?"

Jack rubbed his jaw. "I don't know. You and Abby," he repeated. "That's quite a stretch."

"She'd do alright with me, now that she's got some clothes on. I'd teach her how to be a proper Jillaroo."

"Jillaroo?"

"Yeah, I'll be the Jackaroo, and she'll be my Jill. Farmhands on my brother's station, y'know."

Rubbing his jaw, Jack studied the elegant Abigail. "You're jumping the gun here, aren't you? I mean, you haven't even had a date, or anything."

"I'm rectifying that tonight, mate." Baker's smile blazed hot and heavy.

"Does she realize the treat you have in mind for her, being a Jillaroo?"

"Not entirely." Baker barked out his laughter. "She thought 'Down Under' referred to a sexual position!"

And that was another thing Jack would never get used to. These twenty-first century women were so...so damn casual about sex. Thinking about Larissa with another man corroded his soul. Hell, just thinking about her got his blood boiling.

Baker wagged a stubby finger at Jack. "You need to go after that fine filly of yours, Harrington. Tell her what she wants to hear, then lasso her in."

Jack shook his head. "No, right now I need to lasso a redheaded filly." He clapped Baker on the shoulder. "Listen, I'm glad about you and Abby. I wish you both all the best. Your sorry ass is going to need it!"

"Maybe yes, maybe no. You take care of your lassoing, while I take care of mine. Meet up with you by the entrance." Baker ambled over to Abby and Estrella, hooking arms with them. "Girls, how about some refreshments, eh? Abby, you and I have plans to make. And Estrella, how about if we give Señor Sal a jingle?"

"A jingle?" she piped up.

"A ring, a buzz, a...lud! A telephone call!" Baker herded the women out into the corridor.

"Oh, sí! Maybe Sal will give me a ring, too. A diamond one!"

Estrella's giggle drifted back inside, causing Jack to smile. He missed her. He missed all of them. Hard to believe that after only a month, he'd been waxing lyrical over that tiny spit of land in the Caribbean.

Pressing his lips together, he walked over to Denise, interrupting Abernathy's hot air. "We need to get going, Denise. But I have to talk with Abernathy first."

Danny Flannery's great niece pulled her gaze from that sophisticated flimflam man and gave Jack a wide Irish grin. "Sure, Jack. I'll just catch up with Ian, okay?" With an airy wave, she turned back to Abernathy. "Nice meeting you."

And now Jack was alone in the war gallery with his nemesis.

Abernathy folded his matchstick arms across his meager chest. "You're a wet blanket, aren't you? Taking away Larry, and now the fair Denise." He shrugged lopsided shoulders. His jacket must've been padded. "I learned something interesting about you, Jack. Very interesting. Did some research on the 381st Bomb Group you and your men belong to."

As the man's expression changed, the hackles on Jack's neck stood at attention. "Strange thing, Jack. After the group's assignment in Ridgewell, England, it was de-activated in the summer of 1945. And listed on the crew was one Captain John Harrington--Jack, to his friends."

With a leer on his face, Abernathy rubbed his hands together. "Odd things are known to happen in the Bermuda Triangle, Jack. So how's life treating a forties retread like yourself?"

It probably would've been too much to ask God above for this slimeball to remain ignorant of his true identity. But maybe being a "forties retread" was more beneficial than Jack believed. "Still a lot of miles left on this ol' tire, Abernathy."

A glaring of eyeballs occurred as they took each other's measure. Abernathy broke the connection first. "If you'll excuse me. I need to find Larry."

Something snapped inside Jack. Whether it was the easy manner in which the man spoke Larissa's name, or because he didn't like the wave of Abernathy's flaxen hair--either way, he didn't know. With flared nostrils, Jack reached out and grabbed the man's lanky arm. "In my free time, I've been doing a little research of my own, Abernathy. On you. Guess I was curious as to how an information broker could afford a yacht. And trips to all over the globe. Flying first class, yet. Plus racking up overseas telephone bills higher than most peoples' take-home pay. Something doesn't add up about your clandestine activities." He watched the man's fists clench and unclench, obviously hitting a nerve. Good. "Yeah, I'm downright suspicious of you."

Beads of sweat popped up on the man's low forehead. "Everything's aboveboard. I have nothing to hide."

Jack released Abernathy's arm. "I mentioned some of my concerns to the top brass at Larissa's job. What is it called, the National Security Agency? The most secretive spy service around. More tenacious than the IRS, I hear tell."

Abernathy paled to a ghastly shade of white. "Why, you son of a bitch--"

Jack grinned. Perversely enough, he was enjoying this. "Now, now. Larissa doesn't care for swearing."

The man made a mistake. A big mistake. He swung his puny fist, intending to clip Jack's jaw.

No match. No match at all. Intercepting the blow, Jack countered with two punches of his own: one to

the cheekbone and the other to the midsection. In slow motion, Abernathy sank to his knees with a gratifying thud and stared out at cartoon stars only he could see. Soon, he would have a beaut of a black eye.

Looking down at the man, Jack curled and uncurled his fist to relieve the stiffness. "You leave Larissa alone. Is that understood?"

Although Abernathy's answer was indistinct, the intention was crystal clear. Nodding in the affirmative, he winced with unexpected pain.

"Good." Turning his back on the man, Jack walked out of the gallery to join Baker and Denise downstairs. For the first time since leaving the island, he finally felt in control of his life...except for one extremely important part.

Removing a slab of gum from his pocket, he savagely chewed on it. Not as satisfying as a smoke, but then again, it was a helluva lot less addictive.

He inhaled determination. Maybe, just maybe there was something he could do to resolve this situation with Larissa. After all, he was part of "The Greatest Generation" as described by one of that stinking television box's nightly news anchors, Tom Brokaw. A "retread" from the forties just didn't knuckle under; by Christ he fought tooth and nail for what he believed was right. And, if the headlines screaming in today's newspapers were any indication, men of integrity were few and far between, unfortunately.

Ian Baker never had spoken truer words; all four men had been given another go at life. And there was nothing Jack wanted more in all the world than to spend his second chance with Larissa.

* * *

"Why do you wear sunglasses inside, Larissa? The sun does not shine on us in the museum." Estrella stood on her tiptoes to peer at Larissa through the darkened glasses.

Her eyes reddened from crying, Larissa took a step away, avoiding the girl's piercing gaze. "Oh, we're going out in a second. Just as soon as Abby gets back with Avery."

Pouting, Estrella gestured wildly with her hands. "Did you know I was not able to talk with Sal? But he had something called an answering machine, so I left him a message." She sighed, then frowned up at Larissa. "Why are you not happy, Larissa? Why did you and Señor Jack not kiss, like in the movies?"

Twirling around near the museum's floor to ceiling glass walls, Estrella spun at a dizzying rate. "Sal and I would have kissed. Maybe even a French kiss. That means tongues, you know."

"Estrella!" Hoping no one had heard the girl, Larissa flushed. Obviously Estrella was watching too much television. "At your age, you shouldn't be talking about such things."

The girl gave a continental shrug. "At my age, I should be married with many bebès. Babies. As you should be, too."

Well, that was an emotional minefield if ever there was one. Marriage had never interested her, except...except with Jack. But that was impossible, wasn't it?

Swallowing the lump in her throat, Larissa quickly changed the subject. "Look, here's Abby. Abby, are you ready to go? Where's your brother?"

As she approached, a heavenly smile spread across Abby's beautiful face. "I've never been more ready to fly the coop." She clasped her hands together. "I mean, sure, let's go."

Happiness actually vibrated off her. Larissa had never seen her friend looking so...so thrilled.

Abby joined Estrella in a joyful pirouette. "You wouldn't believe how much has happened! I might be leaving for Australia--soon!"

"With Señor Ian," Estrella confirmed.

What? Larissa blinked back her shock. "Abby, you can't be serious."

"Honestly, I've never been more serious. I think I've loved him from the first moment I saw him."

Not to burst anyone's bubble but, Larissa had to call a spade a spade. "You mean when Ian told you to cover up your white pointers?"

"Mmm. Isn't he romantic? He doesn't want to share me with anyone else! We're going on our first date tonight." Abby sailed through the museum's doors out into the waning October daylight. She was like a woman possessed. "And who knows? Maybe I'll emigrate to the lucky country!"

Wow. This was just too much. Then again, Abby had always been impetuous. But Larissa had to concentrate on a more mundane issue. "Aren't you forgetting someone? Where's Avery? We can't leave without him."

His sister jiggled car keys. "Yes we can, Ms. Know-It-All. He gave me his car keys. Now I get to drive through traffic out of this horrendous D.C. maze."

"But why?" This whole day wasn't making any sense. And to Larissa's logical way of thinking, things were going absolutely bonkers.

A brisk breeze lifted up a strand of Abby's golden hair. She smoothed it back down. "Well, that part's odd. He must've fallen or something 'cause now he has a shiner like you wouldn't believe. Said he wanted to get checked out at an emergency room. Even had trouble standing up straight. Poor Avery. I've seen him looking better. Maybe he still has jetlag."

"Maybe. That's awfully peculiar." Pulling the reins in on Estrella, Larissa followed her friend to the parking lot. Not especially excited at Abby's sudden designation as driver, Larissa took small favors where she found them. At least she didn't have to drive through the Nation's capital with its labyrinth of highways. And she didn't have to sit next to Avery worrying whether he'd put the make on her again.

How did he get that black eye, anyway?

Larissa slipped her sunglasses down to massage the bridge of her nose. She was glad this bizarre day was almost over. The sooner she was safe, in her own home, the better. And the sooner she could forget about Jack, the happier she'd be.

Sure. The sting of more tears resurfaced. Without Jack, she'd never be happy again.

Chapter Thirteen

Larissa usually didn't get personal telephone calls at work, so when she was paged to return to her office, she had no idea who was on the other end of the receiver. As soon as she heard a sniff, though, she knew. This was an SOS call from her mother in Montana.

"Oh, honey! You've got to come out here. Things are getting impossible and I just don't know what to do!"

Larissa sighed. Emergencies always seemed to crop up on Mom, and the dear woman was never ready for the challenge. "Mom, what's the problem? Can I help you with it over the phone?" She crossed her fingers. Please? Just this once?

"No, no. No. I need you. I need you here with me, right now!"

"What about Molly and Ellen? They're a lot closer, and--"

"You know your sisters, Larissa. Never half as dependable as you. Besides, since Molly's pregnant, she's as big as a house, and Ellen...well, with the divorce and all, I'm afraid she's been drinking."

Larissa slumped down in her chair. Even though it was December, she'd redecorated her office with pictures of tropical islands. At least ten times each day, she'd gaze out at the sandy, white beaches and foaming ocean surf to daydream about a certain idyllic time...a certain maddening man. A toy model B-17 bomber even stoically sat on the corner of her desk, unfazed by stacks of computer papers littering the surface.

Shaking her head to clear it, she said, "I'm sorry to hear about Ellen. She seemed fine a few weeks ago when I saw her. But she's really got to put the past behind her and concentrate on the future."

Great advice, Larissa, she chided herself. So why don't you do the same thing?

"Will you come?" Mom's plaintive tone pulled on more than Larissa's heart-strings.

"Oh, Mom." Always a sucker for a sob story, Larissa adjusted her eyeglasses, then checked her calendar. Having to ask for time off after just being back at work only two months was embarrassing in the extreme. However, on the positive side, she'd be able to spend Christmas with her family. She hadn't done that in a long time. And Estrella would have fun in Big Sky country with her sisters' kids. She was getting a little bored with her schooling, and it was almost winter break, anyway.

Her decision made, Larissa flipped through her Rolodex cards to find her travel agent's number. "Tell me, what's wrong this time, Mom?" Or in other words, she silently added, tell me what's waiting for me when I get there.

"Oh, it's awful. Just awful."

Now Larissa was really curious. What had her mother gotten herself into?

"Since I'm all alone now...this big house is so empty with just my footsteps, you know." Mom's voice trembled. "I, well, I got lonely and, er, took in a boarder."

"And...?" Larissa prompted. At this rate, she'd be on the phone all day. "Is there something the matter with her?"

"With him! There's something definitely wrong with him. I...I'm scared."

Oh gosh. A sudden shiver rocked Larissa's body. Brrr. Visions of Freddy Krueger and Nightmare On Elm Street distorted her thoughts. Fixing her gaze on the scene of a wind-tossed palm tree, she calmed

herself.

"Okay, Mom. Tell you what. You get out of the house and stay over at Molly's, okay? She can use your help, anyway. I'll book the first flight available. Estrella and I will probably be there before noon tomorrow. Is that okay?"

More sniffing came over the ear piece. "Thank you, child. Thank you. I don't know what I'd do without you."

Poor Mom really must've been quivering in her boots. She never was so appreciative over the phone. But that only worried Larissa more. "Promise me you'll leave the house. I'll handle that lodger when I get there, okay?"

After Mom's sobs and assurances that she'd go to Molly's place, Larissa hung up the phone, only to pick it up again. Next day flights to Great Falls were bound to cost a pretty penny. Pulling out her charge card, she contacted the travel agent. All in all, maybe Mom taking in a boarder was a good thing. Because of that, Larissa would be home for the coming holiday, helping Mom and her sisters. And Estrella would enjoy a change of scenery.

And right now a change of scenery for both of them was a darn good idea.

* * *

Larissa turned the key and opened the door into her mother's entryway. "Hello?" she called out. Nothing but the silent creaking of an empty house answered her, although the welcoming aroma of fresh baked cookies still hung in the air.

She took a step inside, shut the door, and removed her coat. Perhaps it was better this way with the man not being home. She would have the psychological advantage of confronting him on her own terms. After first stopping at Molly's, she had grilled her mom on what, exactly, was wrong with the male boarder. Mom, in her typical vague way, had said only that he made her nervous. Not a substantial reason to evict a person, but surely the man would understand how important it was for a widow to be comfortable in her own home. And if he didn't....

Larissa patted the cell phone concealed in her pocket. A phone call to the police was only a second away.

Taking the few stairs up to the main level, she walked into the dining room to gaze out the sliding glass doors. Estrella had insisted on accompanying her to the house. Larissa acquiesced, but just as stubbornly, insisted the girl remain outside. Just in case.

Out of character, Estrella had meekly agreed. She now dangled over the back fence, discovering the horse farm on the neighbor's property. With her long hair swaying in the Montana breeze, she waved to a grazing mare, demanding it stop eating and come visit her.

What a pip of a gal! And how fortunate Larissa was in being her guardian. Turning away, she went up the stairs to the bedrooms to make certain she really was alone in the house. After a quick check in Mom's room, she couldn't help visiting Gramps' room next. Mom hadn't changed a thing. The chilled air no longer had a sickroom scent: camphor and vapor rub, and the battered bureau still stood displaying his treasured pictures from the war.

She couldn't ignore the photo commanding her attention. There Jack was--standing next to young Gramps--confident and smiling, as handsome as when she'd seen him last. Tears blurred her eyes. This was the only picture she would ever have of him. The only memento besides her memories.

Sorrow enveloped her. But she couldn't have a major meltdown right now. Not with that boarder due to arrive soon.

Removing her eyeglasses, she brushed away tears. Oh, if only things had been different between her and Jack. If only....

She couldn't bear to be near his picture so she rushed across the hall into the lodger's rented room. Nothing had changed there either. Just a bed made up in a crisp military style and a chest of drawers containing nothing of a personal nature on its surface. That was odd. Curiosity got the better of her so she opened the closet door to peek inside.

Empty! Except for some of Mom's old clothes hung in dry cleaner's bags off to the side.

"Something's not quite kosher here." Hearing noises, she moved over to the window and pushed aside the filmy curtain. Estrella had managed to coax a horse to her side, but she also animatedly talked with a large man in an Air Force uniform. Larissa squinted her eyes but couldn't identify him. She'd have to go get her glasses in Gramps' room.

But when she turned around, she stopped dead in her tracks.

"Looking for something, babe?"

Good God! It was Jack, leaning his athletic form against the doorframe. "Jack," was all she could manage to say. Her eyes popped out of her head and her mouth must've hung wide enough to catch flies.

Dressed in Air Force blues, he sauntered in, unzipping his short, winter jacket. "In the flesh," he agreed. "You're talking to yourself. Not a good sign."

"Jack, what are you doing here?" His hair was more precision cut than the last time she'd seen him. Probably still within regulations, but just barely. If only she could run her fingers through that thick crop of hair. In fact, she positively itched to touch him. Biting her lip, she folded her hands behind her back just in case they decided to stray without her permission.

He removed his jacket and draped it over a closet hanger. "The question is, 'What are you doing here?' This is my room."

"What? You...you can't be the boarder."

Patting the pocket on his light blue uniform shirt, he grinned. "Then how'd I get this here house key?"

Her heart, which had decided to jump out of her ribcage at the sight of him, now started fluttering like a freshly caught fish. She watched him sit on the bed and with the greatest degree of nonchalance, he unlaced his shoes.

She had to concentrate to focus her thoughts. "Um, okay. Let me get this straight. You're assigned to the Air Force Base--Malmstrom. And you decided to rent a room from my mother."

He slipped off one shoe, then the other, placing them neatly by the closet. "I've got a temporary duty assignment here at Malmstrom, yes. And no, I decided to rent a room in my best friend's house."

Which, of course, amounted to the same thing. She held out her hands palms up in a questioning gesture, but then quickly hid them behind her back again because they shook. "Why are you making my mother nervous? She called me to come out, and...and I was supposed to evict you."

"I'm making your mother nervous? She never told me." Lifting an eyebrow, he unbuttoned his shirt. "You look anxious as well. Maybe you Parish women are a bit...jumpy."

Flying two time zones behind Eastern Time must've scrambled her mind because she could hardly think, let alone breathe. And when he whipped off his shirt, she could only stare at the white undershirt he wore underneath. His dark chest hairs curled enticingly out of the v-neck opening. As he hung up

the shirt, she noticed two gleaming silver oak leaves on the shoulders. "Um, you've been promoted to lieutenant colonel?"

"Yeah. Guess the big brass thought over fifty years as a captain was overkill. Skipped a major's rank, too. Baker held out for major, while Flannery pinned on captain, as Scarpelli did."

Sal. He was the one outside talking with Estrella. Larissa glanced through the window to see the two of them making goo-goo eyes at each other.

A jiggling sound brought her attention back inside. Jack fumbled with his silver belt buckle.

She swallowed down hard. "G--Goodness, what are you doing?"

"You're an intelligent woman. You figure it out. This is my room and I just got off of a forty-eight hour shift. This bed here looks pretty inviting." He lifted his eyebrow again. "Care to join me?"

If there was one thing she didn't feel right now, it was intelligent. Emotional, yes, but her brains were definitely not in gear. She wanted to be with Jack, and yet..., and yet this way, it was wrong. She loved him. With every breath deep down to her soul, she loved him. But joining him for a quick roll in the hay was not what she longed for. Not unless they could stay in the hay forever.

Her eyes blurred and she looked away from him. "Um, what about Denise?"

His cool voice wrapped icy tendrils around her. "Babe, I'm tired of your twenty questions. Denise isn't here. You are. Shall we?"

Shall we? Oooh. Larissa virtually bubbled with righteous indignation. Who did he think he was to be so blasé about making love? As if she would even consider a slam-bang-thank-you-ma'am sort of arrangement. She was no substitute for Denise or any other woman! How dare he...how dare he cheapen what they once had.

She narrowed her gaze. "No, we shall not. I'll leave you to get your sleep but be advised I'm giving you notice to find other accommodations. You can stay here three more days--until the end of the week. That's fair enough. I'll not have my mother uncomfortable." Her hand on the doorknob, she turned back to accuse him with her eyes. "You have to go."

Shutting the door on him and on her hopeless, impossible dreams, Larissa stomped down the stairs to stew in private.

* * *

She loves me. Jack flopped on the bed, elbows out and hands under his head. By all that was holy, the woman was absolutely crazy about him.

Grinning from ear to ear, he relived her powerful fury. Oh yeah, she had been ready to spit fire at him. But at first sight, she'd wanted to melt in his arms. Which would happen. By Christ, it would happen soon.

He closed his eyes to get some much needed shuteye. Nat, you ol' sot, what do you think of me and your granddaughter getting hitched?

Nat approved; Jack was sure of it. Just as he was sure ol' Nat was the source of the inspiration to finagle a temporary duty here. And approach Larissa's mother with this plan. To appease his own inner demons, Jack had needed to make certain Larissa wasn't free with her favors. That she didn't jump in the sack at any chance she got. Not that he didn't admire that attribute, however he was old-fashioned enough to admit that what he really wanted was for her to wear his ring.

Mrs. Jack Harrington. Yeah, 'til death do us part, babe.

Curving his arm around the pillow, Jack drifted off to sleep. With any luck, by the end of the week...or sooner, he'd be curving his arm around Larissa instead.

* * *

Anger had a great energizing effect. Larissa took out her frustrations by cleaning the dirty dishes left in the sink, wiping down the countertops, and rearranging the pantry. She just finished washing the kitchen floor when Estrella tapped on the sliding glass door, holding hands with Sal.

"Larissa! It is a miracle! See who I have found." A trail of frosty breath followed Estrella as she paraded Sal inside, never taking her gaze from him.

Sal removed his Air Force hat and blushed down his beefy neck. "Er, hullo, ma'am. It's good to see you again."

Larissa gave him a hug. "Just call me Larry, okay? I hear congratulations are in order."

Goodness, if he blushed any deeper, he'd be a serious shade of purple. But the odd thing was, Estrella blushed, too.

Larissa slid her gaze from one to the other. "I mean about your promotion to captain."

"Oh, er, that. Yeah, thanks." He shifted from one foot to the other. "You're probably wondering why I'm here. Did y'see Jack?"

Jack. A pain lanced her heart. She nodded. "He's upstairs, sleeping."

"Señor Jack is here?" Estrella clapped her hands together. "Madre de Dios! This truly is a miracle!"

Sal smiled fondly at her. "Just came over to ask Jack if he wanted to go out to eat. Then I saw Estrella." His smile widened. "You sure look grown up, chica."

"I am not a girl, but a woman." She pouted her lips enticingly. "Larissa, may I go to dinner with Sal, please?"

"I'll ask Larry, Estrella." Sal cleared his throat. "Why don't you go...."

"Freshen up. That is what American ladies do. They freshen up." With dancing dark eyes, she flashed a grin and retreated to the bathroom.

Taking Larissa's hand, Sal gestured toward the dining table. "Let's sit. I need to talk with you about Estrella." After settling in, he exhaled slowly. "I know she's young, but in so many ways, she's a lot more mature than most women around. And, well, such an unusual background. Y'know, I haven't been able to stop thinking about her."

Larissa let him talk. Silently she agreed they made a good couple.

He caught her gaze and held it. "Estrella and I have a lot in common, kinda both out of our element here." Drumming his thick fingers on the table, he continued. "I guess what I'm saying is that I want to take care of her 'cuz I...cuz I love her."

To underscore his words, he slammed his palm against his heart. "I like being a navigator, so I'll be staying in the Air Force, unlike Danny and Jack. And I think she'll enjoy traveling around the world, seeing the sights."

Larissa blinked back her surprise. Instead of asking about Jack, she dodged the issue. "Danny isn't staying in?"

"No, he likes that plant stuff, y'know, botany. So Denise, that's his niece, got him a job with the Smithsonian's Museum of Natural History."

Whoa. "Denise is his niece?"

"Yeah, his great niece, actually. You met her, remember? She really liked you." Sal leaned back in the chair, more relaxed. "Anyway, we're all going different ways. I'll miss my 'twin,' but Danny'll be happy in D.C. Ian's planning to be a bushie now with Abby. Going to live in the Outback, wherever that is in Australia. And as I told you, Jack's getting out too, and plans to stay someplace in Montana. Estrella and I'll go wherever the Air Force sends us."

Larissa had known about Ian and Abby, but not the news that Jack had decided to leave the military and live in Montana, of all places. What was she to make of that?

Sal cleared his throat again. "So, what I'm asking is, do I have your blessing, Larry?"

She reached over and patted his hand. "Estrella's only sixteen and she's quite a handful, but you know she hasn't spoken of anyone else since she met you, Sal. Nonstop! I...well, maybe you can go slowly and see if this is what you both really want."

He laughed. "It is! And I'll go slow. Promise."

As if on cue, Estrella burst out of the bathroom. "Mira! Look! Am I not fresh now?"

Larissa laughed. "Silly goose. You two have a good time." She left the table to pull out a pad of paper from a kitchen drawer, and wrote out Molly's address. "Curfew at ten, okay? And bring Estrella back to my sister's."

If happiness had a picture, it would've been Estrella and Sal's faces.

After they left, Larissa sank back in the dining room chair. Jack wasn't romantically interested in Denise. It was obvious, now. And he intended to "retire," so to speak, and settle here in Montana. Things just kept getting curiouser and curiouser.

She picked up the phone and called Molly's house. "Mom? Hi, it's me, Larissa. Do you know who your boarder is?"

Mom's response was quick and to the point. "Of course I do. He said his name is Jack Harrington."

"Right. But did you know he was one of the men I was stranded with on the island?"

"Really?" Growing interest colored Mom's voice. "He told me he was your grandfather's best friend. Gives me goose-bumps just thinking about it."

But it's true, Mom. Larissa kept her thoughts to herself. "Is that the reason Jack makes you nervous?"

"Isn't that reason enough? Did you...get rid of him?"

Larissa glanced up at the ceiling as if she could see through to where he slept. "No, I gave him three days to find another place. I thought that was fair."

"I see. Coming back to Molly's, then?"

"Not yet." So much unfinished business between them. Maybe she should talk with him one more time.

"I see," Mom repeated. Then her tone grew hushed. "Are you sure you know what you're doing, child?"

Evidently a mother's intuition could work even when the child was twenty-eight years old. Smoothing back her hair, Larissa stood. "No. But I don't think anyone ever really knows exactly what to do one hundred percent of the time, either."

A certain suspicion wiggled its devious way into Larissa's thoughts. "Mom, my sister Ellen hasn't taken up drinking, has she?"

"Heavens no," was the immediate response. "Why do you say that? In fact, she's found herself a really good man. Might be wedding bells there soon."

Larissa sighed. So her mother and Jack were in collusion with each other. Had to have been, for Mom was the source of Ellen's rumored drinking problem.

"Well, I've got to go now, Mom. Wish me luck."

Indecision hampered Larissa's movements. Should she go upstairs and knock on his door? Or should she wait until he woke up on his own? What to do, what to do? Navigating the stairs took ten whole minutes, and even as she reached the top, she dithered whether to stay or go back downstairs and pace a hole in the carpet there.

She decided to stay. Pausing by the railing, she glanced at the closed door. She changed her mind. A man was always in a better mood after a good night's sleep.

Larissa took a step down.

"Didn't figure it would take you this long to get up here, Larissa." Jack opened the door and walked out into the small hallway. Still dressed in his undershirt and navy pants, he folded his arms across that broad chest of his while his heavy-lidded eyes held her captive.

She stepped back up. With him so near, the tiny corridor seemed even tinier. "I, um, I didn't want to disturb you."

He wet his lips. "But you do disturb me. Very much."

"Jack!" This was the Jack who so tenderly held her in his arms and made love to her. She no longer doubted him. Driven by instinct, she propelled herself against him, hugging, feeling, embracing him for all the days they'd been apart.

His touch made her dizzy; he too was driven with a passion so strong as to transport both of them to that other place, outside time and space.

"Ah, Larissa." He showered kisses from heaven over every curve on her face. "Honey, I want you to know I've made my peace with this new century." Pulling away, he drank in the sight of her, his grey eyes now coal-black with desire. "I'm not half a man anymore. I've got plans for the future, and those plans include you."

"Do they, now?" she murmured against the thick cord of his neck. "I never thought you were half a man, Jack." Her hands lovingly traveled over his powerful muscles, relishing his hard skin, his rigid shaft. "No, indeed."

With a whoop, he lifted her up, carrying her to his bedroom. "I'm asking you now, Larissa, and I warn you, I won't take no for an answer. Will you be my wife?"

As he gently set her down on the bed, she kept her arms arched around his neck. There was no way she would ever let him go. "Barefoot and pregnant?" she teased. "Is that how you see me?"

He flashed her a grin. "It's a start!"

She languidly traced her finger down the edge of his strong jaw, then nipped at his earlobe. "Gosh, I don't know. Rumor has it you plan to build a log cabin out in the sticks of Montana. I ran away from small town living once."

Catching her fingers, he kissed them. "Hadn't thought of log cabins, but they do have their advantages. Especially on cold winter nights." Jack eased down on top of her, savoring the contact between them just as she reveled in it. "And I wouldn't call living in Montana's state capital the sticks."

"In Helena?" Actually, she'd always liked Helena; it was only about an hour's drive from Great Falls. But anyplace on earth would've been A-OK with her, as long as Jack was by her side. "But what about my job?"

"What about your job? Leave NSA in D.C. My plan is for you to be a senator's wife, eventually." He rubbed his delicious self against her, heating up every blessed inch of her body. First the shirts, then the rest of their clothes went, leaving them completely and gloriously naked.

"Senator's...wife?" she panted, wallowing in his masculine scent, his erotic feel. Oh dear God, she grabbed his buttocks and sunk her teeth into his shoulder.

"Mmm, ah, yeah, I've decided what this country needs more than anything else right now is a few good men. And what better way to improve government than to start from within." He caressed her breasts, then slipped his hands down to fondle her most intimate place. "So to speak!"

She groaned and moaned. More kisses, more strokes tore her wits away from her, leaving only desperate, raw emotion.

He stopped his assault to whisper in her ear. "You haven't given me your answer."

"Oh," she gasped. "This--this is blackmail, Jack Harrington! But yes, I want to marry you more than anything else in the world." She ground her hips to his. "So let's you and I cement our coming nuptials. Agreed?"

As his bulk throbbed against her, he slid inside her velvet moistness. "Ah, success." Jack crowed victory. "Lovely Larissa, I look forward to our imminent nuptials as well as our imminent coming, again and again!"

And, as sure as her name would soon be Larissa Harrington, she heard a faint voice echoing, "Heaven on earth." From his celestial vantage point, her grandfather was keeping his promise to walk her down the wedding aisle.

"Heaven on earth!" came the muted words again. Dear old Gramps. Obviously he was cheering his granddaughter and his best friend on with enthusiastic approval!

~The End~

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