



HONEYMOON FOR ONE

By

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CHAPTER ONE

"It's so beautiful!"

Abby threw open the drapes and gazed out at the lush gardens below. A carpet of deep green grass, flanked on either side by fuchsia flowers, led to the turquoise ocean. She sighed again in utter contentment and turned to her husband. "The perfect location for renewing our vows and finally having that honeymoon."

Her proclamation drew only a grunt from her Greg, who was staring out the window, presumably admiring the same view as Abby, yet he stared off into space visibly lost in thought. *Oh well*, Abby reflected. Preoccupied by the demands of a thriving business, Greg was often lost in thought. She refused to let Greg's absent-mindedness interfere with this once-in-a-lifetime vacation.

Carefully packed in her luggage lay a strapless wedding gown. The designer silk creation fit her perfectly. When they'd said their vows the first time, the best she could afford was a navy suit. Formal wear came in dark colors, her mother-in-law had insisted. The short dress of white eyelet she'd intended to wear simply wouldn't do. According to Greg's mother, it looked like a sundress. Abby couldn't see what difference it would have made to their informal civil ceremony. No bridesmaids, no flower girls. Greg's parents were their only witnesses. She refused to count Greg's best friend Dorian as a witness, especially after he'd arrived drunk. Abby thought of her new silk wedding gown and smiled. This time things would be different.

The door to their suite banged open. Abby jumped. A tiny shriek escaped her lips. Not the door to their room, she realized, gathering her wits, but the door to the adjoining suite. And standing in the doorway was Greg's best friend, Dorian, a beer already in hand.

"What's he doing here?" she hissed at Greg, who finally tore his attention from his woolgathering.

"Oh," he said absent-mindedly. "I invited him."

"You invited him!" Her voice rose louder than she intended. She grabbed Greg by the sleeve of his silk t-shirt. "What do you mean you invited him?"

"I figured since he was our best man the first time round, he should do the honors on the second."

"Honors! He got falling down drunk!"

Greg's eyes narrowed as if he really didn't understand why she might be upset. Instead of arguing with her, he merely shrugged. Greg never argued. He simply did what he wanted.

Seemingly oblivious to their discussion, Dorian turned his attention to his beer. With some distaste he extracted the slice of lime stuffed into the neck of the bottle and tossed it in the garbage can. *Their* garbage can. Where the ants--

Abby dragged her mind back to the present, determined not to let Dorian spoil her last chance at a perfect wedding. Rooms could be rearranged. As soon as she'd gotten rid of Dorian, she'd have a talk with Greg and get Dorian moved to the other side of the resort. Or, if circumstances permitted, the other side of the island. "I see you've found the

bar,” she sniped.

Dorian pretended not to notice. “Pretty swanky place, huh?”

She studied her husband's friend. Greg's polar opposite, she never could understand what the studious Greg saw in the boisterous Dorian. Greg had spent the past twenty-five years working round the clock to build up his business. Dorian floated from job to job working as everything from a carpenter to a skiing instructor, to his current incarnation as a web developer. Still, at forty-seven, that lifestyle had to be losing its appeal. She glanced at Dorian's nonchalant demeanor. Apparently not.

“What you need is a beer,” Dorian said, turning his attention to Greg. Dorian captured his attention easily enough, she thought with a pang of anger. Or perhaps it was the beer. “Sure,” Greg said. Grabbing his room key, he followed Dorian to the door.

“Back in an hour honey,” he said, almost as an after thought.

“Don't be late. We have a meeting with the wedding planner at five,” she reminded him.

From the doorway, Greg turned back. “It's not a wedding, honey. We're already married. You really don't need to get so bent out of shape.” The door swung closed on whatever she would have said.

“Yes it is,” Abby told herself. The wedding she'd never had. The one they'd never been able to afford. This time she'd have the flowers, the cake, the wedding video and the designer silk dress. This time she'd have it all. She stared out the window at the sculpted gardens and the blue sea. In her suitcase was the bikini she'd dieted for six months to fit into. Well, two could play at this game she thought and went to change.

The white bikini looked striking against her suntanned skin. Even though she'd sworn never to set foot in a tanning salon, she'd broken down and got a base tan. She'd had her hair streaked to give her a sun-bleached look. All in all, she looked pretty good for forty-five. Tossing a plush hotel towel over her shoulder, she headed for the beach.

She found a hammock tied beneath two palm trees. Gentle waves lapped at the shore beneath her. Abby found the sound soothing. Lulled by the rush of the sea, she drifted off to sleep.

A prickling feeling woke her a couple of hours later. Abby lifted her head. The tide had drifted inland and warm water now lapped around her buttocks through the hammock's netting. She looked down at her body and groaned. Where a couple of hours before, she'd been a golden brown, now her torso had turned a color only a lobster could be proud of.

Flinging herself out of the hammock, she jumped down into the water and waded back toward the hotel. “Don't panic,” she muttered to herself. “Make-up can cover sunburn.” Hopefully the hotel gift shop sold aloe vera.

The hotel gift shop, it turned out, didn't sell aloe vera. When she arrived back at her suite hoping to slink into the shower unnoticed, she found Greg and Dorian sitting on the balcony. Beer bottles littered every table on the patio. She turned to hide in the bathroom, but Dorian caught sight of her and burst out laughing.

Abby opened her mouth, her temper rising and intent on tossing Dorian bodily from their room, when she caught sight of the clock. “Five to five!”

At the sound of her voice, Greg turned. “There you are. I wondered where you'd gone.”

Dorian gave her an appreciative once-over and then went back to his beer.

"We have five minutes before we have to meet with the wedding coordinator." Her voice sounded shrill even to her own ears.

"Ready when you are," Greg said.

Annoyed and not sure why, Abby darted into the bathroom. No time to cover her burns with makeup. No time for anything. She brushed her wind-swept hair and pulled on a white sundress, wincing as she did up the straps. She left her bikini bottoms on.

"Wow, you're really burned," Greg said as she emerged. No *wow, you look wonderful* or *I'm really glad to be marrying you again*.

"Let's go," she said tersely and headed out to the hotel offices.

* * * *

"We have a lovely gazebo, right on the water."

The wedding planner led the way through the gardens. Flowers overflowed the path in a riot of color. Fuchsia battled with vibrant yellow and deep purples. Abby wanted to stop and gaze at them all, but she had a wedding to plan. One that was taking place tomorrow.

"We can do the ceremony at sunset, if you like."

Abby looked at Greg who was staring out to sea again lost in thought. "What do you think, sweetheart?"

He blinked, then turned to look at her. "Whatever you want, honey. It's your big day."

She smiled. That was Greg. Most of the time she had to repeat every thing she said to him. He worked long hours and often came home exhausted. She had supported his career, working in his business, giving up on her dream of having a family until it was too late. But Greg's business flourished. They had a beautiful home full of pretty things. Fancy things she'd always thought she wanted. That made it easy to overlook the lack of attention except on those nights when Greg worked late and she slept in their king-sized bed all alone.

Then, on rare occasions he surprised her, suddenly becoming sweet and attentive. Like now. Knowing how important this second wedding was to her, he smothered his own desires and allowed her to have everything she wanted.

She roused herself to find both Greg and the wedding planner waiting for her answer. "Sunset would be beautiful," she agreed.

"Okay then." The wedding planner made some notes. Turning she made her way back through the gardens. "We have you scheduled for a massage at noon tomorrow, followed by hair appointment at two. Come back to the office and we'll talk about the video and the flowers."

Surprised, Abby turned to Greg. "Only the best for you, honey," he said.

Her heart melted. He'd even arranged for a massage!

He put his mouth close to her ear. "Let's get your flowers arranged and then let's have a romantic dinner at the waterfront restaurant. We have a reservation."

She couldn't help asking, "Dinner? Without Dorian?"

Greg smiled. "Dorian has other plans."

Abby could well imagine. Women seemed to flow through Dorian's life like water. All of them tall. All of them blond.

"Good."

Greg winked at her. "But I'm going to bunk with him tonight." She opened her

mouth to protest, but he said, "You know it's bad luck for the groom to see the bride on the morning of the wedding."

"Just don't drink too much," she warned. The night before their wedding Dorian had taken Greg out for an impromptu bachelor party. From what she'd been able to pry out of Greg over the years, it was lucky either of them had made it home alive.

Greg grinned at her. Tiny lines creased the corners of his eyes and his blond hair was sprinkled with gray, but otherwise, he was the man she'd married ... twenty-five years ago tomorrow.

* * * *

Abby stood in the center of the gazebo and gazed out at the water. The sun hovered on the horizon, dyeing the waves crimson. Her sunburn had faded overnight, and she'd been able to cover what remained with makeup. In her form-fitting silk gown, she looked like a bronzed goddess. She carried a spray of flowers fresh from the garden. The bright blossoms set off her white dress perfectly. In a minute, the sun would set, casting rays of purple across the sky. She twisted the platinum ring she'd bought for Greg and cast a backward glance down the path to the hotel. The minister cleared his throat.

Greg was late.

With a sigh she watched the sun sink below the horizon. Rays of maroon and indigo streamed across the sky. The pictures would still be stunning, she thought. If Greg would just hurry up. Maybe they could do the photos first and the ceremony afterward.

The minister lit the candles on the altar. Abby strained her eyes to see through the shadows that now marked the gardens.

Lights flickered to life on the pathway. And there, emerging from the hotel she caught a glimpse of a figure in a white tuxedo. The figure hurried toward them. Her heart sank.

Dorian.

In his right hand he carried a letter. In the dim light she watched the minister's grim smile tighten. Putting her bouquet down on the altar, she hurried down the steps.

The designer gown made it hard to run. She heard a loud rip, then running became easier. Dorian would pay, Abby thought, as her meticulously arranged up-do shredded in the wind. He'd pay to have her dress repaired and her hair redone. He'd pay for whatever he'd done to delay Greg.

"Where's Greg?" she demanded when she reached him.

His tuxedo hung in creases, as if he'd been wearing it all day. Wind ruffled his already messy, dark hair, and the orchid in his lapel had long wilted. He stared down at her, remorse creasing his expression. "I don't know."

"What do you mean you don't know?"

Rather than his normal, cocky self, Dorian looked crestfallen. Dark circles ringed his eyes. "When I woke up, he was gone."

"Gone?" she repeated stupidly. The information rattled around in her brain, refusing to make sense. Then it began to form a sinister picture. The night before their wedding twenty-five years ago, Dorian had taken Greg out for drinks. They'd barely made it to the ceremony. Dorian had been drunk. Now, twenty-five years later, on the one day that was supposed to make up for it all, the day she'd planned the wedding she'd never had, Dorian had ruined it once again. "What time did you wake up?" she asked, her eyes narrowing.

"A few hours ago. And when I woke up Greg was nowhere to be found." He looked down at the crumpled letter in a hotel envelope in his hand. "At first I just thought he'd gone to get his hair cut or something. But when he didn't come back, I got worried. I looked all over for him."

"Obviously, you didn't look hard enough," she snapped. "Are you certain he even made it back to the room with you?"

He gave her a guilty look full of remorse. "Well, no. We went to the bar. I don't remember how I got back to the room."

"Great." Abby stamped the heel of her silk shoe into the soft grass. She'd likely put a stain on the four hundred dollar sandals, but she didn't care.

"Greg must have come back to the room at some point, though," Dorian said. He held up the wrinkled envelope. "Because he left this for you on the bureau."

While they'd been talking, the sun had set completely, leaving only a magenta streak across the sky as evidence it had been there. A scattering of stars appeared above them. A warm ocean breeze stirred her hair, freeing another tendril from her heavily sprayed up-do. It promised to be a spectacular night full of sultry promise.

Yet an icy shiver of dread ran down her spine as she took the envelope from Dorian's sweaty hands. She ran a fingernail under the flap, chipping her French manicure. Inside lay a meticulously folded piece of hotel stationery. The shiver turned into a full-body tremor as she unfolded the paper. Three lines in Greg's handwriting stared back at her.

Forgive me, but I just can't do this anymore.

Enjoy your holiday.

We'll talk when you get back home.

Greg

Abby stared at the writing. She read it twice, and still the simple sentences wouldn't make sense. She felt the warmth from Dorian's body as he peered over her shoulder. Walking away, he stared to curse softly under his breath.

From the corner of her eye, she saw the minister approach. Dorian intercepted him. For a moment they spoke in whispers. Then, with a pity-filled look in her direction, the minister departed. The photographer went with him.

"Abby!" Dorian had been calling her, she realized suddenly.

She looked up, becoming aware that tears were running down her face and splashing on the paper, smearing the ink and ruining her make-up.

Dorian took her gently by the arm. "Let's get you back to the hotel room."

She let him pull her toward the path leading to the hotel--to the Honeymoon Suite they'd booked. Then reality hit like a ton of bricks.

Abby dug her four hundred dollar heels into the grass. "You knew about this, didn't you?"

"No!"

By the shocked and hurt look on his face, she almost believed him. But Dorian went through women faster than most men changed their shirts. Hell, he'd probably encouraged Greg to do it.

"I'm as shocked as you are," Dorian insisted. "I had no idea."

“Well, I don't believe you!” She turned away from him, catching sight of herself reflected in a decorative pool lit by torches.

Her streaked-blond hair hung in tendrils, curling in the humidity, her up-do a complete ruin. Somehow in the past few moments, she'd managed to get dirt stains on her silk wedding gown. Tears had reduced her make-up to random streaks of color, some of which had splashed down on her dress. She took another long look. This was supposed to be the happiest day of her life. The day to make up for twenty-five years of neglect and indifference. Instead, it was turning into the worst day of her life. That bedraggled reflection in the water couldn't possibly be her.

Whirling away from her reflection, she hiked up her dress. Ignoring the dew and the possibility of getting grass stains on her expensive shoes, she raced across the grass toward her hotel room.

Behind her she heard Dorian yelling her name but she ran like a woman possessed. It was only when she reached her hotel room that she realized she had no key.

Dorian's shoes clattered on the pavement as he caught up with her. “Here,” he said, taking his own key from his jacket pocket. He shoved it into the lock and opened the door to his room. “Come on in. I'll call the front desk and get them to send someone up to open the door.”

The last thing she wanted was to wait in Dorian's room but the fewer people who saw her in her present state the better. She hoped the minister hadn't told anyone. They were expected shortly for dinner in main dining room. A flower-decked table awaited them along with a wedding cake and well-wishers. She groaned aloud.

“Have a seat,” Dorian said, reaching for the phone. Obviously, he meant that figuratively, Abby mused, looking around the room. Clothes covered every inch of furniture. The loud shirt he'd been wearing yesterday lay bunched in the chair beside the window. He seemed to have emptied his suitcase on the unmade bed. A pair of pants hung on the back of the only other chair. She noted a pair of briefs on the bureau. Following the path of her gaze, Dorian nonchalantly reached for them and tucked them into a drawer. Empty beer bottles overflowed the wastebasket. He'd obviously taken advantage of the all-inclusive bar.

Abby couldn't see any sign of Greg anywhere. Meticulous Greg had taken his suitcase and all its contents and left.

With half her attention, she heard Dorian on the phone to the hotel desk, explaining that while rushing for the ceremony, Abby had forgotten her hotel room key and now needed to be let in. He sounded so matter-of-fact, but she appreciated that. The last thing she wanted was anyone else witnessing her heartache.

An unopened beer sat on the bureau next to where Dorian's underwear had been tossed, as if he'd debated having one last brew before packing it in. She wondered idly if Greg had talked him out of it, then decided that it didn't matter. She picked it up and held it up for Dorian to see. He nodded.

She wandered into his bathroom. Obviously, the maid hadn't been in yet because wet towels covered the floor. She tip-toed through them and used the opener attached to the wall. As a rule she never drank beer. Today she'd make an exception. Tipping her head back, she took a long deep swallow. It poured down her throat in a frothy wave. She swallowed, burped loudly. Through the open doorway, she saw Dorian look up at the sound, but he said nothing.

Appalled, she glanced away, coming face to face with her reflection in the mirror. Who was that woman with disheveled hair in a creased dress slugging back a beer of all things?

Who was that man that she'd shared a life and a bed with for twenty-five years? The one who'd left her at the altar. In that moment she realized she hadn't known Greg at all. Even more disturbing was that she hardly recognized herself.

"The desk says they'll send someone up right away," Dorian said, walking to the doorway.

She nodded and took another long pull on the beer.

Wordlessly, he put his arm around her and drew her out of the bathroom. Plucking his shirt off the chair, he offered her a seat. It wasn't like Dorian to be gallant, she thought, sitting down. Maybe he just felt sorry for her.

He perched on the side of the bed. "Look, Abby, I really had no idea. I woke up this morning fully expecting to stand up for you and Greg while you renewed your vows."

She heard the words, but she couldn't seem to think past the static in her brain. One thought kept repeating itself like a distress signal. *Greg left me. Greg left me. Greg left me. Greg left...*

"This morning?" she asked dully.

"Okay, this afternoon. We had a few drinks last night."

"Just like before our wedding," Abby snapped. Another thought added to the repeating distress signal. *Greg left me. Dorian's a jerk.*

"Believe me, it wasn't my idea. We went to the bar. Greg kept ordering more drinks. Beers, margaritas and those fruity things with umbrellas. After a few...well, I stopped protesting."

"Sure," she said, finishing the last of his beer. She burped again and didn't care.

A rap on the door interrupted the loop in her mind. Dorian rose to answer it.

The bellman gave the room a distasteful once over. His gaze lingered on the disheveled bride sitting with the best man, but he made no comment. He nodded to Abby. "I'll open the honeymoon suite now for you, Ma'am."

Putting down the beer, she smoothed the wrinkles from her dress and tried to look dignified. "Thank you."

She followed the bellman next door. To her dismay, Dorian came with them.

Her dismay grew when she stepped into her room. Flowers adorned everything. They ran in a riot of color along the back of the bureau. They sat in vases on both bedside tables. They formed a rainbow over the headboard. Sitting on a room service table in the center of room was an ice bucket complete with a chilled bottle of champagne and a silver balloon that said congratulations.

A sob worked its way up her throat, the first emotion she'd felt since she'd read Greg's letter.

"Thank you." Dorian tipped the bellman and plucked the key from his hand. Giving Dorian one last, amused look, he left.

"Are you sure you're going to be okay?" Dorian asked. He looked ready to bolt himself.

"Do I have a choice?"

Her question stopped Dorian. He turned back toward her. "Of course you have a

choice, Abby. You always have a choice. Even,” he said softly, “if you don't think you do.”

His answer surprised her. It was far deeper than she would have given Dorian credit for. She pondered his words for a moment, pulling the champagne from its bucket and examining the label.

“Well, Greg had taste if nothing else,” she muttered. She held it up for his perusal. “Want some champagne?”

He looked at her like he wasn't certain she was serious. She held up a glass as well. “Sure,” he said cautiously. He reached for the bottle. “Why don't you go change into something else while I open this?”

Abby glanced down at the soiled wedding dress. She couldn't remember where she'd tossed the bouquet. She stood before the closet where she'd meticulously hung all the sexy clothes she'd brought with her. White satin negligees, lacy white sundresses. Clothes designed to be provocative, meant to rekindle the magic that had long since gone out of their marriage. *If it had ever been there in the first place*, said voice in the back of her mind.

Everything in the closet was white to offset her tan. White to make her look like a bride. She wasn't a bride, she thought with a sick pang in her stomach. She was a middle-aged woman who'd lost a few pounds and invested in a few minor cosmetic procedures. She was a middle-aged woman who'd fallen asleep in a hammock yesterday and gotten a wicked burn. A middle-aged woman who had been dumped by her husband.

With a sigh, she pulled a white sundress from the closet and disappeared into the bathroom. As the door closed, she heard the cork pop and the fizz of champagne being poured into glasses. This wasn't how she'd intended to spend the evening. She'd imagined Greg, dashing in his white tux, reciting vows he'd written himself, as the sun set. She'd envisioned what lovely wedding photos they'd take and the romantic dinner they'd have afterward. Late into the evening, when the buzz from the champagne had worn off, she fantasized about great sex in the king-sized, four-poster bed. Not that she and Greg had ever had great sex. But hey, a woman could dream, couldn't she?

Shutting the door on her dreams, Abby faced her reflection. Undoing the pins that held what remained of her up-do in place, she brushed the spray from her hair. It hung to her shoulders, the ends gently curling from the humidity. The streaks she'd had done a week ago had lightened from the dose of sun she'd given them yesterday. Now they looked garishly yellow against her dark hair.

She washed the heavy make-up from her face. The burn she'd gotten yesterday still stung a little, but the bright red hue had faded to a golden brown. It made her blue eyes look brighter. She couldn't bear slathering anything else onto her skin, so she left it bare, adding only a bit of gloss to her lips.

She stepped out of the strapless gown, letting the silk puddle around her feet. Beneath she wore a white lace bustier and garters. She stripped those off as well and kicked aside her expensive shoes. The bustier had left welts along her ribs. She stepped into the sundress, braless.

The chambermaid had even decorated the bathroom with flowers. Plucking one from the arrangement, Abby stuck it behind her ear.

In the other room, the phone rang. She heard Dorian talking in low tones and hoped it wasn't Greg. One last look at her reflection made her groan. She still looked like

a bride.

Well, damn it all, she was a bride. Whether she had a groom or not. With that thought in mind, she swung the door open.

She found Dorian on the balcony, staring out into the ocean. He turned as she approached. One eyebrow rose. His dark eyes glinted in the light from the room. "Wow, you look...good."

"Thanks." From Dorian that counted as a compliment. He liked women who looked like fashion models. Then again, she thought, he could just be humoring her.

He held out a champagne flute. Golden liquid bubbled inside. "Here."

The beer she'd slugged back started to slosh around in her stomach. She realized it had been a long time since she'd last eaten. Nevertheless, champagne offered one thing food didn't ... the dulling of her pain. She swallowed a healthy mouthful. It bubbled on her tongue.

"Who was on the phone?"

"The hotel restaurant. They're holding your table."

She said, "Oh."

"Do you want me to tell them to cancel? They could probably send the dinner to your room."

She really wanted to say yes. She wanted nothing more than to crawl into bed, sans the sexy negligee and pull the covers up over her head. She wondered briefly if the hotel kitchen made comfort food like mashed potatoes with gravy or macaroni and cheese. Then she thought about the amount of money the dinner had to be costing Greg. She glanced at Dorian looking mussed and disheveled in a way she'd never found appealing before. It might have been shock, or the effects of a beer on an empty stomach, she thought shaking her head to clear it. "Hungry?" she asked.

He stopped, the champagne glass half way to his mouth. "Yeah, I could eat something."

She wandered back inside the honeymoon suite, filled her champagne glass up to the brim and promptly drained it. "Let's go then."

An arch of flowers was set up over their table, along with more silver balloons. So much for keeping it anonymous. By the time the food had arrived the waiters' smiles had begun to grate on her nerves. They didn't know, she thought. They assumed the wedding had gone off as planned and Dorian was the groom.

For his part, Dorian seemed uncharacteristically subdued tonight. He accepted the flood of congratulations with a smile, graciously diverting the attention of other hotel guests who came up to offer their congratulations.

Food arrived: succulent chicken on a bed of vegetables and more champagne. More flowers had been artfully arranged on the plate. She wanted to scream but her stomach caught the aroma of food and growled loudly. She laid into her plate with a gusto she didn't know she possessed. Greg, being a prominent executive, liked his wife fashionably thin. He said a slender wife made him look successful. With those second wedding photos in mind, she'd lost a lot of weight. Now the dream of the second wedding had vanished along with the photos. Except for the still photos the photographer had taken of her in the garden before the ceremony, no record existed. Finally, she could eat what she wanted.

Dorian looked up appreciatively as she dug into her chicken. He'd probably never

seen a woman eat before, Abby thought. None of those skinny blondes he'd dated looked like they'd ever had a decent meal. Not that she cared.

When they'd finished the chicken, the waiter brought a tiny white wedding cake, decorated with yet more fuchsia flowers. Brandishing her butter knife, Abby bisected the unsuspecting dessert and dumped half of it on Dorian's plate.

He grabbed her hand. With strong fingers, he gently pried the knife from her hand. "Abby, it's going to be okay."

"Is it?" Her voice rose. Guests glanced in her direction. "Did Greg tell you that, too?"

"Greg didn't tell me anything," he said, putting the knife down out of reach. "I feel as badly about this as you do."

"Well, I doubt that," she snapped.

He looked at her, eyes full of sorrow. "You have to believe me, Abby. I really didn't know."

She didn't believe him. Not for one moment. The man was a half-decent actor, she'd give him that much.

"What are you going to do?" he asked when she'd fumed for a few moments in silence.

Do? The question stopped her cold. "I have no idea," she whispered.

Dorian glanced around, shaming the guests who'd looked in their direction into turning their attention back to their meals. "I think you should stay."

Stay? Here in paradise where every gust of warm wind and sea air reminded her of the ruin of her life? The man was insane. "Why?"

He looked around again. Leaning toward her, he lowered his voice. "Because Greg has paid for you to be here. And he'll be counting on you being shaken and upset."

"I am shaken and upset." She poured more champagne into her goblet and drank.

Dorian took the glass from her hand and put it back down on the table. "I know," he said gently. "So take some time. Rest, relax. Get your head together. I guarantee you, he wouldn't be expecting that."

A few more days in paradise, Abby thought. She could do that. Before she had to go home and unravel twenty-five years of their life together.

CHAPTER TWO

Abby paused, the champagne glass halfway to her lips. Time stretched out before her. The first few days that hadn't been planned or orchestrated or otherwise scheduled since she'd married Greg. What did a suddenly single woman do in paradise, in a resort designed for honeymooners and lovers? Where with every step she took she'd practically be falling over couples in an amorous embrace. Where every couple she saw cuddled in a hammock, walking hand in hand on the beach and gazing into each other's eyes over dinner reminded her of all that she'd lost.

Strangely, she didn't miss Greg as much as she should, she realized. She missed the person she'd hoped Greg would be. The person she'd been hoping he'd become for twenty-five years. She'd held onto that deceptive dream all this time. She'd believed in it completely. Giving up that dream made her feel lighter somehow.

"Maybe you're right," she mused after a long sip of sparkling wine. "Maybe I should take some time and think about what I want to do."

But what *did* she want to do? The question lingered in her mind. She had no idea. She'd thought she'd wanted to renew her vows with Greg at sunset, surrounded by all the trappings of the wedding they'd never been able to afford. But had she really desired to live another twenty-five years with Greg?

Well, not really, came the answer. The last thing she needed was another twenty-five years of living a solitary life within the bonds of her marriage. Abby pushed that thought aside. Maybe she was in shock. Shock dulled the pain ... didn't it?

Shock made the white wedding cake seem doubly delicious, she thought as she finished it off. It hardly mattered now. There wouldn't be any wedding pictures. No photos of her in a white bikini. She could eat what she wanted.

The waiter brought another bottle of champagne. Abby hoped Greg had left a credit card imprint. If she had to pay for it herself, she'd be washing dishes for the rest of her life. Another thought occurred to her. She had no credit card of her own. The only card she owned belonged to Greg's company. She had no job, no money, nothing that didn't belong to Greg. Nothing except a soiled wedding dress and a bunch of equally soiled dreams.

Staff cleared away the dinner tables, making room for the dance floor. A steel band struck up an upbeat melody. A warm breeze blew in off the ocean. Abby turned her face toward the breeze, taking in the smell of sea air mixed with tropical flowers. The scent lifted her spirits.

Couples flowed onto the dance floor. Abby tapped her foot to the beat. Before she had a chance to think about what she was doing, before she had a chance to wonder if she looked fat, if what she did might somehow embarrass Greg, Abby had joined them.

Thinking her the bride, they made room for her, giving her the center of the dance floor. She rarely danced. Greg didn't like to dance. He dreaded looking undignified in any way in front of his employees and he refused to let her dance with anyone else.

But Greg wasn't here, Abby thought. Greg wouldn't know. She danced her way

back to the table for another gulp of champagne.

A large warm hand suddenly circled her wrist. She looked up. Dorian's eyes glinted in the candlelight. For a moment they merely stared at each other. Then he placed his other hand on her hip and steered her back toward the dance floor.

Seeing who they thought to be the bride and groom take to the floor, the band slowed for a more romantic number. The champagne had gone to her head, Abby thought, dulling the pain and taking the brakes off her inhibitions. Dorian irked her at the best of times, but he was there and Greg wasn't. Dorian was the only dance partner available.

And ... she thought as he swayed against her ... the man could dance. Who knew? The evening seemed determined to reveal Dorian to her in a completely new light.

He held her a sedate distance apart, but that didn't stop her from feeling the warmth of his body through the thin material of her sundress. He'd taken off his tuxedo jacket and loosened his tie. Wind ruffled his hair, giving him a disheveled, yet somehow approachable look. As he led her around the dance floor while everyone watched, she felt her heart lightening. Dorian had technique. No wonder, she reflected, with the number of women who flowed through his life. Dorian knew how to romance a woman and then waltz right out of her life without a trace. She knew as much, but it didn't matter. What she needed right now was a diversion and two weeks in paradise ought to do just that.

* * * *

Bright Caribbean sunlight splashed the room, made all the more garish reflecting off the yellow walls. Abby squinted against the glaring light. A sliver of pain lanced through her temples. She groaned. The bedspread with its brightly colored flowers swirled before her. She moaned.

A glance over the side of the bed showed her white sundress crumpled on the floor. No longer white. A pink stain spread across most of the front of it. At some point in the evening she must have graduated from champagne to some of the resorts more exotic offerings.

She had no idea how she'd gotten back to her room.

Or what she'd done before. She remembered drinking far too much champagne. She remembered the dance floor swirling in a multitude of colors. She remembered feeling strangely liberated and oddly relieved. She shouldn't be feeling relieved ... should she? But she did. Last night she'd drunk more than the usual one glass of white wine Greg allowed her at his company cocktail parties. Last night, she'd danced without worrying about how she looked or who was watching. Last night she'd danced ... her heart sank ... with Dorian.

That thought made her want to pull the dazzlingly bright comforter up over her head and hide in the king-sized four-poster for the rest of the day. Who knew what signals she'd given him? Then again, Dorian had drunk too much champagne as well. Perhaps he didn't remember.

A loud rap at the door dashed that vain hope. Tossing aside the too-bright comforter, she leapt out of bed. "Just a minute." She barely recognized that hoarse voice as her own. She sounded like a chain-smoking barmaid.

A white terry robe hung on a hook behind the bathroom door. She struggled into the robe and tied the sash extra tight. Creeping to the door, she squinted to see through the peephole. Dorian stood in the hallway, looking oddly refreshed and chipper. In his

arms he carried a room-service tray heaped high with bacon, eggs, toast and pancakes.

She leaned her back against the door, afraid to face him with her hair in disarray and lines from where she'd slept with her cheek against the comforter still on her face. He knocked again. "Room service."

Still she hesitated. Dorian was Greg's friend, not hers, Abby reasoned. Who cared how he saw her? She was covered ... sort of. Memories of their intimate dance the night before flooded her memory. She glanced down at her bare legs and groaned.

Dorian knocked again. "Come on, Abby. Open the door. I know you're there. I saw you looking through the peephole."

Annoyed, Abby yanked the door open. The smell of food wafted up to greet her, making her stomach turn over. With a moan, she dove back toward the bed.

"Now, now," Dorian said. "None of that."

"What do you think you're doing?" she demanded, covering her nose with the sleeve of her robe.

"Bringing you some food."

"I couldn't possibly eat a bite." The words came out muffled by terry cloth.

"Sure you can." Dorian pulled a bottle of champagne from behind his back. "All you need is a little hair of the dog..."

Abby uttered a deeper moan. "Take it away and bring me some dry toast and water."

Undeterred, Dorian put the tray down on the bedside table. He poured a dash of champagne into a crystal goblet and filled the rest with orange juice. "Come on, bottoms up."

She shook her head and pressed her lips closed.

"Trust me. It works every time."

And he might know. According to Greg, Dorian had quite the social life. He might know a few remedies for curing a hangover. Her stomach did a little flip-flop. She shook her head again.

Dorian pushed it closer. "Believe me, it'll work. Besides you'll need your strength if you're going to go parasailing."

"Para--" she blurted. Her mouth was so dry, her tongue stuck to the top of it. Dorian closed her fingers around the stem of the glass.

Cautiously, she took a sip. Her stomach rebelled at the taste, but it stayed down. After a few more sips, she realized she really was hungry. Dorian had already laid out a couple of pancakes, some scrambled eggs and two slices of bacon on plate. "Try this to start with," he urged.

"To start with?" Abby finished the rest of the glass and poured herself another--this one straight orange juice. "This is more than I eat for breakfast in a year!"

"It's almost lunch," Dorian remarked.

Well, that settled it, she thought. She'd missed breakfast. She'd eat lunch. She dug into her scrambled eggs.

Dorian raised one dark eyebrow, waiting for the verdict.

"Okay it worked," she said. "I'll give you that. And I do appreciate the gesture. But I'm not going parasailing with you!"

"Suit yourself," Dorian said, stealing a piece of bacon from the tray.

Bacon! She thought, helping herself to another piece. Greg would never have

allowed her to eat bacon. He made disparaging remarks about her weight if he saw her eat more than a bowl of cereal for breakfast. While he'd never forbidden her to eat a heavy breakfast, those insidious little jabs percolated in her mind throughout the day. Was she fat? Was she undesirable? Would Greg still love her if she gained weight? It became less stressful to eat cereal for breakfast and salad for lunch.

"You'll be missing out on a lot of fun," Dorian teased.

"I'd hardly call dangling from a parachute miles above the water fun. Ever hear of disaster and dismemberment?"

"Now you're just being dramatic." Dorian liberated a fork and dug in to what remained of the eggs.

He ate with such gusto, she wondered if maybe he was right about parasailing. Maybe it was fun. Wasn't that what newly-single people did? Tried new things? "Okay," she said around a mouth of pancake. "I'll come with you and watch from the beach as you get yourself killed. That way I'll be able to tell your nearest and dearest how you died."

Dorian smiled. His cheeks had dimples on either side of his mouth. He had a nice smile. A friendly smile. It completely changed his dark and brooding looks. She'd never noticed that before.

"I need a shower first," she added.

He stood up, then as an afterthought, reached in for yet another piece of bacon. "Great. I'll pick you up in an hour."

Abby watched him leave. A quick perusal of her drawer revealed nothing suitable for going parasailing. The white string bikini certainly wouldn't do and the lacy white cover-up she'd brought to go with it wouldn't provide much coverage. But, she reminded herself, she was only watching from the beach while Dorian tried to kill himself. Hopefully, he wouldn't bleed on her white cover-up.

A steamy shower washed away the last remnants of her hangover. She pulled her hair back into a ponytail, deciding to let it air dry. Remembering her last foray into the Caribbean sun, she liberally slathered herself in sun block. Then she pulled on the bikini, added a pair of white loose pants and finished it off with the lacy cover-up. A glance in the mirror made her groan. Why had she brought so much white? She wanted to look like a bride, came the answer. Even if she hadn't been a bride for twenty-five years, for once, she wanted to look like one. She'd really bought into the marketing, she thought with a pang of disgust. She'd bought into the romance and the dream of marriage she wanted them to have, instead of the one they actually had.

She leaned against the sink. Not only had she believed the dream, she'd believed it with her heart and soul. No, she corrected herself mentally, she'd wanted to believe. Deep down she'd known Greg's long absences meant more than workplace stress. He'd grown bored with her. She read the travel brochures and thought taking a romantic vacation might solve the problem. She'd lost weight, trying to be one of those slender willowy types Greg fantasized about. She'd highlighted her hair in an attempt to be more like the blonds he favored. In the end, apparently none of it had worked. She wasn't overly thin. She wasn't blond. She wasn't what Greg wanted. All the travel brochures, the warm sea air and the breathtaking sunsets couldn't make him want her.

A loud knock at the door shattered her musing. "Come on, Abby," came Dorian's voice muffled by the wood. "No chickening out."

"I'm only going to watch," she insisted. She walked to the door and stood there

without opening it. How did he know her next thought had been to give her regrets and crawl back into bed? A nearly full bottle of champagne still sat on her bedside table. She could drink that. She was feeling better now.

"Fine. Now open the door."

She opened the door a crack and peered out. Dorian stood on the threshold, clean-shaven for a change and freshly showered. No matching swimsuit set for him. He wore a pair of long swim trunks. Black. He'd be sweltering in them by noon, she thought. Over the bathing suit, he'd thrown on a loud floral shirt decorated in a pattern that used nearly every color in the rainbow in neon hues. It hurt her eyes just to look at it. Black sunglasses gave his dark eyes a more mysterious look.

He gave her a quick once-over. "That'll get dirty in a minute," he said with a disapproving glance at her all-white outfit.

"Doesn't matter." After being dumped at the altar, she never wanted to wear white again.

"Ready?"

"Sure." She put her room key in the pocket of her cover up and opened the door. "But I'm only going to watch."

He nodded, smiled his slow sexy smile, but said nothing.

Outside, the sun shone like a golden ball in a clear blue sky. Turquoise water glistened in the heat. A breeze blew off the ocean, cooling what would otherwise have been a stiflingly hot day. Brightly-colored flowers waved in the wind as they strode toward the beach. The natural beauty soothed her soul. In spite of Greg's sudden departure and a night of heavy drinking, Abby felt her spirits lifting.

Dorian strode toward the water sports hut. She could sense the impatience in him. He was looking forward to this, she realized. The man was clearly crazy.

She rushed to keep up with him. "Ever been parasailing?"

"No," he said, his gaze intent on a multicolored thing that looked like a parachute hanging in the sky. "Always intended to, though."

Yep, she thought following his line of sight. Crazy. No doubt about it.

But she couldn't help asking, "What stopped you?"

He glanced back at her. Something flashed behind the shades in those dark eyes. "Work. You know...."

Work? It occurred to her that she didn't know exactly what Dorian did for a living. Something to do with the Internet. According to Greg he was always out of work. According to Greg he had a new woman every week. Then again, Greg had also professed to love her. For the first time she wondered if maybe a lot of what Greg said wasn't true at all. About Dorian. Or about her.

She knew even less about Dorian's family. Mostly because she'd never asked. Abby had no idea if he had siblings, or whether he was youngest or oldest. Youngest, she decided. He had that devil-may-care, attention-grabbing attitude. He could even have children for all she knew. Having never married didn't necessarily preclude that.

Dorian strode away from her toward the water sports hut. Abby trailed after him.

"A ticket for me and the lady," he told the attendant in the hotel uniform.

"Wait a minute--" Abby started to say. But Dorian had already charged the fee to his room. "I'm not going up in that--" Her eyes tracked the multi-colored parachute. She gulped. "I'm not."

“Live a little,” Dorian said. “Put a little danger in to your life.”

“That’s not danger,” she insisted. “That’s suicide.”

The parasail’s current occupant landed on the beach with a whoop of triumph. “He doesn’t look dead to me,” Dorian remarked. “Relax. I’ll go up with you.”

Live dangerously. Something she’d never done, Abby thought. She’d married oh-so-stable, voted most likely to be rich in his high school yearbook, Greg. She’d married him right out of high school, long before she’d had a chance to decide what she really wanted in life. Or whom. And the longer they were apart, the more perspective she gained on their life together. Oh-so-safe Greg turned out to be not so dependable. He had stolen her youth, used her hard work to further his own career and dumped her in middle age when no one else would want her.

It would serve Greg right if she killed herself parasailing. He was legally still her husband. He’d have to pay for her funeral.

“Okay,” she said before she could change her mind. “I’ll go along with your suicide pact.”

Dorian smiled. “Come along, drama queen.” He grasped her hand and pulled her along the beach toward where the water sports attendants were unloading the last fool and scanning the beach for their next victims.

Abby stared at the deflated parachute lying like a limp balloon on the beach. *I’m out of my mind*. She should bolt, go back to the room and drink the rest of that champagne. The worst that could come of that was a hangover. No plummeting from the sky. No crushing of bones against the rocks. She gulped loud enough for Dorian to hear.

“No chickening out,” he warned. “This is fun. You’ll see.”

“Fun,” she repeated dully. “I thought you’d never tried it before.”

“I haven’t.” He gave the attendant their vouchers. “Looks like fun, though.”

Abby gazed at the sky--the same sky she was certain to come dropping out of in minutes. “It does?”

He grasped her wrist and dragged her hard against him. “Don’t worry. I’ll be with you the whole time.”

She could feel every inch of his muscular body pressed against her back. Warm from the sun, he felt safe and strong. At another time she might have been interested. If he weren’t Greg’s best friend. If she hadn’t just been dumped by her husband. And if he hadn’t just talked her into doing the most foolhardy thing she’d ever done in her entire life.

How bad could it be? How much did it hurt to fall from the sky and land on a rock?

The attendant buckled her into the harness, wrenching her from her musings. “Ready?” he asked.

“All set,” Dorian agreed. His breath felt warm beside her ear. “We have to run now,” he instructed.

“No!” she started to protest. But the word was crushed from her lungs as the boat streamed out from the shore. Behind her Dorian started running. She jammed her feet down into the sand and began running just to keep up.

The boat roared from the shore into the open water. Her feet left the ground. Dorian’s arms went around her, yanking her back even harder against him. She glanced down at the shoreline receding beneath them. She was shaking, she realized. Deep, terror-

induced shudders.

"Don't look down," Dorian counseled.

Abby wrenched her eyes from the ground below. The horrifyingly far away ground below. Wind whistled by, undoing most of her ponytail and sending her hair streaming back into Dorian's face. He freed a hand to brush it out of his eyes. She uttered a squeak of terror.

"Look!" he said in her ear. Gently, he pressed his head against hers, urging her to look in the direction he indicated.

She gasped in awe.

From their vantage point, she could see the far side of the island. Beneath them hills covered in jungle jutted up from the ocean floor, dormant volcanoes she remembered the tour guide telling her and Greg the day they'd arrived. Turquoise ocean stretched out on all sides. White sand rimmed the island. Flowers in varying shades of yellow, red and fuchsia broke the green jungle. Beautiful, she thought. Dazzlingly beautiful.

Dorian still held her tightly. His body heat protected her from the wind's chill. She realized suddenly that she hadn't been afraid for several minutes. Abigail Smith, who had never done anything unsafe or unplanned, had done something completely foolhardy and dangerous on the spur of the moment. And lived to tell the tale.

So far.

The boat turned in a wide arc back toward the shore. They began to sink in the sky. Those rocks at the edge of the beach reared up to meet them.

"Remember to bend your knees and run when we hit the sand," Dorian said.

"Run," she said. "Right."

As the ground seemed to rush toward them, understanding hit her. Abigail Smith hadn't conquered any of her demons. She'd only succeeded in diverting her attention for a few minutes. She was still a middle-aged woman whose husband had dumped her at their recommitment ceremony. She had no job and no prospects. Her life plummeted toward disaster just as quickly as she was falling from the skies, all her hopes and dreams to be dashed upon the rocks.

The sand reared up sooner than she expected. Lost in thought, she'd forgotten to bend her legs. She'd forgotten to run as well. Her legs crumpled under her. For a moment Dorian tried valiantly to hold them both up. His breath came in harsh pants in her ear. But he lost his balance and tumbled down on top of her. His weight crushed the breath from her lungs. She tried to scream, but an-incoming wave rushed over her head. She struggled with the harness. The wave rolled back out to sea, undoing the strings of her bikini top. The laces around her neck held, but the bottom flapped up around her neck. She choked on a mouthful of warm salt water.

Dorian thrust her head and shoulders above the water. Attendants from the water sports hut ran to help. Someone thumped her on the back. Someone wrestled with the harness. She coughed up water. Her hair hung in a sodden lump obscuring her vision. Hands touched her everywhere. Someone tugged her further up the beach, toward air and sunshine.

"It's okay," Dorian said. "Breathe." He brushed her wet bangs from her forehead and chivalrously looked away as she reached under her cover-up to redo the ties on her bikini top. She must have made quite the sight, she thought in blackest humor. A glance

down at her formerly white lacy cover-up confirmed her suspicions.

Sand covered the front of the lace where she'd ground it against the shore. The rough grains had torn the front of her pants and abraded both her shins and her elbows. By tomorrow she'd be covered in friction burns. She moaned.

"I'm sorry," Dorian was saying. "I shouldn't have talked you into that."

She should hate him for it. Against her reservations, he talked her into doing something so daring and unlike her usual cautious self. For a moment, it had been so exhilarating. For a moment, she'd enjoyed the adrenaline rush.

Abby took a hesitant breath and realized she could breathe. "It's okay," she said hoarsely. "It was fun ... at first."

He looked at her, dark eyebrows drawn together in concern.

"Things are always fun at first," she said, thinking of Greg. The beginning of their courtship, so long ago, had been fun. He couldn't seem to get enough of her. He'd insisted on spending nearly every waking minute together.

But it wasn't fun, a voice inside reminded her, one she'd nearly forgotten about. Over the years it had whispered, shouted and railed at her ... until it had finally fallen silent forever. And now it was back. Reminding her of past slights, refusing to let her believe that everything was all right, demanding that she open her eyes and really *see*.

The early days of their courtship had been anything but fun. She'd been young. Barely out of high school, and yet, so grown up she thought she knew what she was doing. She mistook Greg's strong personality for wisdom. She followed him blindly. Though he could be completely bland and predictable to other people, when they were alone, Greg controlled her every move. He told her what to eat, whom to see, and even what music to listen to. Far from not getting enough of her, he refused to leave her alone. When they were apart, she thought darkly, she spent the hours full of anxiety and self-doubt, wondering if she'd ever measure up.

And Dorian ... Dorian had apparently told Greg not to marry her. Something she could never forgive him for.

What on earth was she thinking allowing him to talk her into going parasailing?

"Abby? Abby?" Dorian's voice seemed to come from far away. She roused herself long enough to answer.

"What?"

"I asked if you were hurt."

"There's blood all over the front of my pants. Does it look like I'm hurt?" she snapped. Immediately she felt guilty.

"They want to take you to see the resort doctor."

Her brain kicked in. She really should see a doctor. Even if it was just to get the sand out of her wounds and put some antibiotic cream on them. She glanced at the water sports attendants watching her anxiously. "I don't know if Greg paid for medical coverage."

"Don't worry about it," Dorian interjected. "I'm sure it's all taken care of."

"I'd better check first." Another cruel reality hit her. "I don't have any money. Not of my own."

"I'll check about the health insurance," Dorian said.

"I don't even know who Greg booked the holiday through," she told him. How on earth had her life gotten so far out of control? Why had she allowed Greg to handle

everything ... even the break-up of their marriage?

"I'm sure I can find out," Dorian said. He looked again at her legs and blanched. "Go with the medics, Abby. I'll take care of it."

The last thing she needed was another man taking care of anything. Just then the scrapes on her legs began to sting from the salt water. Dying of an exotic bug didn't sound like a good way to go, either. "Okay," she agreed weakly.

Tomorrow she'd get to the bottom of it all. After she'd been patched up and had a good night's sleep. She'd find out whether Greg had left his credit card as a guarantee. If he had, the first thing she intended to do was to buy a one-piece bathing suit. Black. No, red, she decided. That's what divorcees wore, wasn't it?

Dorian helped her to her feet. Supporting most of her weight, he walked her up the beach and into the hotel. Most of the patrons were at the beach. She attracted some curious looks on the way to the hotel, but inside all was quiet.

Once she'd peeled off her mud stained pants and her scrapes had been cleaned, her wounds didn't look so bad. Just scrapes. Dorian had managed to hold them both up as they hit the sandy beach. They'd missed the rocks. It could have been worse.

Mentally, she added a pair of pants to the inventory of things she needed. Red, to match the new bathing suit. She sat on the examining table while the medics fussed over her and submitted to being bandaged. Dorian arrived to tell her that her medical coverage was taken care of and not to worry.

With a hangdog expression, he walked her back to her room. Guilt for talking her into going parasailing weighed heavily on him. She could tell.

"So," he said lingering in the doorway when all she craved nothing more than a shower and a long nap. "Should I come pick you up for dinner?"

Well, if it was only guilt that kept him by her side, she could relieve him of that. She shook her head. "Dorian, there's a whole resort full of single women out there. Why on earth would you want to have dinner with me two nights in a row? Honestly, I'm not that pathetic."

Her tirade left him speechless. He opened his mouth to say something, then changed his mind and tried again. "Good God, that's not it, Abby. I just ... want to make sure you're okay."

"I'm okay," she insisted, even though she was anything but.

Seeing through the lie, he grinned. "Sure. And just for the record. This is a resort for honeymooning couples. There are no single women." The grin widened. "Well, the manager's kind of cute."

"So ask her to dinner."

Damn the man was good looking, she thought, as his smile grew wider still. Why hadn't she ever noticed that before? Those dimples made him look younger, more innocent. "I did. She turned me down."

"So it's me then?"

The smile faded and he grew serious. "Fraid so."

She sighed, the last of her energy going out of her. "Okay then. Meet you at the restaurant at seven."

"Seven it is." He let the door swing closed.

Abby leaned against it and surveyed the room. The maid had cleaned up the towels she'd left on the bathroom floor. She'd folded the clothes she'd left on the tables

and made the bed. She'd put the leftover champagne in an ice bucket and removed the breakfast dishes. She'd even hung the stained wedding gown in the closet. Abby shook her head. By the smudges on the white dress, the poor women likely thought the bride had a wild night.

She should send the dress to the cleaners. Once she found out if Greg's credit was good, perhaps she would. If the dress turned out to be salvageable, perhaps she could sell it. She needed the money.

A deep sighed escaped her lips. She glanced down at her ripped pants and her bandaged legs. Well, the pants could be replaced and the scrapes would heal.

But ... she wondered. Who would heal her heart?

CHAPTER THREE

So far he was batting a thousand, Dorian thought dismally. Instead of impressing Abby he'd gotten her drunk, given her a killer hangover and to top it all off, he'd nearly gotten her killed.

He'd thought a little distraction might finally get Greg out of her mind and allow her to finally see ... well, him. The way he really was instead of the way his false friend had portrayed him to her.

Worst of all, he couldn't quite figure out how it had all gone wrong. He was no awkward sixteen-year-old. He'd had his share of women. He had more finesse than this. He knew how to show a woman a good time. He did know how to impress a woman, and how to seduce one, too.

But for some reason when it came to Abby, the sum of his well-honed technique went out the window.

He'd offered her the champagne to take the edge off Greg's rejection. How could he have known she'd drink it all? He thought taking her parasailing might be a nice diversion. Something to make her feel alive. Something to get her mind off Greg and the disastrous second honeymoon.

Greg, he thought, his jaw tightening in anger. Greg didn't deserve a woman like Abby. Greg had never deserved Abby. For twenty-five years now he'd watched Abby try to twist herself into the woman she thought Greg wanted. Problem was what Greg wanted changed with the season. He upgraded his mistresses as often as he upgraded his computer or leased a new car.

In trying to be a loyal friend, he'd looked the other way and pretended not to know, while Greg blamed him for his excesses and outright lied to his wife. Over the years it had gotten to the point that he dreaded even going to a bar with Greg. It made him sick to his stomach to watch Greg picking up women and blaming his all-night absences on Dorian. He should have told her, he thought dismally, but he'd never known how. He couldn't bear the thought of bringing her carefully constructed facades crashing down around her.

When Greg had told him they were going to a Caribbean resort to renew their vows, he'd thought Greg had finally seen the light and planned to change. Instead, he'd involved Dorian in his greatest deception ever.

The depth of what Greg had done made his stomach clench anew. He'd built up her hopes to dazzling new heights, and then with one hastily scribbled note, dashed them all forever. The coward hadn't even had the courage to do it himself. He'd tricked Dorian into doing it for him. He clenched a fist and slammed it into his other hand. When he got his hands on Greg, he'd be very sorry.

In the meantime, he mused, staring out into the dark water, he had Abby to worry about. She had every reason to be furious over the botched parasailing adventure. She likely didn't want to see him again, yet he couldn't keep his mind off her. He had to tell her the truth. He had to help her pull herself together enough to give Greg what he

deserved. To allow Greg to destroy her spirit would be criminal. He had to find a way to earn her trust. But how?

* * * *

Abby sat at a table for one overlooking the ocean. Crimson streaked the sky. She could see the white dots of stars just beginning to appear. A warm wind blew in off the water. It was a beautiful night. A night made for romance. A night that could make you believe dreams could come true. Well, she thought wryly, the old Abby might have believed dreams came true on a night like this. The new Abby saw only darkness and loneliness. What on earth was she going to do when the plane left a few days from now? She no longer had a home to go to. She didn't know a divorce lawyer. She didn't have the money to pay a lawyer. Other than the work she'd done for Greg she had no job skills.

She glanced down at the white sundress she wore. This one had giant purple flowers on it. She wished fervently that she'd brought something less cheerful, though she'd been anticipating cheerful and happy when she packed. She swallowed past the lump in her throat. If she survived her upcoming divorce, she'd buy a whole new wardrobe full of black.

The wait staff gave her questioning looks as they passed. So far she'd ordered nothing to eat. She'd drunk only a single coffee, eschewing the wine and the offered champagne. Brides didn't normally dine alone crying into their coffee. Well, she told herself, it was bound to happen once in a while, to someone other than her. People did survive getting left at the altar.

But not people who'd been married twenty-five years.

"Hey," said a voice out of the darkness.

She jumped. For a second nearly too brief to count, she imagined she saw Greg standing in the darkness, that he'd come to tell her it had all been a huge mistake and that he still wanted to have that wedding and honeymoon. Then the voice's owner stepped into the light and she saw Dorian standing beyond the restaurant's low stone wall.

He walked barefoot, carrying his shoes. Sand clung to his feet, evidence of a stroll along the beach. He wore tan-colored silk pants. Her eyes moved upward and she winced. To top it all off he'd donned a lime green silk shirt patterned with bikini-clad women wearing Santa hats.

He noted the grimace and glanced down at his shirt. "Oh, I bought this for Christmas," he said in explanation. "I spent it in St. Kitts."

"Not much snow in St. Kitts," she remarked.

"Well, no, but that was the point," he said. "Besides, I don't have any family left, so there's no one to spend Christmas with back home."

Dorian's folks had passed away, she realized, startled. Greg hadn't told her that. But then, she guessed there were many things that Greg hadn't told her. Namely that he didn't love her anymore. "I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't know."

He looked surprised at that. "It was a while ago."

She nodded. "So you tried to distract yourself in St. Kitts?"

Dorian nodded.

"Did it work?"

"Sure." He smiled sheepishly. "Sort of."

She guessed *sure* meant he'd scored with at least one or two of the women at the resort. What kind of person went away at Christmas while everyone else celebrated back

in town? A lonely person. She thought of all the holiday parties and dinners she'd attended alone while Greg worked late, or went out of town on a last minute sales trip. The memory of being stuffed into a little black dress, bravely clinging to her wineglass for company while making excuses for Greg's absence sprang to mind. She could have gone away. She could have had a wild affair with a stranger. Would Greg ever have known? Did she really know what Greg had been doing on those sales trips?

Still leaning against the stone wall, Dorian watched her, waiting for her to say something. His eyes strayed to her abandoned coffee cup, then flashed to the tear streaks on her cheeks. "Sorry I'm a bit late. You haven't eaten, have you?" he asked softly.

"No," she admitted. "Have you?"

"Not yet."

She indicated the vacant seat across from her. "Well, sit down and have some dinner."

He gazed uncomfortably at the empty chair, still obviously feeling guilty about the parasailing disaster.

Abby offered him a wan smile. "Sit down. You're forgiven."

"I am?" He seemed surprised.

"Sure. In spite of that unfortunate shirt you're wearing."

"I packed in a hurry," he said sheepishly.

Now that sounded weird. They'd planned to renew their vows for over a year. "You did?"

"Yeah. Greg asked me the day before we left. I had a ton of work to clean up before I could go. Stayed up all night. I was half asleep when I packed."

"But Greg knew we were going for months...."

With a shrug Dorian pulled out the chair and sat down. "I asked him that. He said he'd been meaning to mention it to me, but it slipped his mind. Said he'd been busy at work."

She stared at him, his green eyes hidden in the dark. "Are you telling me the truth?"

His eyes widened at her accusation. "What reason would I have to lie?"

None that sprang immediately to mind. "I don't know, you tell me."

"Abby, I swear. He asked me the afternoon before we left. It just about killed me to get ready in time. As it is, I still had to bring work with me."

A horrible thought occurred to her, one so appalling it took her breath away. "You don't think he planned it--I mean, planned to--to ditch me at the altar and...." She choked the last word out, "Leave?"

He spread his hands. "Abby, I really don't know. I was just as surprised as you were."

"Try devastated," she corrected.

"Devastated. But I was very surprised. I never thought Greg would leave you."

"Why?" she asked.

"Because you were the best thing that ever happened to him."

That caught her off guard. Then again, maybe Dorian was just trying to be nice, especially after he'd nearly gotten her killed. "Obviously, Greg thought differently."

Dorian had no smart comeback to that one. The wait staff, who'd been circling nervously while she'd been crying into her coffee, descended like a flock of birds now

that Dorian had arrived. A newlywed quarrel averted they probably thought. She wished it were that simple.

"Some wine?" Dorian asked while the cocktail waitress waited. "It'll make you hungry, maybe it'll make it easier to eat something." He smiled. "Don't worry, I'll make sure you don't have daiquiri chasers this time."

Abby smiled. Why was she holding back? She was dining on traitorous Greg's dime. Why shouldn't she have wine? She didn't have to get up early in the morning. She didn't have to do anything for days, except eat and drink and figure out where she could scrounge the money to hire a divorce attorney. "Sure, a little white wine."

"How much work do you have to do?" she asked after the waitress had placed a bottle on the table.

"A few days worth," Dorian said.

It didn't sound like a good way to spend a vacation to her. "So how come you didn't just go home. I mean once you knew...."

His smile showed off his dimples. In the darkness the lime green shirt with the Santa babes didn't look so garish. "I came for a holiday. A working holiday, but a holiday nonetheless. Besides ... you're here. We could have fun."

Fun. It had been so long she could barely remember what fun felt like. Real laugh out loud fun, not the stripped-down, regimented variety Greg favored.

Oh God, she thought suddenly. Last night when she'd been ... inebriated, she'd slow-danced with Dorian. Vividly, she remembered the feel of his body warm against hers in the cooling wind off the water. *And it had felt so good*, said a traitorous voice inside. She squelched the thought before it could take hold. Maybe she'd given him the wrong idea.

"Look, Dorian--" she began.

He held up his hand, cutting off her words. "That wasn't what I meant. I know you're going through a tough time. And I'm, well, burned out and stressed out and working on my holiday. But maybe there's a way we could have a bit of fun. Not the dangerous sort," he amended hastily.

"As long as it doesn't involve plummeting from the sky."

"No," he said. "None of that."

"Maybe some sightseeing."

"Sure," he agreed. But he sounded like he'd enjoy another chance to plummet from the sky more.

Her stomach rebelled at the first sip of wine, especially after all the coffee she'd drunk while staring out into the ocean. But after the first few sips, it seemed to go down better. Dorian was right. It did make her hungry. She ordered chicken and rice, anything easy to digest. Dorian ordered steak.

For a long while they ate in silence broken only by the rolling waves that crashed against the shore. Despite her misgivings, Abby finished her chicken and even ordered dessert. She finished her glass of wine, but put her hand over the glass when the waitress would have poured another for her. The moon cast silver highlights into the black water. Once in a while small passing clouds obscured its glow, but they were swiftly swept clear by the breeze. It was, quite simply, the perfect night, the kind only seen in movies or written about in romance novels. In spite of Greg's departure, she should have enjoyed a little bit of it, but something nagged at the back of her mind. Something she needed to

deal with before the evening drew to a close.

Abby peeled a piece of chocolate icing from the back of her cake with her fork. She liked to eat it that way, icing first. Greg had always objected to her odd way of eating cake like there was a proper way to do it. As if it somehow reflected badly on him that his wife liked to strip the icing from her cake before she ate the rest of it. But Greg wasn't there, so she slid the fork between her lips and bit down on all that chocolaty goodness. The cocoa was freshly grown on the island and it tasted like nothing she'd ever experienced before. If she kept eating like this, she'd put on all the weight she lost for the holiday before it was over. But who would care? Actually, she thought she looked better with a few pounds on. Rounder, softer, more feminine. She looked up to find Dorian watching her.

"I like the way you do that," he said. He licked his lips as if he couldn't help it.

"Do what?"

"Devour that cake, like it's the best thing you ever tasted."

"It's damned close," she admitted. She nodded to the extra fork by his plate.

"Want some?"

"Chocolate's not my thing. But I like watching you eat. It's rare these days to see a woman enjoying her food."

"Ah, well, the cult of thinness," she said around another mouthful. "And all that."

"And all that," he repeated. "But I like a woman who knows how to live."

Did that mean he liked her? She wasn't sure she should ask. Not certain she wanted the answer. Yet again, that nagging thought lingered in the back of her mind.

Abby swallowed another bite of chocolate cake and washed it down with a sip of water. "There's something I have to ask you."

Dorian raised an eyebrow. "Okay. Ask away."

"What made you decide to be Greg's best man again?"

He opened his mouth to answer, but she held up her hand. "Especially after you told him not to marry me."

The look on his face gave her the answer.

She pressed further. "You did tell him not to marry me, didn't you?"

He swallowed hard, like trying to swallow sand. "Yeah, I told him that."

"Why?"

The moon emerged from behind a cloud. His eyes glittered in the darkness. "I didn't think he was worthy of you."

"Oh, come on. Surely you mean it was the other way around."

He shook his head. By the tortured expression on his face, she could tell he'd rather discuss anything but this. "Even when you were dating in high school, Greg never treated you right. You were utterly devoted to him. And he ... well, he never seemed even to notice. I thought..." He paused, searching for the right words. "I thought you deserved someone who'd treat you as well as you treated him. And as much as I hate to say it, that man wasn't Greg."

No one had ever summed up their life together so accurately. She'd done everything to please Greg. She'd changed her hair, her body, even her personality to please Greg. None of it had meant anything to him. She'd thought when he'd agreed to the trip, that he intended to reward her for more than two decades of devotion. In the end, Greg had done what Greg wanted. Just as he always had.

"But you guys stayed married. For twenty-five years," Dorian was saying. "So I thought maybe it worked for you. That it was worth it for the nice home and the nice clothes and the fancy holiday."

Abby laid her fork down. "You mean the nice home I lived in alone. And the nice clothes I had to starve myself to wear." At the thought of starvation, she picked up her fork again and dug into the last of the cake crumbs with renewed vigor. "And the fancy holiday from hell," she said around another mouthful of cake.

He poured himself some wine and drank it down.

"You could have said something. You could have said something to me!"

"I just did," he said, putting his wineglass down.

"You could have said something twenty-five years earlier."

"Maybe you wouldn't have been ready to hear it twenty-five years earlier."

He was probably right, but still the accusation stung.

"But it's never too late to have a life," Dorian said. "I realized that after my parents passed away. Every day is precious and none is improved by looking back on your regrets."

That sounded so deep, she had to remind herself Dorian said it. She'd never seen this side of his personality before. She'd thought him shallow and irresponsible but it turned out Dorian had wisdom and depths that she'd never imagined.

He looked out into the dark water. The moon had moved while they'd lingered over dinner and now hung low in the sky. "Want to go for a walk along the beach?"

The question surprised her. She hadn't expected him to be a walk on the moonlit beach kind of guy. "Sure." Better than going back to her room alone to despair over the turn her life had taken.

They left the restaurant with its hanging dragonfly lights. Out on the beach the darkness was absolute, lit only by the moon and the stars. She gazed up at the sprinkling of stars. With no city lights to blind her to the heavens the Milky Way shone in a haze of stars. She gasped as a shooting star creased the heavens. It left a pink trail behind it.

"Did you see that?"

She turned to find Dorian staring at her. "No. What?"

"A shooting star. A pink one. I've never seen a pink one before."

"Maybe it's good luck. You should make a wish."

A wish. What on earth would she wish for? A day ago, she would have wished for Greg back. Now, with every passing hour, she found she missed him less and less. How could that be possible? Surely after twenty-five years of marriage she should miss him more.

It wasn't Greg she missed, she realized. She missed what she'd thought they had together.

I wish to have what I thought I had for real, she wished silently. She glanced back at Dorian to find him still staring at her. "What?"

"You were really thinking hard there."

She laughed. "Well, yes. You know it's weird, but I've never thought about what I really want in life. It took me a second to think up a decent wish."

"But you decided on one?"

Abby nodded. "Once I put my mind to it, it wasn't so hard."

"You're just out of practice."

She fell silent, and for a moment they walked along the hard-packed sand simply enjoying the quiet. Waves rushed in around her ankles. She took off her sandals. Dorian took off his shoes and rolled up his pants.

"I should be feeling more miserable," she said, breaking the silence. "Why aren't I feeling more miserable?"

"Maybe you've been miserable for a long time and just didn't know it." Dorian sounded sure of himself. Had she been that miserable? So miserable that everyone could see it but her? So unhappy that Dorian who she'd had little more than a superficial relationship with had noticed.

"Maybe," she echoed.

The tide brought deeper waves. Abby tied up her dress. Dorian gave up on rolling up his pants.

"You don't have to be miserable any more Abby. You're a good person. You're a smart person. Once you decide what you want, you'll know what to do."

She stared out at the black ocean. Beyond the moon's glow, it seemed like an endless tide of black rolling waves. Kind of like her future, she mused. And yet, the ocean was teeming with life. The ocean was where all life came from. At some point primitive life forms had crawled out of the ocean to make a new life on land. She could do that too.

Another wave swirled around her thighs, the water still slightly warm. A piece of driftwood swirled in the whirlpool cast by the waves and for an instant she doubted. She was more like the driftwood than those intrepid creatures. She'd let the currents of her life, of Greg's life, carry her willy-nilly without any thought to where she might make landfall. At the ripe old age of forty-five, what made her think she'd be able to start anew? Old dogs generally didn't learn new tricks.

"Such serious thoughts," Dorian said, breaking into her musing. The moon's glow caught his face. The light made a startling contrast against his dark hair and green eyes. She thought of all the women who might have admired that face. Why had none of them taken him home to keep? There was something entirely suspicious about Dorian. Something she intended to find out.

Yet, he was staring at her with such rapt attention, she found herself staring back at him, enjoying how the moon painted him in silver and black. "I was thinking about what you said," she murmured as another wave rushed in, soaking his pant legs and wetting the hem of her dress.

"What I said about what?"

"About how it's never too late."

"It is never too late. For anything," he added.

"You sound so sure of that."

"I am absolutely sure of that."

"Because your parents died?" she asked hesitantly.

He tore his eyes from hers and glanced back at the dark water. "Not just because of how they died, but how they lived."

She wasn't sure what to say to that, so she waited for him to continue.

"They were always so careful," he whispered turning back to her. "My dad counted every penny he spent. He never splurged. He never really enjoyed himself. He was always worrying about what might happen, what terrible fate lay around the next

corner that he forgot to live in the meantime.”

“I’m sorry about your Dad,” she said softly. “But honestly, I kind of know how he feels.”

“Well, wait ‘til you hear the rest of it.” He drew in his breath. “Mom always wanted to go to Europe. She wanted him to retire early, sell the house and take a holiday. But Dad would never fly anywhere. Not because he feared flying, but because he thought it cost too much. He worked right up until his sixty-fifth birthday. And after renovating the house because he thought it would improve their investment, he took Mom on a cross-country road trip.”

“That doesn’t sound too bad....”

He held up his hand. “It probably wasn’t. Until he had a heart attack at the wheel of the RV, ran off the road and killed them both.”

She gasped. “Oh no, that’s terrible.”

“Should have sold the house and gone to Europe,” Dorian said. “That’s the moral of the story, the way I see it.”

“But you’re viewing it with the 20/20 clarity of hindsight,” Abby said gently. “The truth is no one knows what’s going to happen.” She trailed off into silence, and then said, “Especially me.”

He nodded grimly at that.

“Your Dad probably didn’t see his heart attack coming any more than I foresaw Greg leaving. We were just living our lives, doing what we thought was right ... until fate reared up and whacked us one across the face.”

Dorian laughed harshly. “Quite the wake-up call.”

She couldn’t help laughing in grim humor. Abby glanced up at the black sky with its sprinkling of diamond stars. “Well, Fate, I’m wide awake now. You can stop whacking me!”

He hooked a finger under her chin and turned her face back toward him. She looked at him, his eyes glittering in the last of the moon’s light. His face was inches from hers. “It’s okay, Abby,” he said so softly she wasn’t entirely sure she’d heard him. “Unlike my Dad, you still have a life to change. And it is never, *never* too late.”

Warm water rushed between them, but he pulled her close, forming a dam with their bodies. Waves swirled around them, rushing toward the nearby shore, dragging seaweed, driftwood and shells with it. She followed the path of a bobbing piece of driftwood as it bumped against the shore until she felt Dorian’s finger once again beneath her chin.

She turned back, finding that she had to turn her head to avoid bumping noses with him. He seized that moment to slant his mouth over hers, taking advantage of the new angle.

His lips were warm against the cooling air. She’d never noticed they were so full or so soft. An instant later, she stopped noticing anything except how wonderful they felt against hers.

Her mouth opened at his gentle insistence and he deepened the kiss, slipping his tongue inside. Greg had often tried french-kissing her, but she’d always found it distasteful. The sensual strokes of Dorian’s tongue however brought a flicker of passion to life. She’d never felt aroused when Greg kissed her but Dorian seemed to know instinctively what would fan the flames of her waning desire.

Maybe it wasn't waning, she thought at another stroke of his tongue. Maybe it was just coming to life.

His hands moved in lazy circles up her back, mirroring the delicious torment he exacted on her mouth. Every stroke of those warm hands against her cold back brought another wave of desire. She pressed her body harder against him and she heard him moan deep in his throat. The vibration made her giggle but another stroke of his tongue quickly brought her back to seriousness.

So this was what it felt like. She'd always thought she lacked some essential feminine gene. Greg's touch never aroused her, never made her feel like ... this! He'd blamed her for the lack of passion between them. She'd blamed herself. Now, she viewed their pathetic love life from a new angle, reexamining every bit of it. Maybe what they lacked between them was chemistry. Or ... came the novel thought ... perhaps Greg just wasn't very good.

Whatever Greg lacked, Dorian had it in spades. He dragged every one of her dormant senses to life, kissing her softly and teasingly one moment, then varying it with a deep and probing kiss. Water rushed around them, becoming cooler as the evening lengthened. He moved his mouth from her lips to tease the tender spot between her neck and shoulder. She'd never known so many nerve endings existed in that one spot. She felt his feather-soft caress all the way down her spine. As he lowered his head to tease the peak of one breast through the material of her sundress, she stopped caring about the cool water, or Greg, or the strange turn her life had taken.

His hot lips pulled at the material of her dress, rubbing the cotton across her sensitive flesh. She clutched him closer still, demanding more. He responded by moving his head to tease her other breast. She moaned, heedless of who else might be wandering on the beach and who might overhear. For once she felt uninhibited, free.

Together they formed an island in the water, a refuge from the cold and the increasing wind, a refuge from the hurt and disappointment Greg had dealt her. She deserved some comfort, she decided. She deserved to know what passion felt like. She deserved one uninhibited romantic encounter, the kind they portrayed in movies. She could take what Dorian offered her, she realized. No one would fault her. Her husband of twenty-five years had dumped her at the altar on the evening of their recommitment ceremony. She didn't need to renew her vows to Greg. She'd never needed to. What she needed was a whole new life. Whether Greg realized it or not, he'd given it to her. She'd use every bit of his cowardice against him. She'd make a new life, better than the one she had before and she'd start here in the Caribbean with the sun and ocean to soothe her soul. She had several days to enjoy paradise on Greg's expense account. Including what was turning out to be the best romantic encounter of her life.

She'd have paradise and awesome sex, Abby decided, as she linked her hands through Dorian's dark curls, now wet from the ocean's spray and pulled him harder against her breast.

For the time that remained, she'd have it all, a wonderful vacation and a red-hot fling with Dorian. Greg had dealt her a cruel surprise. She'd give him one in return.

Before she had to deal with the ruin of the rest of her life.

CHAPTER FOUR

Even nature seemed to be plotting against her. No sooner had the thought formed in her mind, no sooner had she decided that she really *could* continue this erotic exploration with Dorian, take it back up to her room and hopefully have mind-blowing sex in the honeymoon suite she planned to share with Greg ... when the wind picked up. The gentle waves that had been lapping at their legs became white-capped, roiling dark water that crashed against them, threatening their already unsteady footing.

At first Dorian held on, refusing to let nature ruin what up until then had been a perfect moment. Digging her feet deeper into the sand, Abby returned her attention to the delightful sensations that Dorian created. She shut her eyes, enjoying the feel of his warm mouth against her cold skin.

With her eyes shut, she didn't see the giant wave cresting toward them, until the sand gave way beneath her and the undertow dragged her feet off the ocean floor. She fell into the cool water. Her eyes flew open. Salt water stung her eyes. She gagged in a mouthful of murky water. Dorian flailed, trying to maintain his balance. His arms left her. The water pushed him against her, and then he fell, taking her with him.

She fell down into dark water, suffocating under his weight and the true realization of what she'd nearly just done. Sleeping with Dorian would do nothing to get her life in order. It would only complicate things further, perhaps in ways that couldn't be undone.

Abby struggled to get her feet back under her. Clawing her way up Dorian's body, she thrust her head above water.

Then as swiftly as the wave had come, it receded, leaving them both soaked and chilled.

Abby spit sand and water from her mouth. Her scrapes from earlier in the day smarted from the salt water. Dorian gained his feet and pulled her against him.

"Abby I'm so sorry. That's the second time I've nearly drowned you in the ocean today." He looked as wet, cold and regretful as she felt.

She offered him a sad smile, her ardor irrevocably cooled. "Maybe we should just call it a night."

"Maybe we should," he agreed, somewhat reluctantly.

They walked in silence back to the hotel. The gust of wind that had done so much to ruin the moment had died down, leaving the night once again hot and humid. Crickets hummed in the gardens. From somewhere beyond the hedges, Abby thought she heard the screech of a monkey. It would have been the perfect night. It might have been the perfect romantic encounter....

Except that she was soaking wet and once again muddy and scraped. Dorian didn't seem to have fared much better. His silk shirt clung to his chest, the bikini wearing Santa babes streaked with sand. His silk pants clung to every muscle of his well-proportioned legs, leaving nothing at all to the imagination. All she wanted to do was go back to her room and crawl into a hot bath in the heart-shaped tub and forget the past two

days had happened. No forget the past twenty-five years had happened, she amended.

They reached the Honeymoon Suite. "Well, goodnight then," Dorian said. Dark circles ringed his eyes, as if he hadn't been sleeping any better than she had lately. Or maybe it was all the late night debauchery.

Abby felt in the pocket of her sundress, discovering to her dismay that she'd once again lost the key to her room. She imagined it floating out to sea, just like all her dreams and expectations had.

If it had been Greg she'd had to confess to, she would have had to endure a tirade about her many shortcomings. Dorian merely took the change in plans in stride. He looked her up and down, giving her soaked sundress a sheepish look. "You wait here. I'll go to the front desk."

She nodded dumbly, wanting nothing more than to crawl into bed. As he walked away, she caught him giving her a backward glance and realized that the sundress likely revealed as much as Dorian's silk pants. Probably more, she thought with a groan looking down at the white material.

She leaned against the wall, leaving a wet smear. How had it all gone so wrong? Even her rebound fling, the one supposed to erase twenty-five years of misery, hadn't gone the way it should. Certainly not the way they did in the movies, she thought with a pang of disgust.

But it had for a moment, came the nagging thought. For a moment, it had seemed more right than anything else in her life.

Dorian returned a few moments later with her key in hand. The front desk, it seemed, had grown used to the best man requesting the key to the Honeymoon Suite. She wondered briefly what they thought about her strange arrangements and the fact that the groom hadn't been seen since he stood her up at the altar, and then decided she really didn't care. Soon she would be divorced. At some point she'd have to tell just about everyone in her life what had happened. She might as well get used to the idea.

Dorian slid the key into the lock. The door sprang open. He propped it open with his foot and gazed down at her regretfully. "Sleep well."

"You too." He looked as exhausted as she felt. She plucked the key from his hand. "Good night."

"Night," he echoed. "See you tomorrow."

The door whooshed closed, leaving him outside.

Not the end to the evening that she'd expected, Abby thought as she slid into the heart-shaped tub alone. The entire Honeymoon Suite was outfitted for lovers. There were two of everything: two white bathrobes, two champagne flutes sitting beside the silver champagne bucket, two heart-shaped throw pillows on the bed, and two bars of pink heart-shaped soap in the soap dish.

She groaned and slid under the warm water, letting it rinse the salt from her hair. For a moment she lay there, half-floating in the tub, the water dampening all the sounds from outside, dampening all her worries. She could have stayed there forever.

After a few moments, she rose from the water and pulled on one of the white bathrobes. Leaving her hair wet, she slid into bed.

A round of applause and a hoot of joy awoke her. Shocked to find the sun already slanting across the room, Abby rose and went to look out the window. The sun shone high in the sky. It had to be past noon already. But it was the event going on in the

gazebo by the water that caught her attention.

A wedding was underway. At least twenty people stood on the lawn gazing up at the bride and groom. The bride wore a gauzy white gown that blew against her body in the gentle wind. The groom wore a white silk tux, much like the one she'd picked out for Greg. Had he even rented it? The ceremony must have just ended because the groom gave the bride a long passionate kiss to another rowdy round of applause and more hoots.

Her heart clenched at the scene. Until now, she hadn't believed that heartbreak could be a physical sensation. Abby turned away from the scene and headed toward the bathroom.

Sleeping in wet hair hadn't been the best idea. Haphazard curls stood out in all directions, curls she'd have to wet and blow dry to get rid of. Though she'd slept like the dead last night, pale rings still marred her eyes beneath her sunburn.

What on earth had she been doing with Dorian last night? Why had a fling with Dorian suddenly seemed like a good idea? She glanced at the sunburned stranger in the mirror. The woman with the wild hair and sunburned face.

All her life she'd defined herself by Greg's values or rather by the value she added to Greg's life. Was she young enough or skinny enough to make Greg look good? Could twenty-five years in a bad marriage, followed by two days of heavy drinking erase a lifetime of restraint? Could twenty-five years of overwhelming disappointment cause you to lose your mind?

Perhaps, she thought in a rare moment of clarity, maybe instead of buying into more of Greg's insanity, she'd suddenly gone sane.

Abby studied the woman in the mirror. What was so wrong with a few laugh lines around her eyes? She was forty-five years old after all. She hadn't been kept under glass all those years, she'd lived!

After two days of good food her figure had filled out a bit. She couldn't have gained more than a pound or two, but she'd lost that gaunt look she'd had before. While she'd gotten a bit too much sun the day before the aborted wedding, the extra color suited her. She looked alive.

Abby ran a brush through her hair, trying to iron out the riot of curls. Instead of taming her hair, the attention made it even curlier. With a sigh she gave up, prepared to step into the shower and wet it down. A sideways glance in the mirror stopped her. The wavy hair only added to the vibrant look. Her hair was naturally curly, but Greg had liked it better straight, so she'd spent the past twenty-five years straightening her hair and living in fear of humidity. How had she never noticed that she actually looked better with a bit of curl in her hair? She'd spent so much time catering to Greg's tastes--did she even really know what she actually looked like?

What would happen, she wondered, if she were to walk out into the Caribbean sunshine wearing her real hair, showing off her curvier body and her true face devoid of make-up? She decided to find out.

The sunlight made her eyes tear after the dimness of her hotel room. It had to be almost noon. She hoped the restaurant was still serving something that resembled breakfast. A glance at the waiters stripping the tables of their bright cloths for the lunch rush quelled that hope. She circled around the periphery of the restaurant, thinking she might ask the kitchen staff if there was still some coffee to be had, when a voice called her name.

“Abby!”

She turned, seeing Dorian walking down the path from the kitchen. His arms were laden with two plates covered with cloth napkins. A carafe dangled from his other hand. Abby turned back toward him.

He looked even more relaxed than last night. He wore a white t-shirt and a pair of beige shorts. The shirt was clean enough, but it would be impossible to squeeze another wrinkle into it. The shorts also looked clean, yet creased beyond all hope.

“Can I give you a hand with that?” she said, reaching for the top plate that looked ready to topple off the pile at any moment.

“Thanks.” Dorian cast an appreciative eye over her. “You look really ... good this morning.” He paused, as if trying to think of something to say. “Did you do something new with your hair?”

“This is my real hair. Greg never liked it curly.”

“Greg was a fool.” Dorian smiled broadly. “But I’ve said that already, haven’t I?”

She took the top plate from him. “You have, but feel free to say it again. And again ... and again.”

“Actually, I was just coming to see if you were up.” He held up the coffee carafe. “I rescued you some breakfast.”

“Thanks! I guess we missed the breakfast service.”

“Maybe we could eat this on the terrace,” Dorian suggested.

She followed him back to their suites. Hers had already been made up, so they ate on the porch overlooking the water. The two plates contained far more pastries and croissants than two people could possibly eat. All the eating she’d done in the past two days had probably given Dorian the wrong idea about the extent of her appetite, but he didn’t seem to notice. Abby thought about all the appetites she’d had to suppress during her marriage to Greg. No wonder she was hungry!

“Any plans for today?” Dorian asked.

Abby shook her head.

“I was thinking we could go snorkeling.”

Abby glanced at him incredulously, her half-eaten croissant forgotten in her hand. “Oh right. Like I’m going to give you another chance to dunk me under water.”

Dorian had the good sense to look chagrined. “No, really. It’s quite safe. You wear a floatation device and a mask, and you have a tube to breathe through.”

“Sounds real safe so far. Kind of like parasailing.”

He held up a hand in a plea for mercy. “All you have to do is to skim along the top of the water and watch all the fish below. The water’s crystal clear here and there’s a small reef just off the far dock. We won’t have to go far. It’ll be fun.”

“Fun,” she said. “Like parasailing was supposed to be.”

He gave her a sheepish smile. “Well, yeah, kind of like that.”

Abby took pity on him. “Okay. As long as we don’t have to go far. As long as I can make it to the shore without swallowing half the ocean.”

“Guaranteed,” Dorian assured her.

When they checked in at the water sports hut to sign out masks and snorkels, Abby wasn’t so sure. It could have been the dubious looks the staff gave her. After she’d come plummeting out of the sky, they didn’t seem like they wanted to trust her with any more equipment. Dorian didn’t seem to notice, though, and within a couple of minutes

they had masks, snorkels and lifejackets.

The brilliantly colored equipment made her look like some kind of exotic fish. The fuchsia mask and flippers and glaringly yellow life vest clashed with her white bikini. She noted that the equipment they'd given Dorian was all black.

They waded into the warm water beside the dock. Abby was surprised how much easier it was to propel herself with the flippers. She followed Dorian's lead and put her face in the water, using the snorkel to breathe.

A wave of panic washed over her, reminding her of being flung into the depths of the ocean yesterday. She forced herself to take a deep breath through the tube. Warm air flowed in. The lifejacket kept her floating on the top of the water, so she only had to lift her head to gain a breath of air. Keeping her head under water, she followed Dorian as he headed for the nearby reef.

At once she entered a new world. Dozens of yellow and black fish swarmed around her, so numerous she nearly panicked again. They seemed fascinated by this colorful being that had invaded their turf. She waved her hand and they scattered away only to return a moment later unable to contain their curiosity.

A blue fish with a red stripe zigzagged through the school. The yellow fish zoomed away. Abby wished for a camera to capture the grandeur of it all. A mountain of coral sprouted from the ocean floor. Like an underwater city, she noted many species of tiny fish swirling between forks of coral. Like everything else on the island, it was dazzlingly beautiful.

Drifting just under the water's surface, she experienced more peace than she'd felt in years. The ocean muffled all sound from the world above. Worries flowed away from her along with the noise. Sun-warmed water lapped against her in a sensuous massage. Supported by the water, she let the tension ease out of every muscle. So much of Greg's life had brought her stress and worry. So many of Greg's opinions had made her feel lacking and insignificant but here in the burnished surf of the Caribbean, she felt free to be herself. Free just to be.

She floated, hovering above the underwater landscape, just watching the myriad creatures that moved in and around the coral. Sponge waved in the current. Small white fish with brown spots hid nearly invisible against the sandy ocean bottom.

Dorian joined her, a darker shape in the water. Behind his mask his eyes looked huge. He gave her what she thought was a smile around the mouthpiece of his snorkel and raised his thumb. She returned the gesture. He kicked off and swam away from her toward a school of orange and white striped fish. Abby followed him.

More colorful than she could have ever imagined, the small fish enchanted her. They swarmed away from them, startled by the interlopers, then drifted back after a moment, their curiosity getting the better of them. Dorian reached out to steady her as they hung in the water above them. An eel snaked along the ground. Abby moved her flippers to flee, but he held her in place. The eel moved on, scattering other fish in its wake.

Abby followed its progress until it disappeared from sight behind another outcrop of coral. She glanced back to find Dorian staring at her with the same kind of awe she'd given the schools of fish. The intensity of that look startled her. *Had she misinterpreted his intentions?* she wondered. Was there more to Dorian's sudden interest than simply trying to enjoy an impromptu holiday?

Vividly, she remembered the kiss they'd shared last night. It was so unlike her to become caught up in the moment like that. She could still conjure the warmth of his lips against the cool air and the water swirling around them. Dorian seemed to have been enjoying it every bit as much as she had. Maybe it had meant something. Something more than a bit of wine and a romantic walk on the beach. Catching her gaze, his expression changed to one of just calm friendliness making her wonder if she'd seen it at all.

A wave rolled over them, making her drift away from Dorian momentarily. The motion rocked her gently. She felt the pressure in her ears change. The waves grew stronger, gentle rolling white caps that passed above them, yet her stomach rebelled. She returned her attention to the ocean floor, intending to fix her gaze in one place and calm her roiling stomach. But once upset, her body refused to be calmed.

Seasickness, she thought, recognizing the feeling suddenly. She got horribly seasick if she got in so much as a dinghy. Even floating in someone's pool could do it to her. Though, she hadn't expected to experience it snorkeling.

Dorian still floated beside her, his attention taken with the action on the ocean floor. Forgetting herself, Abby opened her mouth. She gagged on salt water, upsetting her stomach further. Bile rose in her throat. She didn't have time to explain it to Dorian. She had to get to shore!

Kicking off, she used the extra speed gained by her flippers to make a beeline for the shore. Sand swirled in a miniature whirlpool. Dorian looked up. He started after her, but she didn't have time to explain.

Waves clung to her calves as she floundered out of the water, intent on making it all the way back to her hotel room where she could be sick in private. Still, dizziness and seasickness worked against her. Even though she had her feet planted in sand, she couldn't seem to convince her stomach and her inner ears that she was almost on dry land. Another wave rushed toward the shore. The momentum knocked her over. She fell into the shallow water.

A strong hand pulled her up. She looked up into Dorian's dark eyes. He ripped the snorkel from his mouth. "What's wrong?"

She tried to answer him and gagged again.

He pulled the mouthpiece away from her. "Abby?"

"Seasick," she managed to get out and ran in an odd frog-like movement up the shore.

"Seasick?" she heard him say behind her. He grasped her arm. "Are you kidding me?"

The question made her angry, despite her protesting stomach. "No, Dorian, I'm not kidding!" She gagged again. "Does this look funny to you?"

"No." His expression turned serious. "I'm sorry, Abby, let me help you."

Had she not been about to spill her guts in front of the hotel's upscale clientele, she would have pulled away from him. Her stomach made protesting noises that suggested she get to the room soon. So, she let him help her back up the too-green lawn to the hotel.

By the time she made it to the hallway, she'd convinced her stomach the world had stopped moving. Dorian reached for the door handle, then groaned. "I left the hotel key in my pack on the beach." He looked so mortified she nearly laughed.

"It's okay. I'm feeling a bit better now."

He leaned against the wall. "I didn't know it was possible to get seasick snorkeling."

"For what it's worth, neither did I. But I get motion sickness very easily. I once went for a harbor cruise on one of Greg's client's boats." She swallowed hard at the memory.

Dorian grinned. "Bet that didn't go so well."

"I almost threw up over the side of the boat. Greg was mortified."

His smile widened. "I bet."

"I guess the trophy wife wasn't supposed to have human weaknesses."

"Well, you are human, Abby," Dorian said. "And humans are prone to human weaknesses."

"Greg never thought of it that way."

"Well, he should have. He has more than a few failings himself."

"Not that he'd ever admit," Abby said. Embarrassing herself by getting seasick combined with memories of Greg soured her mood with every passing second. "Could we talk about something else?"

"Sure," Dorian said. "If you're feeling okay, let's go back and get our keys."

"I didn't mean to cut your snorkeling expedition short," Abby said. "You don't have to come back with me. You looked like you were having fun."

"It looked like you were, too," he said.

"Well, I was ... til...."

"I'm not exactly batting a thousand here," Dorian said ruefully. "I've dunked you in the ocean twice, nearly killed you once, and made you sick."

Abby reached out, placing her hand on his arm. His skin was cool from the water. A muscle jumped at her touch. "It's okay, Dorian. Before I came here, I was really set in my ways. You showed me something new."

He shrugged. "Guess I'm good for something."

They walked back toward where they'd left their packs and their towels. Clouds clung to the peaks of the nearby hills. The air smelled of rain. "Guess it was time to head inside anyway," Dorian said.

Then, as if the sky had been listening, the clouds broke. Rain fell in fat droplets hitting the ground with an audible splash. Hotel guests fled the beach. Using their towels as umbrellas they raced for the sanctuary of the nearby hotel.

Abby and Dorian followed them. By the time they reached the hotel walls, the rain slanted in white sheets toward them. Their towels had soaked up so much water that they were little use at all. Even though the air still held the afternoon's warmth, the cold water chilled her. By the time they reached the hallway outside their rooms, Abby's teeth were chattering.

Her hand shook as she tried to put the key in the lock. Dorian's hand closed over hers. The door opened with a click. "Have a hot shower," he suggested. He stood so close she could feel his rain-chilled skin. "Then maybe we could go for a drink." He said the words so softly she barely heard him.

He could have left her to her own devices. He'd done his best to provide some kind of diversion for the past days but it seemed to Abby like Dorian genuinely wanted to be with her. Despite her intention to enjoy a brief fling, she was starting to feel the same.

When had that happened? she wondered.

Again, she remembered their passionate kiss under the moonlight and the feel of their warm bodies pressed together.

"I can't believe you're willing to trust me around alcohol," she said, trying to inject some levity into the situation, to put some distance between her and these strange feelings.

"I'll make sure you stay in line," he said. He smiled and his eyes crinkled at the corners. He looked adorable, she thought suddenly. Like a big, disheveled little boy.

"Shower first," she said, pushing the door open.

"Showers first," Dorian agreed, opening the door to his own suite.

Abby stood under the hot spray for a long time. The water restored the warmth she'd lost in the rain. When she left the shower, steam had filled the bathroom. Like walking through a cloud, she emerged into the air-conditioned suite. She stood in the doorway to the closet, her hair hanging in a long, wet trail down her back. She pulled the white terry robe closer to stop the water from trickling down her spine.

A soft knock from the other side of the adjoining suite startled her. Forgetting the closet, she strode to the door and opened it. Dorian stood framed in the doorway, wearing a pair of jeans and a white t-shirt. It occurred to her that she had spent a very long time in the shower. Women usually did, she reflected.

"I took a long shower," she murmured.

He glanced down at her appreciatively. "So I see."

How he could stare at her like that when she'd stood under the hot water long enough to wrinkle her skin and with her hair hanging lankly down her back was beyond her ... but he was. Moreover, she found herself looking back at him with just as much adoration.

And then he kissed her.

The first touch of his lips shocked her. Yesterday, she'd vowed not to get involved with Dorian. She'd planned to have an illicit affair with him. Whatever mojo the man possessed, it sent her emotions reeling. She'd never felt this way about Greg. She'd never felt this way about anyone and all these years Dorian lurked in the background, waiting. She didn't believe in fate. She didn't believe in true love or love at first sight or any of the things her friends talked about. Yet here he was, setting every nerve in her body on fire with one brush of his lips.

Abby moaned against his mouth. She clutched his shoulders, pulling him closer, seeking ... something and not really knowing what it was. He responded by yanking her against him. She felt every hard muscle in his body through the material of the terry robe. She was suddenly conscious that she wore nothing at all underneath.

His hands moved down her back, cupping her bottom. He wanted her, she could tell that much without a doubt. He wanted her as much as she wanted him.

She deepened the kiss, demanding more, afraid that if either one of them stopped to think about what they were doing it would break the spell.

"I wish you could see how wonderful you look like that," he pulled away to whisper in her ear.

"I'm soaking wet," she protested. "I've managed to be soaking wet and disheveled all week."

He grinned at that and kissed her again. With subtle pressure, he walked her

backward far enough to close the door behind him and turn the lock. Then he moved her toward the four-poster bed.

Could she really make love in the bed in the Honeymoon Suite? Abby wondered with a brief backward glance. The bed she'd planned to make love with Greg in. She realized with an odd pang of regret that she'd never looked forward to making love with Greg. Making love it wasn't, she thought. The entire act had been about Greg, about his pleasure and his needs. But Dorian seemed to know without even being told what to do to enflame her passions. How did he do that, she wondered? She had little time to ponder that thought because Dorian backed her up against the king-sized bed. She bent her knees and sat down, reaching up to pull him down on top of her. He tumbled down on top of her. The bed sagged to support their weight. His legs wedged between her bare thighs. The terry robe had fallen open, revealing the curve of her breasts. He glanced down appreciatively, then lowered his head to take the pink tip of one in his mouth.

Abby moaned and arched against him. Raising himself up on one arm, Dorian moved the material of her robe aside to taste the other. Hot white waves of desire clawed their way down her body. She pulled his head up to claim his mouth once more. His hands were busy working on the sash of her robe, undoing the knot she'd put there.

She pulled the material of his t-shirt free of his jeans and went to work on the button. The sound of his zipper rasped loudly in the silence between them.

Dorian looked down at her. "Abby?"

He said only her name, but his meaning was plain ... are you sure? She answered by sliding her hand beneath his briefs.

He moaned. His eyes drifted shut, as if it had been a long time for him. That couldn't be true, she mused, not if what Greg said about all those women were true. Then he moved his mouth to trace her navel with tempting licks of his tongue, and she stopped thinking about other women, stopped thinking about anything else except making love with Dorian and how good it was going to feel.

She tightened her hand on him. With another deep groan, he kicked off his jeans and tore the t-shirt off over his head. Her fingers hooked in his briefs, ready to pull them down. The molten look in his eyes told her it wouldn't be a moment too soon. Abby let him undo her sash and slide the robe from her shoulders. He looked down at her like a starving man eyeing a banquet table. Snatching the bedspread with one hand, he pulled it down and moved to position them against the white sheets.

The jangle of the phone startled them both.

CHAPTER FIVE

As one they turned to look at the phone on the bedside table. It rang again.

"It's probably a wrong number," Dorian said.

"What if it's Greg?" Abby suggested.

Dorian's expression darkened at that. He reached across her and yanked the phone off its cradle. "Hello?" He didn't sound friendly at all. If it was Greg, she thought, she pitied him. "Hello?" Dorian repeated.

Pulling it away from his ear, he looked at it in annoyance, then put it back down on the cradle.

"Who was it?"

"No one there." He glanced back down at her. "Probably a wrong number."

"Probably," she agreed. But she couldn't shake the feeling that Greg might be out there thinking of her. What would she do if he were? What would she do if he told her he'd reconsidered and asked her to come back?

She didn't want him back came the sudden answer. Oh, it would be nice to watch him grovel. It would be nice to make him hurt the way he'd hurt her. But she knew she didn't want him back. Even a few days without him had lifted a weight she hadn't known had been hanging around her heart and casting a dark shadow over her life.

The phone's sudden interruption and the thought of Greg had dampened her desire. Dorian still lay atop her, though he'd eased himself away when he answered the phone. He still looked as appealingly disheveled. And her body certainly wanted him just as much. Yet the few seconds it had taken him to answer the phone had changed something intangible between them, making it difficult to pick up where they'd left off.

A few moments ago, her mind had been hazed by desire. Now her thoughts came through crystal clear. Thanks to Greg, most of her life needed to be rearranged. Though she craved the kind of physical satisfaction it seemed only Dorian could give her, sleeping with him would likely complicate things immeasurably.

Dorian seemed to be feeling the same, because he pulled further away from her. "Still up for that drink?" he asked hopefully.

"Sure," she said, giving him a graceful way out. Neither said anything about what had just happened between them. "Just let me get dressed."

He stood up and held out a hand, helping her to her feet. He mumbled something about needing to grab his key and disappeared through the door to the adjoining suite.

Abby sighed. What had she been thinking? Why hadn't she told him to let the damned phone ring?

Oh well, she thought with another heartfelt sigh, maybe it wasn't meant to be. Maybe making love with Dorian was something she should do with a clear mind. Abby opened the closet door and groaned aloud at the spread of white clothes. She really did have to go shopping tomorrow, even if she had to borrow the money from Dorian. She desperately needed one outfit that wasn't white. She chose a white skirt and a matching blouse with a white lace collar. Pulling them on, she turned and surveyed her reflection in

the mirror.

Aside from her wild hair, she looked presentable enough. Her body still thrummed from Dorian's attentions, telling her in no uncertain terms that she was an utter fool. A glass of wine would quiet the feeling, she thought, turning away.

Or not, her body teased, determined to torment her.

He was waiting for her outside her room. He'd changed his t-shirt for another of those loud silk shirts. This one had blue palm trees against a red and white background. Well, at least it matched his blue jeans.

They walked in silence across the lawn toward the outdoor bar. The storm had passed quickly leaving everything damp and even greener.

"What would you do if he did call?" Dorian asked suddenly.

She glanced up at him, startled. His expression was guarded. "Not sure. Tell him to take a hike, probably."

"Really?" There was hope in his voice, hope he was desperately trying to hide.

"Yeah." She stopped to admire a spray of purple bougainvillea. "I mean, I'm scared and I'm hurting, but it's weird ... I'm kind of glad he's gone."

"But you have a long history together. Financially it would probably be better if you stayed together." His words came out strained, like he felt obligated to state both sides of the argument, but didn't want to.

"I won't lie to you, Dorian. Now that Greg's gone, I'm in a huge financial mess. But I don't want him back. With Greg gone I feel more like myself than I have since...." She had to stop and think about that one. "High school," she finished.

"That's a long time to be someone else," Dorian supplied.

"It is."

They began walking again reaching the bar. The wait staff had dried off the patio furniture, though puddles still dotted the cement.

"If there's anything I can do," Dorian said awkwardly. "Financially, I mean. I'd be happy to help."

She glanced at his wrinkled loud shirt. Dorian didn't look like he had any money to spare. "That's kind," she said. "But I'm sure I'll be fine. Everything Greg and I have is half mine by law."

* * * *

By law, Dorian thought as they took a seat overlooking the ocean. Problem was he didn't trust his former friend to obey the law. Abby had enough to worry about without him complicating things and he'd just about complicated them as much as possible. He'd wanted to make love with her. His entire body demanded that he snatch her back to the room and get it out of both of their systems. But he could see it in her eyes that the sudden phone call had made her question what they were doing. If she slept with him, he wanted it to be because she desired him, not out of some misguided revenge on Greg.

Worse than that, he'd seen hope flare briefly in her eyes when she'd thought it might be Greg. He couldn't sleep with her until she was sure of her feelings. He couldn't sleep with her until he was sure of his own.

So, he sat her down at the oceanside table in a spot that couldn't be more romantic and proceeded to be a complete gentleman.

* * * *

A glass of wine didn't dull her desire for Dorian one bit, Abby thought. However,

now that the moment had passed, she had no idea how to rekindle it. What could she say? *Look I've changed my mind. Let's go back to my room so I can screw you silly?* She stifled a laugh and coughed into her drink. It had a certain ring to it. It might have amused Greg, but she had the feeling that wouldn't work on Dorian. Truth be told, if he said no it would break her heart.

Her stomach was still queasy from her near-miss with seasickness. The glass of wine she'd drunk sloshed around in it threateningly. The conversation with Dorian about finances echoed in her mind. Could she count on Greg to give her what was half hers? A nagging feeling of doubt lingered. Knowing Greg he wouldn't go down without a fight. Even if he'd been the one to leave, he'd make her beg for every cent. Still, she didn't want him back. Just the thought of lying next to him in bed after he'd left her waiting at the altar in her designer gown made her stomach clench. Greg made her stomach clench, she thought grimly. Nothing was simple when Greg was around. Everything had to be done the way he wanted it. Every conversation was about him and every minute of every day planned exactly the way he wanted it. She'd been tense for twenty-five years and she hadn't even realized it.

Dorian, on the other hand, was far more relaxed--about everything. She glanced up at him to find him studying her.

"Abby, about what happened, well, almost happened...." he began. He looked so uncomfortable, she smiled at him.

"Don't worry about it," she said, noncommittally. That could mean almost anything. She hoped he'd take the out gracefully and not press. At least until she'd had a chance to examine her conflicting feelings and decide what she wanted.

"I--" he started to say.

A blast of music from the nearby pool bar drowned out what else he might have said.

Abby turned to look in the direction of the cheerful music. A Salsa demonstration had been set up poolside. Young couples wearing only bathing suits and older couples in loud beachwear milled about awkwardly.

"I've always wanted to learn to Salsa dance," Abby mused.

Dorian jumped to his feet and held out his hand. "Let's go then."

She glanced back at the couples in their beachwear and felt a sudden pang of nerves. "Oh, I couldn't, not with everyone watching."

"Who's everyone?" he asked. "No one knows you here. You're never going to see any of these people again."

He had a good point. For the past few days, she'd been worrying what the hotel staff thought of her husband abandoning her at the altar and what the front desk staff might be thinking about the amount of time she'd been spending with the best man. In truth, it didn't really matter. Like Dorian said, she didn't know any of the people here. They didn't know her. They'd never see each other again.

Hesitantly, she took his hand and allowed him to help her to her feet.

Greg would never have joined the group. In a generous mood he might have allowed her to go alone. In a less magnanimous mood, he'd demand she stay behind and not make a fool of herself. Greg--she had to stop thinking about Greg. She had to stop defining herself by Greg's warped set of values.

No one seemed to notice as they joined the back of the group. The instructor

couldn't have been more than twenty, she thought with another wave of embarrassment. She was old enough to be his mother. She wondered what he thought about all those middle-aged people shaking their sunburned flabby flesh, and then decided she didn't care. She'd never be here again. It wouldn't matter.

The impossibly-young instructor demonstrated the steps. They tried it first in slow motion. That wasn't so bad. But as soon as he started the music again, she lost her train of thought and stumbled.

"Hey," Dorian said, grabbing her.

"This was a bad idea."

"No it wasn't," he insisted. "You're just thinking too much. Feel the music. Let yourself enjoy the dance."

"Feel the music?" she asked. She had no idea what he meant, but as she tried to follow the music's beat, she found she could move easier. Her feet seemed to know what to do. She concentrated on the warm air and the upbeat music and stopped worrying about what she looked like.

"That's better." Putting his hands on her waist, Dorian started moving with her. She followed his lead. He was a good dancer, far better than she was. Unlike Greg, he didn't lord it over her. Greg would have rebuked her for her lack of talent. Dorian seemed just to be enjoying her company.

And she was certainly enjoying his.

There was something really sexy in the beat of the music, the rush of warm air beneath her skirt. And something entirely appealing in the way Dorian moved against her, brushing her occasionally.

Her body responded wanting to feel him pressed hard against her, wanting what they'd nearly begun in her room. And he seemed to sense that as he closed the meager distance between them.

He moved them to the music, teaching her with every seductive move of his muscles the steps of this unfamiliar dance.

The instructor began to demonstrate some more steps, but Dorian just kept them moving to the music, dancing her away from the pool area to a square of patio stones beneath a palm tree. A breeze blew in off the ocean. She felt Dorian's warm body against hers cooled only slightly by the breeze.

Her embarrassment evaporated. She ceased to be Abigail Smith, awkward wife of Greg Smith, scorned woman and became only sensation.

Dorian's silk shirt brushed her bare arms softly. She felt the long line of his leg muscles encased in denim where he pressed himself against her. The denim created a delightful friction that made her clutch him tighter. She tipped her head back to find his green eyes glazed with desire. He seemed to be thinking exactly the same thing as she was.

"Should we go back to the room?" she asked, shocked to find her voice husky with passion.

He looked down at her. At some point in the past few seconds they'd stopped moving, content just to clutch at each other. "Is that what you want?"

The question lingered in her mind. Was it? Her body insisted emphatically that it was but her poor, confused heart wasn't so sure. Mere days after her husband had left her, was she really thinking about sleeping with another man?

Yes! Desire left no doubts. Her body wanted desperately to take him back to the room. Her body had been thinking about it, and little else, for the past few days.

Dorian would make one heck of a rebound fling, she thought. His whole attitude toward sex was far more relaxed than Greg's had been. Greg had wanted to control even her desire. Every time she tried to express her passion, Greg stomped on it, as if he wanted to dampen it back to a manageable smolder. As if he were afraid of what might happen if he allowed her desire to run free.

But now Greg was gone, and she was free, Abby mused. She didn't have to ask Greg's permission ... for anything.

"Yes," she said aloud, deciding that despite the possible complications, Dorian was indeed what she wanted.

"Okay, then," he said. Taking her hand, he strode purposefully from the dance demonstration. The curious gazes of several of the participants followed them, but Abby pretended not to notice. She'd have to write the instructor a thank you note she thought and suppressed a giggle.

Once they reached the hotel room laughter was far from her mind, and reality had sunk in like a lead weight. She was about to take off her clothes in front of a strange man. The fact that she'd known Dorian since high school didn't help. He'd never seen her naked. She was forty-five, not seventeen. What if he didn't like what he saw? What if she didn't live up to his expectations?

What if he didn't live up to hers?

That thought brought another bubble of laughter up to the surface. She reflected on the mountain of expectations that had brought her to the island. In one day they'd all been crushed into pieces no bigger than grains of sand. Fact was, she had few expectations except for some relaxed rebound sex.

She pulled the key from her pocket and slid it into the lock. Stepping into the room, she held the door open for Dorian to enter. The imprint from their bodies still creased the bedspread. The maid obviously hadn't been in for the evening.

Dorian reached behind him and hooked the Do Not Disturb sign off the door handle and hung on the outside. Then he closed the door and threw the bolt. He glanced at the phone and reached down to pull the jack from the wall. She laughed. "Good idea."

He reached for her and pulled her close against him. "I think this is all a very good idea," he said huskily.

Abby opened her mouth to reply, but his lips claimed hers and she stopped thinking about clever replies or disappointment.

Yes, yes, yes her body sang. She met his open-mouthed kiss. Good God, the man knew how to kiss, she thought. Greg never had that kind of technique. When Greg went to kiss her, she instinctively turned her face away, so his kiss would land on her cheek. She'd never wanted to tangle his tongue with her own. She'd never wanted to explore every recess of his mouth like she was doing with Dorian.

Dorian moaned low in his throat. Still joined by the lips, he began stripping off his shirt. Walking her backward further into the room, he then turned his attentions to taking off her lacy white top. It landed in a pile somewhere beside his loud silk shirt. With a groan of protest from her, he tore his mouth from hers and teased her with a line of searing kisses that began at the tip of her ear and trickled down the column of her neck until he reached the swell of one breast.

The material of her bra stopped him. With deft fingers, he reached behind her and undid the clasp. The bra joined the growing pile of clothes on the floor.

Wanting to be closer to him, Abby pressed her breasts against the smooth planes of his chest. The tangle of dark curly hair in the middle teased her nipples. Reaching down, he placed a finger beneath her chin and tipped her head back so he could gaze into her eyes.

He must have liked what he saw there because he lowered his head and closed his mouth over the peak of one breast. Slowly, tortuously, he sucked gently. She squirmed against him, wanting more than his mouth, but his strong arms held her in place.

Refusing to be thwarted, she turned her attention to the button of his jeans. He eased back a little giving her room to work on the button. His erection pressed against his zipper, making it difficult to undo. He closed his hands over hers and eased the zipper down. Then with a groan of frustration, he stripped off his jeans and briefs.

He was still walking her backward toward the dresser on the far side of the room. She could feel his naked erection pressed against the juncture of her thighs. Only the thin material of her skirt stood between them. Desire wound tight around her. She gave up worrying about disappointment. She gave up thinking at all.

Dorian's fingers found the waistband of her skirt. With one smooth motion, he had the button undone. It floated down to puddle around her ankles. Sliding her bikini briefs down on top of it, he kicked them aside. Then he lifted her up and pulled her against him.

His flesh felt hot against hers in spite of the air conditioning as he lowered her to the top of the bureau. She swept a hand behind her, pushing aside the lamp and the hotel directory. Something hit the floor. Not the lamp, she thought with relief, then stopped caring about the hotel property. She glanced back at the bed that still bore the imprint of their bodies from earlier in the day. She'd never been intimate anywhere but on a bed. Greg had been traditional that way. She'd never really wondered what it would be like. But she did now.

Dorian's warm fingers slid down from her hip to the moist juncture between her thighs. Tenderly he stroked her flesh, probing, enticing. She moaned aloud and angled her hips toward him.

"Abby," he whispered.

"Dorian--" Her voice rose in frustration.

"Okay," he said more to himself than her. "Okay."

He raised her gently, moving her to a better angle. She felt him hard and ready, poised at her moist opening.

She moved against him, showing him how much she wanted him, but he hesitated.

"What?" she asked, looking up.

He cleared his throat. "I know this is a hell of a time to ask...."

Abby caught his meaning immediately. She almost told him that she was on the pill, that it was okay. Then a tiny voice inside reminded her of the days that had passed and the pink plastic case sitting on the bathroom counter with at least three pills that she'd forgotten to take still in their appointed slots. Could she even get pregnant at her age? she wondered. Because Greg didn't want children, he had always insisted she stay on birth control, the responsibility for which he left entirely to her. Once Greg had left, it had

slipped her mind completely. She was appalled at how quickly it had happened. "Oh, no," she groaned. "I can't believe I forgot to--"

He pulled away from her. "I can't believe I only thought to ask now...."

"I should have thought," she began. "I should have thought about a lot of things...."

His warm lips brushed her forehead. He lowered her gently back down to the bureau. "Wait here."

Dorian lunged across the room, wrenching open the door to his adjoining suite. He disappeared inside. She heard some rummaging around, followed by a smothered curse. He reappeared seconds later with a foil package in his hand.

She shifted on the dresser, her legs hanging down, feeling suddenly completely foolish. *She* felt foolish. Her body practically screamed in frustration and loss.

Dorian seemed to notice her discomfort. Placing the foil packet on the dresser, he pulled her close. Her legs went around his hips, pulling him tight against her. She could feel him, still hard, resting at the juncture of her thighs. His foray into the other room hadn't dulled his desire any more than it had dulled hers.

He looked down at her, questioningly. "You still okay with this?" The expression on his face said he'd die if she wasn't, but gallantly wanted to give her one last chance to refuse.

Balanced against him, she reached behind and retrieved the foil package. He backed up a bit, to give her room to put it on. He shut his eyes as she rolled it down his hard length. His fingers dipped between her legs, stroking, encouraging, until she let out a long sigh of frustration. Bracing her hands against the dresser, she tipped her hips until he rested again at her moist opening.

He glanced down at her, his green eyes glazed with passion. Excruciatingly slow, he pushed the broad tip inside. With a small teasing movement, he withdrew then eased in again. Abby groaned with frustration. Then, lifting her bottom to give him the proper angle, he plunged inside.

Much bigger than Greg, he filled her completely. Nothing with Greg had ever felt like this, she thought as he withdrew only to clutch her closer and fill her again. She felt every inch of him deep inside her. She stopped worrying about how she must look perched atop the dresser. She stopped thinking about her forty-five year old body. She stopped thinking about everything except the delightful waves of sensation Dorian created.

Finding a rhythm that suited them both, he plunged into her over and over again. Her body tightened, chasing after the release that lingered just out of reach. The dark curly hair on his chest brushed her breasts as he moved against her. His hot and demanding mouth found her lips. She let her head fall back, arching her hips to take him deeper still and he quickened his pace even more.

"Abby?" he groaned.

But despite how much she wanted him, despite how much her body clamored for that final release, she couldn't seem to crest that last hill. "Almost...." she ground out.

He seized her hips and lifted her off the dresser. Withdrawing, he turned her away from him letting her slide down his body until her feet rested on the floor and her palms rested on the dresser. She cried out at the sudden abandonment.

"Shh," he said and kissed the back of her neck. She felt the ripples of that tiny

caress all the way down her spine. Tipping her bottom up against him, he entered her again.

She backed up against him, taking him deeper inside. Clutching her hip with his left hand, his right slid around to the front to stroke her where she needed it the most. The feeling of him deep inside her coupled the demanding caress of his fingers was nearly too much to bear. Almost immediately, her body raced toward fulfillment.

Abby glanced up into the mirror, seeing her face flushed with desire. Dorian's green eyes met hers in the reflection. She never watched herself making love. Greg had always demanded on lights out. Suddenly, she felt foolish again.

She couldn't do this, she thought. She couldn't watch him watching her while they made love. Still ... there was something very sexy about watching their bodies move in unison as they crested the summit together. Abby let her eyes drift shut, savoring the sensual movement of his fingers. Desire coiled tighter inside, sending her suddenly screaming over the edge.

Dorian's answering cry echoed in her ears. Opening her eyes she caught a glimpse of them both panting and sweating, eyes wild, hair mussed. It was a look so primal, so unguarded she could only stare. When was the last time she'd felt this free?

Never came the answer, certainly never while making love. Most of the time Greg thought only about his own passion. It would never have occurred to him to adjust things to suit her the way Dorian had done instinctively.

Passion spent, he slowed his movement, pulling her back against him so he could trail more tiny kisses down her neck. "Abby," he said hoarsely.

She dragged in a breath of air as he eased himself out of her. Abby clutched the edge of the dresser, her legs suddenly gone limp. Dorian disappeared into the bathroom, only to reemerge a moment later. She wandered to the bed, threw back the comforter and crawled into the cool sheets. Even in the air conditioner's cool breeze the covers felt too hot against her heated skin and she threw them off.

The bed sagged as Dorian crawled in beside her. She lolled against the sheets, stark naked, her skin glistening with sweat. She should cover herself, she thought with a sudden pang of self-consciousness. But Dorian stared down at her adoringly.

"You were amazing!" he murmured.

Recapturing that feeling of freedom once again, she laughed with the joy of it. "So were you."

He ran his hand over her shoulder and down over her breast like a sculptor admiring his work. She looked up at him, enjoying every hard line of his body. He really was magnificent. How had she never noticed that?

His caress turned more demanding as his heated fingers stroked her breast to a hard peak. In spite of what they'd just done, she felt the first tinges of desire reigniting. She glanced down seeing his interest quicken as well. Dare she ask for what she wanted?

"Do you have any more condoms?" she shocked herself by asking. Her voice sounded husky to her own ears.

A slow smile grew across his face. "I just might at that...." He lowered his mouth to torment her breast even more. "But," he said, raising his head. "I was thinking maybe we could try the bed in my room."

CHAPTER SIX

Abby awoke to the sun's warmth on the side of her face. Turning over, she noticed the sun streaming through the open curtains. She'd slept more deeply than she had in months. No, probably years, she thought with a deep sigh. Judging by how high the sun was in the sky, it had to be close to noon.

From beyond the window came the rush of the ocean followed by distant voices of people splashing in the surf. She should get up, she mused groggily. She should...her train of thought dissipated as memories of the night before came rushing in.

She sat up, shocked to find herself wearing nothing more than a sheet. She'd made love with Dorian. First on the bureau in her suite, then in the bed in his room, and in a few other places and in a few other positions she wouldn't have thought possible. Her face reddened at the thought. She'd never imagined herself as possessing that kind of sensuality. She never imagined she could feel so uninhibited or so free. She'd never imagined herself as the kind of woman who would have a fling in the first place.

Yet here she was sitting red-cheeked in her husband's best friend's bed. Red-faced and wearing nothing but a smile, she thought as a grin spread across her face. Last night had been quite simply wonderful.

She felt ... Abby searched her thoughts for the answer. She felt content.

So much of her life she'd spent feeling uncertain and anxious. Greg made her feel that way. His exacting, impossible-to-live-up-to expectations made her feel like she was being constantly and unfairly judged. Dorian didn't judge. Dorian seemed content to take every day as it came. Dorian seemed thankful for everything in his life and his enthusiasm for life was catching.

For the first time in countless years, she looked forward to what the day might bring. She looked forward to walking on the beach and watching the sun set with Dorian. She might even try snorkeling again! For the first time since high school, her entire life seemed to stretch before her infinite and unbound. She could be something other than Greg's wife. She could be herself and still be loved.

That realization shocked her. When had she begun to think of herself as less than adequate? When she'd married Greg, her life had been full of expectations and hope. After a few years of his constant cruelty however, she'd begun to question everything from her desirability to her own intelligence. Why had it never occurred to her that Greg was wrong? Until she'd married Greg, the rest of the world seemed to think her quite adequate the way she was.

Dorian had given her a priceless gift. He'd made her feel irresistible. He'd made her feel whole again. Dorian ... where was he?

Abby felt the empty bed beside her. Last night, sated from their lovemaking, they'd cuddled close and slept. She hadn't ever felt so secure and protected. That feeling of safety had allowed her to sleep more deeply than she had in years.

She glanced around the room looking for Dorian. The door to her adjoining suite stood open the way they'd left it last night. If she looked, she'd probably find their clothes

strewn across the floor of her room.

Memories of them making love looking in the mirror made her cheeks turn an even darker shade of crimson. *Why?* she wondered. What was so wrong about expressing your desire? It was a normal, human thing to do. But then, Greg had never been quite normal, or particularly human, she thought with another grin.

The sound of running water drew her attention to the bathroom. The door stood partially open. Hot moist air from the shower mixed with the cooler air of the bedroom in a wispy line of steam that curled down the hallway.

On the bedside table sat a plate of croissants and a carafe of coffee. One of the two mugs had been used. Obviously, Dorian, in his thoughtful way, had gone to get breakfast while she slept. Shocked, she realized she hadn't even wakened when he'd left.

Abby poured herself a cup of coffee. She ducked back into her room to snag the white robe that still lay where she'd left it yesterday. She glanced at the Dorian's pants and shirt lying in a haphazard pile on top of her clothes on the floor and smiled. A look in the direction of the dresser brought the blush back to her cheeks. She'd never look at a bureau the same way again. Or a four-poster bed, or a stool or a shower, for that matter.

Even the sound of the shower running in the other room was enough to bring a flash of desire. Memories of their bodies, slick with soap, rubbing against each other flitted through her mind. The people in the neighboring rooms must really have wondered what was going on in there, she thought. Another blush burned her cheeks. On second thought, they probably had a pretty good idea.

Smiling to herself, she walked back into Dorian's room. The coffee was still hot. She took a bite of almond croissant. Tying the sash of her robe tight, she wandered out onto the balcony. The midday heat hit her like a sudden blow. She could practically feel the ends of her hair curling in the humidity. A gust of wind off the ocean took the edge off the heat. It reminded her of the seemingly endless summers of her childhood, when September seemed a lifetime away. And that's what this was, she reflected. A few seemingly endless days in the sun before her messy life resumed.

Abby leaned against the railing. Well, that would have to do.

Her gaze strayed to the proliferation of couples sunbathing; some lying on towels out in the blinding sun and others stretched out on beach chairs beneath thatched umbrellas. The resort was meant for couples, that's why they'd chosen it. Greg hated to be disturbed by children. In the first couple of days since Greg left, she'd found every couple as a bittersweet reminder of what she'd lost. This morning, though, they were only couples enjoying themselves in the sun. Something in her had definitely changed. She felt relieved and optimistic again.

The heavy scents from the abundant flowerbeds drifted up on the humid air. The heat eased the knots from her muscles. She breathed deeply, savoring the tang of the sea air and the sun's warmth.

Her stomach growled loudly, reminding her she'd missed both breakfast and lunch. She turned back into the room to hunt down more of those croissants and coffee.

Dorian was still in the shower. She could hear him humming to himself. Smiling she poured more coffee into her mug and added another measure of cream. Greg wasn't there to remind her she ought to be drinking it black. At this rate, she'd need a bigger size of clothes for the trip home she thought and then shrugged. The world wouldn't grind to a halt if she wore a bigger size. It would go on just as it should. No one cared what size she

wore. Dorian certainly didn't seem to. She picked up the rest of her croissant and bit deeply into it, wiping the powdered sugar off her mouth with the back of her sleeve. She had half a mind to join Dorian in the shower. After all, she needed one herself.

Just as she was about to push the bathroom door open further, a chime from Dorian's laptop drew her attention to the desk beside the bureau.

"You have new mail," the computer announced.

Having left town in a hurry, Dorian had still been working part of every day since he'd come to the island. It was probably just an email from one of his clients. Or even a piece of spam. Then yesterday's phantom phone call drifted through her mind. It simply wasn't like Greg to leave without tying up loose ends. What if the email was from him? He certainly must have known Dorian would have to keep working on his holiday if he'd had to leave without notice.

The water was still running in the shower. Abby circled back by the bureau and glanced at the laptop. On the screen an icon cheerfully asked whether she wanted to read her mail. It wasn't her mail, she thought with a pang of guilt. It was Dorian's and it was no business of hers but with the shower still running, the temptation was overwhelming.

Swiping her finger across the touch pad, she clicked on the in-box.

The screen changed, taking her to Dorian's in-box. A quick scan of his previous messages all looked business-related. But it was the new and unopened message sitting at the bottom of the queue that immediately drew her attention and confirmed her suspicions. *From Greg Smith.*

She should walk away and forget this moment ever happened. Deep down a part of her really wanted to but she couldn't forget what she'd just seen. After the wonderful sensual evening she had last night, she just wanted to maintain the facade. If Dorian had been in touch with Greg all along, she decided she wanted to know. Her marriage to Greg was over. By standing her up at the altar, he'd shown her his true self. While she was appalled to have been deceived for so long, at least she'd seen the truth eventually. So much of her life had been a sham she refused to go another minute with the wool pulled over her eyes. Biting her lip, Abby doubled-clicked to open the message.

I need you to do something for me, the message began. Just like Greg, she thought with disgust. *I need*. No thought for what others might need. If Greg needed something, he considered it everyone else's emergency. *My accountant says this isn't the best time to get divorced.*

Divorced. The last shred of doubt in her mind vanished. For a few days, she'd wondered if Greg's sudden abandonment was the result of emotional stress. But she couldn't deny the evidence before her in Greg's own words. He had planned to leave her, to leave their marriage and divorce her. Plus, he'd chosen to break that news to her when she least expected it, on the eve of renewing their wedding vows.

Is there a good time to get divorced? she wondered. Did life's little disasters ever wait for a convenient moment? It wasn't like they knocked on your door and asked if this was a good time to drop into your life and send it into a tailspin.

Regarding investments and property, Greg's message continued, *my accountant suggests the New Year would give me time to transfer assets. So I need you to talk to Abby for me. Tell her I've made a mistake. That pressure from work got the better of me, and that I've changed my mind. I'll be back soon to straighten things out with her.*

In disbelief Abby read the message again. Every one of Greg's words tightened

her chest until she had to force herself to breathe. The room spun around her. She skimmed the message a third time, just to be sure she hadn't misread it. No, it was clear enough. Not only had Greg planned to leave her, he planned to bankrupt her as well. And ... she clutched the edge of the bureau for support ... Dorian was in on it.

The crushing pressure in her chest subsided to a sick feeling in her stomach. Last night she'd been intimate with Dorian in a way she'd never shared with anyone else. Not even Greg. Before the joy of that encounter could fade, she'd discovered he was plotting with Greg to ruin her financially.

No, that couldn't be, her heart insisted. A man couldn't fake that kind of sincerity, could he? After twenty-five years of being deceived, could she really trust her own instincts? Abby decided she just couldn't be sure.

In the bathroom the water turned off. She heard Dorian's footsteps on tile floor as he reached for his towel. In seconds he'd be out in the bedroom. Panic set in. She had to leave.

But how? She had no money, no credit that wasn't Greg's and no access to bank accounts that weren't also Greg's. After twenty-five years of working like a dog to help Greg make his business a success, she had nothing at all to call her own. Still, she couldn't stay there in Dorian's room. She had to get somewhere quiet where she could think things through.

Her gaze swept the room, centering on the wallet and keys that lay on the bureau beside Dorian's computer. Seizing it, she flipped it open. Inside she found a twenty and several fifty dollar bills. Her heart pounding, Abby slipped the money into the pocket of her robe.

Behind her the bathroom door opened. She bolted through the door to her adjoining suite and locked it.

"Abby?" she heard Dorian call before the door muffled the sound.

Rushing through her own suite, she snatched the skirt she'd been wearing yesterday off the floor. Gathering it into a ball, she grabbed a couple of t-shirts from her closet as well as a change of underwear. Flinging open her suitcase, she pocketed her passport and plane ticket to go along with Dorian's money and ran past the bathroom long enough to snag her hair brush, toothbrush and one of the hotel's tiny bottles of shampoo. Still wearing only her robe, she clutched the bundle of clothes to her chest, bolted through the door to the hallway and loped down the back stairs.

Hotel washrooms were on the first floor, just off the lobby. That would be her first stop. Hopefully, she wouldn't be spotted.

Luckily, the hallway was empty and the lobby quiet. Keeping to the side of the hall, Abby ducked into the ladies washroom. To her immense relief, she found herself alone.

In the relative safety of the bathroom stall, she slid into yesterday's skirt and pulled on another of her white t-shirts. Huddled over the bathroom sink, she brushed her teeth and combed out her hair. She tucked Dorian's money along with her passport and her meager cosmetics into her pockets and folded the spare t-shirt and underwear into a small packet. Leaving the hotel's robe hanging in the stall, she skulked from the washroom back out into the hotel lobby.

The clerk at the front desk didn't ask any questions when she changed one of the fifties for smaller bills. Minutes later she waked out into the blinding sun to wait for the

bus across the street from the hotel.

This is crazy, a part of her mind screamed as the bright yellow bus pulled up before her. *You have very little money. Stolen money at that. How long do you think you can get away with this?*

Panic spurred her on, in spite of her brain's attempts to reason with her. She'd been duped in every way possible: emotionally, sexually, and financially. She vowed it would be the very last time.

Greg had brought her to the Caribbean fully intending to leave her. He'd known how much this second wedding and second honeymoon meant to her. In utter spitefulness he'd let her plan it, he'd let her look forward to it, all the while planning to bring her dreams crashing down around her in the cruelest way possible.

And Dorian. Memories of what they'd done last night, and in all the myriad ways they'd done it slipped through her mind. How could she have been so entirely stupid? She should have known a rebound fling wasn't a good idea. Yet, she'd allowed Dorian to romance her. She let him soothe her battered ego, telling her everything she wanted to hear while he worked more of Greg's dastardly plan. Still, what they'd shared had seemed so real....

She didn't know what was real anymore, Abby thought, taking a seat on the crowded bus. She had to get away. She had to find time and privacy enough to think.

* * * *

"Abby?" Dorian asked as the door to her adjoining suite swung shut. He heard the lock click into place on the other side. "Abby?"

He tried the lock anyway and found it bolted. "Abby?" he asked the closed door. No one answered from the other side.

Maybe, he thought, she hadn't heard him get out of the shower. Then again, maybe she'd been embarrassed at the sudden and varied intimacy they'd shared last night. He smiled at the thought. Maybe she just wanted to shower in peace.

It all sounded reasonable. So why could he feel his stomach creeping down toward the region of his feet? Why did the cold dread curling down his spine point to the one thought he didn't want to entertain? He took a deep breath and let the dreaded thought in. *Perhaps she'd changed her mind about him.* Guys did that all the time, slept with a woman and then didn't call. Personally, he'd never done it, but he'd heard lots of his buddies talk about it. Did women do the same thing?

He'd tried not to rush her. He knew her feelings were raw from Greg's betrayal. She was only human, how could they be anything but? He knew she was still confused and upset. He'd attempted just to be a friend, to offer his support and companionship. But last night....

Last night she seemed as though she wanted him every bit as he wanted her. He thought of the many ways they'd made love. A woman couldn't fake that kind of thing ... could she?

On the other side of the door, he heard a lot of rushing around. Drawers slammed. He thought he heard the bathroom door open and the closet shut. He knocked on the door. "Abby!"

Then he heard the door to the hallway open and footsteps trail off into silence.

Dorian threw the door to his room open. "Abby!" he yelled into the hallway. Far down the hall a man opened his door and glared at him. "Sorry," he muttered, realizing

suddenly he was wearing only a towel. Shutting the door, he hurriedly dressed, throwing on a pair of blue jeans and a wrinkled shirt from a couple of days ago. He reached for his wallet and keys and stuffed them into his pocket. Something about the way his wallet sat against his hip made him pause. Taking it out, he looked at it curiously. It seemed a great deal flatter than it had been before.

Heart sinking further, he opened his wallet. Where a roll of bills had been stuffed, now there was only emptiness. Abby wouldn't have taken his money ... would she?

He knew she was hurt and upset. He knew she was confused, but the Abby he thought he knew was painfully honest. He'd never taken her for a thief. Something had to have happened. Something profound. He glanced at the door. He had to find her. He had to discover what had happened. And ... he had to get his money back!

Another, darker thought occurred to him. For twenty-five years, Greg had painted him a villain. Greg had used Dorian as an excuse, a cover for all the dishonest things he did in his marriage. Abby had believed him. Had she seduced him in a misguided attempt to get back at Greg? Or, he added, perhaps to punish Dorian for what she suspected was his part in the break-up of her marriage? Anger surged, made all the more painful by the intimacy they'd so recently shared. Intimacy, that at least on his part, had been very real. He'd loved Abby since the day he'd met her. He'd hated the way Greg had treated her. Abby had seemed happy as Greg's wife. He hadn't felt it was his place to interfere.

Feeling like a hundred different kinds of fool, he started toward the door. The glow from his partially open laptop stopped him in his tracks. He backed up, eyeing it curiously. He was sure he hadn't left it this way. He seized the top of the laptop and eased it open.

A message from Greg popped up.

"Damn!" he cursed. "About time you got in touch you worm." But as he read the rest of the text, his anger grew.

"I need you to do something for me..." he repeated. "Like hell you scum." As if it wasn't bad enough that Greg had dumped his wife on the day they'd been about to renew their wedding vows, he'd left Dorian to break the news to his heartbroken wife. Like always, he'd left Dorian to clean up his mess.

Now, he wanted Dorian to mislead said heartbroken wife into believing that there was a chance for reconciliation, so Greg could bankrupt Abby. Well, he wouldn't do it.

Memories of what he had been doing with Abby flitted through his mind, bringing a smile to his face. If Greg only knew....

His gaze slipped sideways to where his wallet had been lying. "Oh no," he said, finally putting the two clues together. He looked at the coffee mugs sitting on the bedside table. Both had been used. His eyes swept over the room, noting the drapes blowing in the sluggish breeze from the open balcony door. Abby had been awake long enough to have had coffee on the porch. His eyes slid back to the laptop. At some point she'd come back into the bedroom long enough to poke around and read his personal email. His temper flared again. His email file was already open. Abby had read Greg's email.

His heart clenched. She thought the worst. She thought he was plotting with Greg to bankrupt her.

That would explain the missing money. Hurt mingled with the vestiges of his anger. He felt stupid, he felt betrayed and humiliated. If only she'd waited. If only she'd confronted him. He would have given her the money. If only she hadn't read his email.

He would have shown it to her anyway. He would have helped her.

Sinking down onto the bed, he rested his head in his hands. He felt furious with her for taking his money and invading his privacy. Still ... he couldn't let her leave thinking that last night had been a sham. He couldn't let her leave because *he'd* forever wonder if her affections for him were real.

He had to find Abby, Dorian decided, standing up. The resort wasn't that big. She couldn't have gotten very far. Wrenching the door open, he hurried down the hall.

Running into the midday heat, he headed for the restaurant. Couples dotted the outdoor patio, some huddled under umbrellas to keep out of the sun and others braving the noon-hour glare. He darted from table to table. The smell of food tempted him, but he kept looking. Abby wasn't in the buffet line. He couldn't find her at any of the patio tables. Squinting against the sun, he surveyed the lone table by the ocean. A dark-haired woman with golden streaks in her hair sat there alone staring into the water. Dorian rushed toward her. "Abby," he called. But she didn't answer. Nearing the table he noticed she was wearing a red cover-up over a bathing suit. As far as he'd seen, Abby didn't own anything red. Sitting in the place across from her was an empty wineglass.

"Can I help you?" asked a rather displeased male voice behind him.

Dorian turned to find a heavy-set guy in a loud floral shirt barreling toward him carrying two plates of dessert. At the sound of his voice the woman at the table turned and smiled. Close-up he could tell she was a good deal older than Abby. Quite obviously the wife of the burly guy in the unfortunate shirt. "Ah, just looking for someone," Dorian said.

"Yeah, well move along," the guy said, without giving him a chance to explain.

Dorian turned toward the opening in the stone fence that led to the beach. "Sure thing."

As he hurried along the beachfront toward the pool bar, he heard the woman ask her husband, "What was all that about?"

A younger crowd occupied the pool bar. From the dazed look in their eyes, Dorian could tell most of them had just woken up. Too sleepy to enjoy a buffet lunch, they'd opted for something lighter from the bar.

Walking the perimeter of the pool, he studied the people in the water. Abby wasn't among those in the pool either.

Dorian wandered back down to the beach. Her first day on the island, Abby had fallen asleep in a hammock by the water and nearly roasted herself crimson. As he recalled, Greg found it funny. But then Greg was usually the first to laugh at someone else's pain.

Couples huddled together under the beach umbrellas, tanned bodies wrapped around each other. He'd imagined spending the afternoon like that with Abby. Until she'd vanished, presumably into thin air. The two hammocks by the ocean were occupied. One with a guy so rotund, the webbing nearly touched the sand, and the other by a couple who were clearly on their honeymoon. He scanned the beach, finding Abby nowhere.

Dread was starting to work its way into outright panic. He jogged back through the colorful gardens in spite of the heat. By the time he reached the hotel, sweat soaked the neck of his t-shirt and plastered his hair to his forehead.

The air-conditioned interior was a welcome relief. Sucking cool air into his lungs, he tried the hotel phone. No one answered in Abby's suite. After five rings, it clicked over

to voice mail.

"Abby, if you're there, can you at least leave me a message," he said. "I just want to know if you're all right." Hanging up the phone, Dorian surveyed the lobby.

A group of patrons with suitcases waited patiently for their pick-up to the airport. Some were still drinking at the lobby bar, others still tried to cram the last of their souvenirs into their already overflowing bags. Abby wasn't among them either.

Taking a deep breath, Dorian approached the front desk. The clerk who'd twice given him the key to Abby's room shot him a dubious look. The look deteriorated to a dark frown when he asked if Mrs. Smith had checked out.

"I'm sorry, we can't give out that information," the clerk said.

Dorian wanted to grab him by his starched uniform and shake the information out of him. He doubted that pointing out that they'd given him her room key not more than a couple of days ago would help the situation. The last thing he wanted was for the staff to start asking questions.

"Look," Dorian said in his best business voice. "I'm part of her wedding party. We were supposed to meet up by the pool, but I can't seem to find her."

The look on the clerk's face told him he didn't believe a word of it.

"If she was supposed to meet you, what makes you think that she's checked out?"

"She'd been talking about heading home early to deal with a problem at work," Dorian lied. "Can you just tell me if she's still registered at the hotel?"

The clerk's eyebrows drew together. He tapped some commands on his computer, while Dorian drummed his fingers on the counter and waited. "It seems Mr. and Mrs. Smith are still registered to the room number you mentioned," he said with disdain and extra emphasis on the Mr. and Mrs.

Well, that at least was good news. "Thank you," Dorian said. Wrapping his will around his temper and unease, he walked toward the front door of the hotel.

Outside the dusty road that led to the highway seemed all the more parched in the midday sun. A bus rumbled by, kicking up a whirlwind of dirt. Waving his hand to clear the air, Dorian scanned the street. His shoulders slumped in defeat.

He felt stupid. Utterly inept. For twenty-five years, he'd meant to say something to Abby about the way Greg treated her. The fear of interfering had kept him quiet. He'd stood by for twenty-five years and let Greg all but ruin a kind, intelligent and beautiful woman. Now he'd lost the chance to help her.

What would Abby have done if he'd confessed Greg's sins to her? Likely shoot the messenger, he reasoned. No one wanted that kind of news and Greg had gone out of his way to paint Dorian the villain. At least if he'd told Abby the truth about Greg, she wouldn't be out wandering the streets somewhere. At least she would have had a chance at a better life. Instead, he'd allowed Greg to ruin his own marriage and now he'd destroyed the fledgling relationship between Abby and Dorian as well.

That guy was bad news, Dorian decided. Greg likely wasn't even still on the island and he was causing trouble. Another car went by on the road scattering dust and dirt in his face. Anger churned in his gut at the unfairness of it all. He felt sweaty, dirty and furious and there was nothing he could do about any of it at the moment.

Though he hated to admit it, Abby's betrayal stung, too. Why couldn't she have just asked him about the email? Though theirs was a very new and fragile relationship, why couldn't she have trusted him? Trusted him enough just to listen and weigh the truth.

Dorian started down the dusty road that wound down the hillside toward the highway. He couldn't see anything in either direction except for the odd tenacious palm tree clinging to the side of the embankment, scrub and more unpaved road. Where could Abby have gone in such a short period of time?

Even though Abby was still apparently a guest of the hotel, she seemed to have disappeared into thin air.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Abby stared out the bus window at the landscape rushing by. The crowded bus hit every pothole on the rustic road. Music blared from overhead speakers creating a background din over which she could hear at least a dozen conversations. Passengers groused about their jobs, their unreasonable bosses, their husbands, their wives and their children. Tourists in white shorts tried to read attraction maps and peered out the window. She wished she could be among them with nothing more worrisome than where to spend the day sightseeing or complaining about a monster boss. Instead, she had twenty-five years of ruined life to fix, and a myriad of details to attend to. She knew *who* had ruined it and *what* she needed to fix. *Where* she'd take care of once she got to the airport. *When* was as soon as possible. *Why* had really ceased to matter. Only the *how* of it eluded her.

The bus reached the stretch of paved highway that led to town and finally ceased rumbling and shaking. Moving at greater speeds, cooler air blew in through the windows, catching her hair and ruffling it in all directions. She'd look like a crazy person once she got to the airport. With luck, she'd be able to change her plane ticket and hopefully by the end of the day she'd be on a flight home. So far that was the plan. If Greg hadn't changed the locks, she still had keys to the house. If he had, well, there was still the cottage they never seemed to have time to visit. Once she got home, she'd have access to lawyers. Assuming she could come up with the money to pay them, she thought bitterly. Dorian's money lay in a wad in her pocket. The money she'd taken. Though she believed Dorian had betrayed her trust, she couldn't help but feel guilty. Never had she been reduced to theft. In the past few days she'd done so many uncharacteristic things, she barely recognized herself. Greg's abandonment had really unhinged her.

Two wrongs didn't make a right, her conscience reminded her. As soon as she got home, she had to get things back to normal, or as normal as she could make them. That included her.

Once she got her divorce settlement and had access to her own money again, she'd pay Dorian every cent back with interest. She wouldn't owe him anything.

The bus reached the outskirts of town and pulled into a gravel parking lot next to the water. She noted half a dozen brightly-painted tour buses parked next to the dark green local transit buses. One of those buses had to go to the airport. Hopefully, she wouldn't have to waste money on a cab.

The driver pointed out the bus that serviced the airport. Abby climbed on and paid another fare. As soon as she got to the airport, she'd buy something to wear that wasn't white, wrinkled and worn yesterday, she promised herself. No matter what the cost. All she had to do was make it home. Then everything would be all right.

Sunburned tourists with suitcases piled onto the bus. A few businessmen who didn't even appear to be sweating in their wool suits got on as well, toting laptop computers and overnight bags. Abby watched the island recede behind her as they pulled off onto the narrow highway that led to the airport strip.

Palm trees grew more sparsely now. Boulders piled up at the sides of the highway

to keep out the spray from the ocean. Sun beat down on the bus' metal roof, raising the temperature inside.

Finally, the bus pulled up in front of the terminal and disgorged its passengers. Abby got off among the crowd toting suitcases. She felt conspicuous carrying only the bundle of her clothes. A look at her reflection in the sliding glass doors shocked her.

Her hair, blown by the breeze through the bus windows, stood up in all directions. Humidity had produced a multitude of curls. Her white clothes were creased and sweaty. And her eyes. It was the eyes that really stopped her so fast that one of the businessmen behind her bumped into her. Her eyes looked wild and worried. She looked insane. No one would let a crazy lady on a plane, she thought. She apologized to the businessman behind her and ducked into the nearest washroom.

Inside she did her best to tame her hair and straighten her skirt. She'd forgotten to grab so much as a lipstick, although with her tan she looked healthy enough. Now, all she had to do was convince the ticket agent to put her on an earlier flight. Checking her reflection, she decided she looked sane enough and headed for the ticket desk.

A charter flight was just leaving and the ticket line filled most of the small terminal. Abby waited patiently in line for what seemed like an eternity before she made it to the desk. The young male clerk didn't look too happy to have to deal with anything beyond getting the horde onto the waiting plane.

"But I have an emergency back home," Abby explained. That was certainly true enough.

"I'm sorry, ma'am," the young clerk explained. "As I said before. You're booked on a charter flight. Not only is your ticket not transferable or refundable, but the flight for this week has just left. There won't be another flight until Saturday."

"It's an emergency," she said again. When had she become a ma'am? she wondered. The kid behind the counter was young enough to have been her son, she thought. He ought to show more respect.

"I'm sorry, ma'am. There's just nothing I can do."

"I want to speak to your supervisor," she demanded, using the kind of tone Greg used when he was about to squash the competition.

"I am the supervisor, ma'am," the impossibly young clerk told her.

Abby groaned. And he'd called her ma'am again. *Try it again,* she thought, *and I just might spank you, son.* "Can I book a ticket on another flight, then?"

Looking immensely annoyed, he tapped into his computer for what seemed like forever. "Only one flight still has room, and it's in first class."

"Fine," Abby snapped. "I'll take it. When does it leave?"

"Tomorrow morning at seven a.m." He named an astronomical sum that far exceeded the money she'd taken from Dorian.

"On second thought, I'll wait until Saturday," Abby said. Ignoring the clerk's sigh of frustration, she walked away.

Huddled in a stall in the women's washroom, she tried not to sob out loud.

How on earth would she survive until Saturday? She was marooned on an island known for its tourism where everything cost more than she could afford and most people paid for their holidays in advance. She thought back to last night and what she'd done with Dorian and a ragged sob tore free despite her efforts. Vividly, she remembered the feel of his warm body against hers as the cool breeze swirled around them. Her body

tingled with the memory of it, wanting him even now. Dancing by the water with Dorian, with the wind blowing through her hair, she thought herself free. She hadn't been free, she thought bitterly, just ensnared in another man's plot. The door to the bathroom opened. Footsteps echoed inside.

She couldn't stay here, she knew that much. Somehow she had to find a place to stay until next Saturday. Somehow she had to survive long enough to get home.

Abby stifled her sobs. While the other woman was in the stall, she crept out into the bathroom and washed the tears from her face with cold water. She looked frightened, she looked hot and sweaty, and she looked discouraged. But she wasn't beaten. She straightened her spine. If Greg and Dorian thought they'd ruined her, she intended to prove them wrong.

She'd find a way to survive until Saturday even if she had to sleep on the beach and eat coconuts. There had to be a motel on the island inexpensive enough to stay for a couple of nights. There had to be a corner store that sold groceries. A jar of peanut butter and loaf of bread would keep her.

Abby dried her eyes on a piece of paper towel and brushed her hair. She forced herself to walk nonchalantly from the washroom and out into the terminal. First stop, clothes. She refused to spend another day in bridal white, even if it meant starving until Saturday.

An overpriced airport boutique held an assortment of beachwear. Abby bought herself a pair of black cotton pants and a t-shirt with a giant golden palm tree on it. She still looked like a tourist, she thought surveying reflection in the mirror, but at least she didn't look like a bride. She sprung for a pair of sunglasses, a brilliant red lipstick and clip for her hair. It cost more than she wanted to spend, but she had to wear something, she told herself. Anything that wasn't white. The red lipstick would really have annoyed Greg. He hated it when his wife stood out in any way. The red complimented her tan, she decided. She paid for the clothes and accessories and strode from the boutique, her other clothes hidden in the boutique's brilliant orange bag.

Out on the tarmac the sun beat down with merciless intensity. She waited at the ground transportation sign and tried to ignore the multitude of gypsy cabs that tried to pick her up. She wouldn't have known where to tell them to take her anyway.

Finally the drab green local transport bus pulled up. Abby wedged herself in between more businessmen and tourists lugging suitcases and took the bus back downtown.

The sun had slid dangerously low on the horizon by the time she stepped off the bus. Stores began to close in the town's small downtown core and the bars began to open. Smells of fish cooking mingled with the scent of fresh coconut. Her stomach growled loudly, reminding her of how long it had been since she'd eaten. Doubt settled like a lead weight on her shoulders.

Perhaps she should go back to the hotel. She'd only been gone a few hours. She hadn't checked out. She could return Dorian's money, pretend not to know anything about Greg's message and spend the next few days in luxury. The thought was tempting in the extreme. She thrust the memory of the resort's five-star restaurants and the comfortable four-poster bed in her room from her mind. She found it harder to banish thoughts of Dorian and what they'd done together in her room, but with great effort, she managed.

No way could she face him after the intimacy they'd shared and knowing how

completely he'd deceived her. Once she'd discovered his deception, she couldn't pretend otherwise. She wasn't that good an actress and no way could she sit in the sun drinking daiquiris while Greg and Dorian plotted against her.

No, it was a motel and a jar of peanut butter, Abby decided. She'd make it to Saturday. That they wouldn't expect.

She needed shelter first, before the sun set. A souvenir stand on the wharf was still open, despite the late hour. Abby decided to inquire inside.

The well-dressed proprietor gave her an odd look. "A motel? Sure, there's one on the next corner." With a manicured fingernail decorated with a small diamond, she pointed out a wooden building with a palm tree outlined in peeling paint. "Sure you want to stay there?"

"It's only for a few days," Abby told her. "I missed my flight. I'm looking for somewhere inexpensive to spend a couple of days until the next charter."

The proprietor shrugged. "Suit yourself." Deciding Abby had no money to spend in her store, she turned her attention to another customer.

Well, it was a start, Abby thought as she wandered down the narrow street toward the motel with the faded palm tree on the side. The sign over the door advertised rooms for the night, the week and the month. Hardly a good beginning. She could probably stand it for one night.

The door opened with a ringing of a bell. Music blared from an overloaded speaker in the back room. Down the hall a door slammed. Someone yelled something unintelligible. Footsteps disappeared down the back stairs.

"Yeah?" said the front desk clerk. Abby turned toward the sound. The grizzled old man could have used a shave and a clean t-shirt.

"I need a room for the night." Abby said when he peered at her in surprise.

He studied her a moment longer then growled. "Sixty bucks. Check out's at noon."

Abby counted out the bills. He handed her the key to #10.

"Do you have a washing machine?" Abby asked.

"Coin laundry out back," the man said, then turned back into his cubbyhole and ignored her.

The room turned out to be on the second floor. Abby opened the door. The hot air from the closed room nearly knocked her out. Closing the door and barring it with the chain lock, she strode to the window and opened it wide. Room #10 didn't come with air conditioning, just a ceiling fan that wobbled so much she feared it might fall down on the bed. But it managed to move some of the stale air with a wheezing clatter. A single bed decorated with a faded floral bedspread, an ancient orange kitchen chair and a dresser outfitted the room. The sheets on the bed looked clean enough and the carpet appeared to have been vacuumed recently. A door with wooden shutters led to a tiny balcony. The balcony overlooked the parking lot for the bar next door. It wouldn't be quiet, she decided, but it was shelter for the night.

Abby looked at the small bundle of belongings she carried. The clothes she'd been wearing were creased and needed to be washed. She dug them out of the boutique bag and counted her change.

The coin laundry turned out to be one ancient washing machine and a decrepit dryer, but at least it had a machine that dispensed tiny boxes of laundry detergent. Abby

dumped her clothes into the washer. To her relief, the machine started. She closed the lid and went in search of dinner.

* * * *

Dorian paced the beach outside the resort as the sun set in a flaming ball of fire but it wasn't the beautiful scenery that occupied his thoughts. Abby was forefront in his mind.

All afternoon he'd looked for her. She hadn't checked out of the hotel. According to the front desk she was still registered to her room. He'd called the airport. The flight desk staff refused to give him any information, but after his third attempt, he'd given up trying to be reasonable and used his charm on one of the female agents who'd verified that Abby hadn't left on any of the flights that day.

Eventually he'd decided to stop calling and asking questions. All those inquiries were bound to attract attention of the kind neither he nor Abby needed. What could he tell them? Besides that he'd slept with his best friend's wife and she suspected him and her soon-to-be ex-husband of plotting to rob her of all her worldly goods? That wouldn't sound credible to the authorities. Not to mention the fact that, according to his email message, Greg would be returning to the island shortly. What on earth would he tell Greg?

Dorian's hands clenched into fists at the thought. He'd like to slug Greg. No words needed. Here--take this! Pow! That's for treating your wife terribly for twenty-five years and making her think all men are like that. He smiled grimly with satisfaction.

Unfortunately, that kind of retribution would only land him in a Caribbean jail. Greg had far more money to pay for lawyers than he did.

Where had Abby gotten to? He stared out into the darkening sky just starting to show the first hints of stars. The resort seemed safe enough but a woman alone in an unfamiliar place could get herself into all kinds of imaginable trouble. There hadn't been enough money in his wallet to afford a decent hotel. Or decent food. The money she'd taken might keep her for a few days. Perhaps she was trying to find a way off the island. That could be dangerous in itself. He reined in his imagination. Abby was a smart woman. Smarter than her husband had ever given her credit for. She'd hole up somewhere. Maybe she'd reconsider and come back to the luxury hotel.

Dorian stalked back up the beach toward the hotel. He'd try knocking on her door one more time. Maybe she had come back. If not, tomorrow he'd take an island tour. At least the tour bus would take him all over the island without raising suspicion. It was a long shot, but perhaps he'd find her. He desperately needed to talk to her before Greg did. He thought of the intimacy they'd shared and grimaced at how it had all turned out. He just had to convince her he wasn't the monster she thought he was.

* * * *

The hotel sheets were scratchy and the room hot. Turned out the bar next door didn't close until 3 a.m., making the light leaking through the thin curtains at 8 in the morning doubly unwelcome. Abby turned over on the lumpy bed and groaned. She might as well get up.

Crawling from the bed, she opened the windows and gazed out. Below her, the street was starting to come alive. Shop owners were opening their stands in anticipation of a flood of tourists from the cruise ships docked in port. Compact cars and buses pulled into town, disgorging office workers. She stared at the jar of peanut butter, the loaf of

bread and the bottle of cola on the dresser. Breakfast. Same as what she'd eaten for dinner. Despite the over-liquored, noisy bunch from the bar next door, no one had disturbed her last night. Of course, it didn't hurt that she'd jammed the chair under the doorknob for extra security.

She made herself another peanut butter sandwich. She un-wedged the chair from beneath the doorknob and dragged it out on the tiny porch to eat her breakfast. Peanut butter stuck in her throat, but she washed it down with warm cola. She'd spent more than she should have yesterday, but she had new clothes, clean clothes and a place to stay. Perhaps if she inquired discreetly in town, she could find another way off the island. Swallowing the last of her sandwich that's what she decided to do.

After reserving her room for the next night, Abby walked out onto the unfamiliar street. With Dorian's money and her passport tucked into a money belt she bought at one of the tourist stands, she decided to explore the town. She looked like a tourist in her sunglasses, bright red lipstick and t-shirt with its garish golden palm tree. But there wasn't much she could do. She didn't want to waste the last of Dorian's money on other clothes.

The early morning sun glared down on her, much stronger than she was used to back home. By eleven o'clock, she felt sweaty and dirty. No swimming pool waited back at the motel. So far her inquiries hadn't turned up any other way off the island. No charters flew from anywhere other than out of the airport. The only other transport off was the ferry that ran to a neighboring island. Briefly, she debated taking it, just to get further away from Dorian and Greg but that would also get her further from home.

Finally, the heat got the best of her. She stopped in front of a small restaurant that offered a tree-shaded patio. Abby fingered the bills in her pocket. She could afford to spring for one good meal and something cool to drink.

A breeze off the water cooled the air in the patio. It felt good to sit down. Abby ordered grilled chicken, salad and a large glass of pineapple juice. She had to force herself to eat the chicken slowly. All that walking during the past two days had really spiked her appetite. Finishing her meal, she pushed her plate away and took a long pull on her drink, letting the cool juice slide down her throat. She leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes for a moment.

A familiar voice made her sit up quickly, nearly knocking over her juice.

"Just give me a bit more time," said a deep male voice.

Greg's voice.

But that was impossible. According to his email, Greg had left the island. He planned to return to talk Abby into reconciling. Her heart thumped painfully. Could it be that Greg had been here all the time?

Shoving her sunglasses down over her eyes, Abby surveyed the restaurant.

"I've given you years," a woman objected.

Abby looked around the patio, trying not to draw attention to herself. A young couple, clearly on their honeymoon, sat at the next table. Not them. She glanced at the table beyond that while pretending to take another sip of her drink. No, a couple of senior citizens occupied that table.

"But this just isn't a good time," she heard Greg say. "I need a few more months to get things organized. Surely you can give me that much."

Surely, Abby thought. Well, that definitely sounded like Greg. No discussion

needed. Surely she'd always done what Greg asked. She turned toward the sound of his voice.

At a table shaded by an umbrella in the corner of the patio sat a blond woman. The umbrella was tilted toward the sun, blocking her view of the man sitting across from her. She didn't need to look beneath the umbrella to recognize Greg. She swallowed hard, trying to reduce her anger to a more reasonable smolder. He'd been here on the island all the time romancing another woman. The idea seemed absurd, but then a few days ago the thought that her husband might leave her at the altar would have seemed absurd too.

Abby studied the woman. She was everything Greg liked. Her long, tanned legs were crossed gracefully beneath the table. She wore expensive sandals and even her toenails were manicured. She had to be at least ten, maybe even fifteen years younger than she was, Abby estimated. She wore her long blond hair pulled back into an elegant ponytail. Her full bottom lip stuck out in a dramatic pout as she listened intently to Greg. It should have made her look silly, instead it made her look like a beautiful, unrepentant two-year-old.

Then a thought occurred to her that nearly froze the blood in her veins. She'd been sitting there for the past hour, not twenty feet away from them, and Greg had been so wrapped up in his mistress he hadn't even noticed her.

Her hand curled around the glass of pineapple juice. Only sheer force of will stopped her from hurling it at Greg.

The cruelty of it all made Abby cast another furtive glance in their direction. For twenty-five years, she'd used her talent and her intelligence to help Greg run his business. He owed a great deal of his success to her. Not only had he never recognized her contribution, he'd outright ignored it. He'd outright ignored her. While she slaved away back at the office, he went off on business trips abroad, likely romancing women on every continent he visited. Her hand curled around the glass. She drank down the iced juice to cool her temper.

Then a thought occurred to her, a thought so incredible it made her breath catch in her throat.

She was the one that had made Greg what he was, not the other way around. Why had she never realized that before?

Because it was in Greg's best interest to keep her feeling insecure, came the answer.

If Abby realized her true worth, she could take it with her.

She looked again at Greg and his mistress. They had their heads together like lovers behind the umbrella while Greg pleaded his case in hushed, urgent tones. He'd convince the blond to do what he wanted, Abby realized. Greg's arguments had always worked on her. But not this time, because she finally realized how much she was worth. Once she knew that, she couldn't un-know it. Though Greg had tried to keep her feeling insecure and lacking, she wasn't stupid. In twenty-five years, she'd learned how to run a business probably better than Greg had. Mostly because she did all the work. She didn't need to throw her glass at Greg. What she needed to do was to let him believe she'd fallen for his plan long enough to get herself back home to divorce lawyers and property settlements.

No sense revealing her hand just yet, Abby thought. Silently, she stood up. Neither Greg nor his mistress took any notice of her. She left enough bills beneath her

juice glass to cover her meal and slunk from the patio back out onto the street.

* * * *

This bus tour had to be his worst idea yet. Dorian stared out the window at another mall passing by. To his dismay, the driver pulled into the parking lot of the upscale shopping complex. Tourists streamed out of the bus, hot in pursuit of duty-free liquor, perfume and jewelry. He tried not to groan. He should really leave the tour and hire a taxi to take him to all the out-of-the-way places Abby might have gotten to on the island. All he saw in the parking lot were more red and yellow tourist buses and hordes of middle-aged bargain-seekers in white shorts. He didn't see any cabs parked at the curb.

Dorian studied his reflection in a store window. He couldn't look more like a tourist himself wearing the lime green shirt with the Santa babes on it. The beige shorts didn't really match, either. Well, he might as well make the most of the opportunity. The mall, if nothing else, had air conditioning.

He strolled up to a booth inside that sold post cards and drinks. He bought a cola and a post card. Why drop the tourist facade now? he wondered. "Do you know of any inexpensive places to stay on the island?" he asked the proprietor. "Like maybe a motel?"

"There's a couple downtown," the owner said, handing over his change. "Near the bar district."

"Thanks. I'll check them out." A glance over his shoulder told him the tour group was milling about the bus, ready to leave for the next mall. One of the stops on the itinerary took them downtown. He'd leave the group there and check out those motels.

Tourists piled back onto the bus. The driver cranked up the air conditioning and the music. Dorian leaned his head against the window and stared out at the passing palm trees. He just couldn't let Abby go home thinking he'd plotted with Greg to ruin her life. He was forty-seven years old. It was long past the time he should have settled down. Though he was only starting to admit it to himself, he'd felt strangely at home in the burgeoning relationship he'd briefly shared with Abby.

They had chemistry. They had a great deal in common. They'd both been disappointed in other relationships. They just both wanted to be loved. He might have been able to give her that ... if Greg hadn't interfered. Silently, he cursed his false friend. Why hadn't he told Greg to take a hike long ago? He could scarcely fault Abby for staying in the relationship for as long as she had because he'd done the same. Why did he still count Greg among his friends? At least he had until yesterday, he corrected. Because, came the answer, he'd thought in staying close to Greg, he could stay close to Abby.

The truth hit him hard. He remained friends with Greg in a misguided attempt to watch over and protect his wife. He should have told her the truth long ago. Before Greg had stolen the last opportunity for honesty between them.

He was so lost in thought, he didn't realize the bus had stopped until the people around him stood up to leave. Dust swirled around the gravel parking lot as more tour buses pulled in. The driver announced he'd be leaving in two hours and everyone was to meet back here. Dorian got out and looked around. A sidewalk crowded with tourists and businessmen led away from the parking lot. He followed it into the town.

Sun beat down on the pavement. Buildings blocked ocean breeze. He followed the smell of fish cooking and headed toward the water. That's where he guessed he'd find the bars and hopefully the motels. He scanned the streets. No one who looked like Abby passed him. He tried to remember what she'd been wearing when he saw her last and had

to admit he wasn't an expert in women's clothes. She seemed to have brought a great deal of white with her and that's all he could remember. She'd been wearing some kind of white knitted top when they went parasailing. Shame made him drop his head as he remembered how *that* had turned out. Maybe he should stay away from her and let her make her own decisions. The thought of her leaving the island thinking the worst of him burned like an ulcer in his gut. He had to find her before Greg did. He had to tell her the truth.

Up ahead he saw a motel sign. Dorian hurried toward it.

Sun beat down on his shoulders. He wished he'd worn a hat. He passed a restaurant with a shaded patio and debated ducking inside for a drink. Maybe on the way back, he thought, keeping the motel sign in sight.

Lost in thought, he nearly ran down a woman wearing black pants and a garish black t-shirt with a golden palm tree on it.

"Sorry," he murmured, rushing on.

"No problem," she called over her shoulder, then stopped suddenly.

It took him about two steps to recognize the voice.

"Abby?"

She'd changed her clothes, gone from wearing white to all black. She'd let her hair down. It curled softly around her cheeks, setting off the brilliant red lipstick she wore. She looked all together different than when he'd seen her last, but the voice was definitely hers.

In the time it took him to turn around, she'd started running in the opposite direction, disappearing down a narrow alley.

"Abby! Wait!"

Dorian tore down the pavement after her.

When he reached the alley, Abby was no where to be found.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Abby ducked into an alleyway. The midday heat seemed trapped between the walls of the wooden buildings. Ignoring the stifling heat and the overwhelming smell from the numerous garbage cans, she stuffed herself into a shadowed doorway and waited.

“Abby!” she heard Dorian call her from somewhere on the street. What was he doing here? she wondered, then decided it didn't matter. Likely he wanted to round her up, so he could deliver Greg's message and help her soon-to-be ex-husband rob her of everything. She couldn't believe that only a couple of days ago when the phone rang, she'd entertained the desperate hope that Greg might have changed his mind. Turned out he had, she thought grimly. Turned out Dorian was working with him behind the scenes. Memories of what she'd done with Dorian since that phone rang flooded her mind. With great effort Abby blocked them out.

That was the problem with mistakes, she reflected. They felt so right at the time. It had felt wonderful. So wonderful it made her heart ache.

“Forget Greg. Forget Dorian,” she whispered softly.

Dorian's footsteps moved to the mouth of the alley. She imagined him looking around.

“Don't see me,” she prayed silently.

To her relief the scuff of his sandals retreated back to the street. Further down the block, she heard him call her name again.

Abby waited until she could no longer hear the sound of his voice. She crept from her hiding place and looked around. Pedestrians crowded the sidewalk. A bright yellow tour bus went by on the street. She didn't see Dorian anywhere, but that didn't mean he wasn't still lurking out there looking for her.

Keeping to the back streets, she made her way back to the motel. Black clothes turned out to be substantially warmer than white. Sweat ran in rivulets down her back, but she couldn't spare the time to stop and buy a drink. Finally, the faded palm tree sign reared up in front of her. Abby darted inside.

She bolted up the stairs, half expecting Dorian to be waiting at her doorstep. The only person she met in the hallway was a chamber maid with a rickety cart. Abby slid the key into the lock. Quickly, she gathered up her meager belongings and tore down the back stairs.

“I need to cancel my room for tonight,” she told the grizzled front desk clerk. She shoved her key toward him, expecting him to refund the rate.

“Fine,” he said, scooping up the key and putting it back on the key rack behind the counter.

“Don't I get a refund?”

“No refunds,” he said and went back to reading the magazine he'd been engrossed when she arrived.

“What?” she demanded, trying not to look desperate. “But it's just after noon. It's

not even check-in time!"

"I held the room for you." He barely glanced up from his magazine. "No refund."

"You held the room for an hour, no more," Abby pointed out.

"No refund," he repeated as though she were completely stupid. "Either stay for tonight, or not. But we don't do refunds."

Abby dearly wanted to inquire what he did do, but Dorian could be out on the sidewalk at this very moment, closing in on her. She desperately didn't want to see him. She didn't want to think about how wonderful their romantic encounter had been. She didn't want to hear him recite Greg's deception. She couldn't risk being swayed. Things were far too difficult as they were.

Because ... she reluctantly admitted to herself ... if she did look into those green eyes she *would* believe him. If she let him lay so much as finger on her they'd be back in the honeymoon suite doing exactly what they'd been doing before she'd read that email. Though she'd never recognized it, an attraction between them had been smoldering for twenty-five years. Now it had been set free. Free to ensnare her in its grasp.

She just couldn't trust her own instincts right now. For twenty-five years, she'd believed Greg had loved her. Now, after what she'd seen, he clearly hadn't. And her rebound fling had only ended in misery. No, best just to stay away from Greg and Dorian. Perhaps, if she got to the airport in time, they'd let her change her ticket and she wouldn't have to sit near either of them on the plane.

"Fine," she snapped. Picking up the plastic bag with her belongings in it, she strode from the motel.

Losing a night's payment depleted Dorian's money even further. She'd seen him out on the street not more than a few blocks away. She simply couldn't run the risk of being discovered. She'd find somewhere else to stay, she decided.

Slipping into an alleyway at the side of the motel, she took the back way to the next street and headed for the waterfront where it was more crowded and she'd blend in better.

* * * *

Dorian wanted to slug the un-helpful clerk at the front desk. "I'm looking for a woman," he said, and described Abby as best he could. He hadn't really gotten that good a look at her. She was wearing new clothes. She'd changed her hair somehow and her makeup.

"Yeah buddy?" He looked up from the magazine he was reading, then quickly back down again. "Who isn't?"

Dorian smothered the urge to yell at the guy. Making enemies wouldn't find Abby. "Have you seen someone matching that description?"

"Dunno," the clerk said, not even bothering to look up this time. "There was someone staying here kind of like that, but she checked out. Gone." He glanced up at the word gone and met Dorian's eyes for a fraction of a second.

"Any idea where she went?"

"Not my job, man."

Dorian groaned. Pulling a twenty dollar bill from his pocket, he slapped it down on the counter. He'd had to take a cash advance on his credit card at the hotel just to replace the money Abby had taken from him.

Without even glancing up, the clerk's hand shot out. He pocketed the money. "She

didn't say. She just left," he muttered.

Dorian snatched the magazine out of his hands.

"Now, what you go and do that for?" the clerk asked. He looked up at Dorian, realizing for the first time that this angry customer stood a good foot taller than he did.

"You sure she didn't say anything about where she was going?" Dorian asked.

"Yeah, I'm sure," the clerk mumbled. "She just left."

Sliding the magazine back across the counter, Dorian growled, "Thanks for nothing." And left. He had one more motel to check.

The staff at the next motel was even less helpful. It seemed Abby hadn't been there. She must have gone somewhere else.

Standing on the corner in the afternoon heat, he scanned the surrounding streets. He just had to find her. He couldn't let her leave the island thinking the worst of him.

* * * *

Abby joined the throng of tourists milling about the waterfront. The sun beat down on her. She thought about the rapidly depleting funds in her wallet. Funds she'd taken from Dorian. Now she'd lost a night's lodging and she was going to have to spring for sunscreen as well.

A cruise ship had docked at the pier. A steady stream of people disembarked, heading for the nearby shops. She joined their ranks, trying to camouflage herself in their numbers. She drifted from shop to shop with them, taking advantage of the air conditioning and a few moments out of the sun. If she got any more exposure, her highlights would be white as snow by the time she got home. She'd thought they'd make her look sun-kissed and sophisticated when she'd had them done. Now she just looked ... overdone.

Maybe she should just go back to the hotel, she thought for the millionth time. Perhaps she could move her room and give the hotel staff strict instructions not to give out her room number. Greg was already back on the island. As her husband and having paid for the room, he had a right to know where she was. Their complicated domestic arrangements would be difficult to explain to the local police. Greg had abandoned her at the altar, but not going through with a recommitment ceremony wasn't against the law. No, she decided. She was stuck. She'd find somewhere else to spend a couple of nights. She'd survived last night. She could survive until Saturday. Once she got home things would be different.

As the sun sunk below the horizon, the throngs from the cruise ships thinned out. Evening fell in a gathering of mauve shadows. Time to find a place to stay, Abby thought. Standing alone on the street corner, she felt exposed, vulnerable. The man at the post card stand had said there were a couple of motels near the waterfront. She'd already stayed at one, perhaps she could find the other one.

She scanned the street. No sign of Dorian. Business people hurried home with their briefcases, tourists looked for somewhere to have dinner. She turned away from the t-shirt shops and the places that sold key rings and coffee mugs and headed back into town.

The second motel turned out to be much like the first, except that the rooms were even smaller. Her tiny quarters felt stuffy from the day's heat, and the bathroom really could use renovation, but at least it was clean. Dorian had likely inquired whether she was staying there. Hopefully, he'd give up and wouldn't be back. The last thing she

wanted to do was to go back to the other motel and deal with the surly guy at the desk.

Exhausted, she turned down the sheets and fell into a deep sleep.

* * * *

Morning dawned, as hot as the day before. Abby awoke late. No one had disturbed her. Stretching, she opened the blinds and peered out into the noisy street. Surprised that the traffic hadn't awakened her earlier, she studied the street. Tourists searched for something to do and locals went about their business. Everything seemed fine. She felt rested, and for the first time since she'd read Greg's email, she felt optimistic. Today, she'd go out for breakfast. She'd reserve her room for the next couple of nights. That would take her to Saturday. Greg couldn't force her to sit with him on the plane. Even if he did, once they landed, she'd be within reach of divorce attorneys. Things would be okay.

For the first time in twenty-five years, she'd spent her days completely alone. She'd always worried about being entirely on her own. Greg had convinced her she wouldn't be able to manage. Strangely, when he went away on business, she keenly felt his loss. Over the past few days however, she'd survived on her own. She'd made her own decisions, she'd survived in a strange place. She could do this. Why hadn't she realized that before?

Abby had breakfast in a local restaurant. She ate at the buffet, trying to cram in enough food to last her the day. Full to the point of bursting, she left and took a long walk on the beach. She depleted Dorian's supply of money even further by buying a bottle of sunscreen and a thick paperback novel. She only had one more day, she thought with satisfaction. She'd done this all by herself. She glanced down at the novel in her hand. Greg wouldn't have approved of her choice of reading material, either.

Taking a towel from her motel, she found a place on the beach to stretch out and read. Clouds crossed the sun, threatening rain. She stayed by the water until the first fat drops of rain chased her back into her stuffy motel room. But even then, the inclement weather couldn't dampen her spirit. One more day....

The rain persisted into her last day on the island. Abby braved the downpour long enough to run out to the tiny corner grocery store and buy some more bread and cold cuts. It took the last of her money. In her pocket she had enough to get to the airport on the local transit and nothing more. Not even enough for a coffee at the airport. She hoped her plane ticket included a meal. If not, she'd be starving by the time she landed.

By dinnertime, the sun made a brief appearance. Abby ventured out for a walk on the rain-soaked beach. The air still felt heavy with moisture, but the skies had cleared, giving way to a stunning sunset. She would remember this place forever, she thought, standing in the last crimson rays of sunset. She'd remember it as the place she finally grew into herself.

Morning dawned, hot and humid. Abby took a shower and pulled on her black t-shirt and pants. Pulling her hair back into a clip only barely tamed it. The humidity reached into the tiny room, curling the tips of her hair, making it unmanageable. Greg would hate it, she thought with a smile. She applied the bright red lipstick she knew he'd hate even more. She attempted to smooth the wrinkles out of her outfit as best as she could. Oh well, she thought, it only had to get her home. Checking out of her motel room, she took the first bus to the airport.

To her dismay, a long line of passengers snaked around the check-in desk. Turned

out everyone had arrived early for their flight. Taking her place in the line, Abby resigned herself to a long wait.

"I'm sorry, the plane is full," the ticket agent said. "We couldn't possibly change your seat at this point." She glanced pointedly at the multitude of people waiting in line. "Fine," Abby conceded, and vowed to take up her case with the flight attendant. She'd spend the flight in the bathroom, if she had to, she decided.

Her stomach growled as she made her way to the gate. The smells of food cooking made her mouth water. Abby pulled out her novel and sat down to wait for her flight.

"There you are!" Greg's voice jarred her. Abby jumped, shocked to realize that in the past few days, she'd quickly gotten used to not hearing his voice. "What on earth were you thinking, Abby, disappearing like that? Do you know how much trouble you've caused?"

His accusation made her blink in surprise. She felt her defenses slipping away. The old Abby would have apologized profusely.

Just then, the new Abby gave her a mental kick. How much trouble she'd caused? Greg had stood her up at the altar. He'd disappeared for days, not telling her anything about his whereabouts or what he intended to do. He'd left her in Dorian's care. Dorian had romanced her and betrayed her. Then she'd seen Greg in town with another woman!

She shot to her feet. "How much trouble I've caused?" she all but shouted. Startled, Greg jumped back. In true Greg form, he glanced around to see if Abby was creating a scene. She was, she realized with satisfaction. They'd drawn the attention of everyone at the gate. Good, she thought. Let the whole world know what a low-life her soon-to-be ex-husband was.

Then to her dismay, she saw Dorian coming toward them.

Greg didn't seem to notice Dorian. He hadn't heard her answer. He didn't care that he'd hurt her in ways that could never be made right again. He only cared about what strangers thought of him. Instead of listening, he stared in dismay at her clothes. His eyes roved over her from head to foot. He examined her wild hair that had long since blown from its clip in the breeze through the bus window. Sun had further bleached her highlights until they stood out in bold relief against her darker hair. Her face bloomed beet red from the sun and from anger. Her black t-shirt with its golden palm tree all but screamed *tourist* and the black cotton pants were wrinkled beyond hope. She didn't look like the wife of an executive. She looked wild, disheveled. Free, she thought, supplying the word.

Greg's voice grated into her thoughts. "What on earth are you wearing?"

After all that had happened, she thought. After all he'd done to her, he worried about what she was wearing. Who was this alien? How had she ever considered him her husband, her partner, her soul mate?

"Clothes, Greg," she snapped. "I'm wearing clothes. What does it look like I'm wearing?"

"Something you picked up off the floor," he said with another disapproving glance. "What happened to your hair?"

Reflexively, her hand touched her hair, trying to smooth it back into place. Realizing what she was doing, she dropped her hand. "This is my hair, Greg. My real hair. Not that you've ever noticed."

About a hundred sets of eyes studied them. Greg seemed to realize this suddenly. He stopped, drew himself up, and used his unreasonable client voice on her. "Look, Abby, you're clearly upset. And I don't blame you. I--"

"You what?" she demanded, cutting him off. "Abandoned me? Lied to me--"

Behind Greg she saw Dorian waiting, clearly unsure what to do or say. Greg hadn't even noticed his approach. Abby gave him her very best glare. She opened her mouth to include him in her tirade, but Greg said,

"I never lied to you, Abby."

"You didn't?" she asked incredulously, her eyes widening at yet another blatant lie. She wanted to yell at him. She wanted to rant and rave at her husband until she felt better. But where to start? How could she begin to explain how much his twenty-five year betrayal had hurt her? Start with his broken promises, namely the one to love her and be faithful to her *until death do us part*. Yes, that was a good place to begin, she thought. "Then maybe you want to tell me--"

"Look, I know I made a terrible mistake."

"You made more than one, Greg," she shot back. Anger tightened his eyes and made little lines around his mouth. How had she never noticed that before? Greg wasn't sorry, he just wanted to rearrange things to suit himself. He gave no thought to the damage his selfishness would do to her life or her future.

"I panicked," Greg said, trying to look earnest. He did look sincere, Abby thought. If you didn't notice the coldness in his eyes.

"Panicked about what, Greg? We've been married for twenty-five years. What's there to panic about? We were renewing our vows, not getting married."

"I know, I know, I just--"

"Just what?" she asked, forcing herself to be patient. No sense accusing him, no sense revealing that she'd seen him with another woman in town. Leave that for the divorce proceedings, she thought. Use the element of surprise against him, like he'd used it against her.

"I just made a mistake," Greg said in that whiny earnest tone that was really starting to grate on her nerves. "I love you ... more than anything. I just crumbled under the stress."

"What stress?" Abby asked, trying to sound reasonable. "We were on holiday!"

Greg reached for her hands, she yanked them back out of his reach.

"And we'll have another holiday. We'll go back to the hotel. We'll rebook our room, we'll have that second wedding. I'll make it up to you."

Make it up her, Abby snarled inwardly. He'd make it up to her by giving her everything he thought she wanted. The second wedding, the romantic honeymoon, and all the while he'd be on his cell phone to his mistress and his accountant moving assets and bankrupting her. In the past few days she'd changed. The wedding no longer meant anything to her. Neither did the new anniversary ring, nor the designer dress. It had only meant something when she thought Greg loved her.

"You've got to be kidding!" she started to say.

"Abby," Dorian interrupted. He'd been standing behind Greg for some time, listening to everything they said. So had the rest of the people waiting at the gate, she couldn't help noticing.

Startled, her husband whirled to face him. Turning his barely-concealed anger

from Abby to Dorian, he said, "Didn't you talk to her?"

"No," Dorian said simply.

"Why not? I told you to." Another order, like the world obeyed his every whim. Before Dorian could answer, Greg said, "Reason with her, Dorian. She won't listen to me."

Dorian's eyes blazed like green fire. His tanned skin blushed crimson with anger but he held himself in check. He stepped up to Greg, making the other man consider the difference in their heights. Good, Abby thought. She wasn't going to trust Dorian, no way, no how. But if he clobbered Greg, well, that'd be just fine by her.

"No," Dorian whispered. The word came out hoarse with rage.

"No?" Greg repeated. "Why not?"

"Because I think going back to you would be the biggest mistake she could ever make," Dorian said calmly, though Abby could tell by the way his fists clenched against his thighs that he had his anger barely contained.

"What?"

"You heard me," Dorian snarled.

Deciding finally that he could not longer count on Dorian as an ally, Greg abruptly changed tactics. "Then you stay out of this!"

"I've stayed out of it for far too long." His eyes sought Abby's and held her gaze. "I stayed quiet while you treated a good woman like dirt. I thought it was none of my business to interfere."

"It sure isn't," Greg interjected.

"Well, you made it my business when you left your wife at the altar and left me to break the news to her. Then, as if that wasn't bad enough, you sent me an email asking me to get your wife back for you, so you could bankrupt her and then divorce her. An email Abby read," Dorian added.

Greg paled. He looked from Dorian to Abby, sensing that the situation had slid very far out of his influence.

"Fine, I can handle it from here." Greg desperately tried to regain control.

"I don't think you can," Dorian said. "Because I have that email saved on my computer and I intend to turn it over to Abby to use in her divorce proceedings. So I'd advise you to play fair. Your blatantly bad intentions won't look good in court."

Dorian's green eyes searched Abby's face, begging her to believe him.

He really was on her side, she realized. She studied his face and read no deception there. Nothing but openness and love.

"Would you really do that?" she asked hesitantly. "Help me, I mean."

He nodded.

Greg's face turned pink with anger. It didn't look good on him, Abby reflected. He was too blond, his eyes too light a blue. On Dorian that same expression looked dangerous. Greg reminded her of an overgrown two-year-old having a temper tantrum. He pointed a finger at Dorian's chest. "I'll sue you."

"On what grounds?" Dorian asked, unperturbed. "I doubt you'll garner much sympathy from the judge when he reads your email."

Desperately trying to save face, Greg stalked away from them. He'd gone a few steps when he turned back. "I'll ruin you," he growled at Abby, much to the delight of the watching passengers. Then he disappeared around a corner.

"He can't," Dorian said, taking her hands in his. "We won't let him."

He sounded so certain of that she couldn't help believing him. Maybe she'd been totally wrong about Dorian. Perhaps she should have given him a chance to explain that he had no knowledge of Greg's plans. He could have washed his hands of the whole situation. Instead, he'd gone out of his way to protect her. Greg had obviously not understood that under Dorian's happy-go-lucky facade was a spine of steel.

"You'd really help me?" Abby asked. "After I took all the money in your wallet?"

Dorian laughed, but then his expression turned serious. He shot a murderous look in the direction that Greg had disappeared. "Consider it a loan then. You can pay me back after you take Greg to the cleaners."

The fact that he thought she could lightened her spirits a little.

"I tried to find you," Dorian said. "I looked everywhere for you. I wanted to tell you I didn't know what Greg was planning. That email surprised me as much as it surprised you."

She desperately wanted to believe him, but Dorian still had much to explain. "But why did Greg pay for the rest of the holiday if he wasn't expecting you to bring me around to his way of thinking?"

Dorian's earnest expression faded. He looked open, vulnerable. "I paid for the holiday, Abby. I wanted you to have some time to think about all that had happened. I wanted you to have some time to decide what you wanted to do. I never meant for..." He paused, searching for the right words. "For what happened between us ... to happen," he finished.

"You paid for the holiday?" Abby tried to get her scattered mind around it all. Dorian had tried to help her, and she'd repaid him by stealing from him. "I don't know what to say..."

"Don't say anything," Dorian whispered. He took her face between his hands and kissed her gently on the lips. That brief brush of his lips was enough to set the fires inside blazing again. She doubted the people watching had missed that, either. His gentle kiss felt so right ... in a way it had never felt with Greg. If she'd trusted her instincts, she might have realized that before.

"I'm sorry I didn't trust you," she confessed.

"It's okay," he whispered. "Under the circumstances I wouldn't have trusted me, either."

"I feel so stupid for not seeing through Greg in all that time."

"You aren't stupid, Abby," Dorian said gently. "You never were. You just weren't the person you are today."

"But twenty-five years! I gave him the best years of my life."

"Not the best years. Your best years are yet to come."

"All that time wasted."

"Not wasted. You were growing. Learning all you know now."

"I'm not sure what that is," she admitted.

"Then you'll figure it out. You're a smart woman. You helped Greg build a successful business. You can figure out how to rebuild your life."

"I don't know where to start."

"Start by going home," Dorian said.

Abby looked around at all the people still staring at them. "I don't think I can sit

on the plane for hours with all these people staring at me.”

Dorian patted his shirt pocket. “You don’t have to. I bought us tickets in first class.”

No sooner had he said that, when the boarding call for first class sounded. Abby and Dorian took their places in line. The other passengers still gazed at them in expectation, hoping for further fireworks. Fortunately, Greg was nowhere to be seen.

They boarded the plane and took their seats. The flight attendant asked her if she’d like a drink. Her stomach growled loudly. Dorian, ever attentive, asked if they had any snacks.

Again, in a matter of minutes, her life had changed. Could she trust Dorian with her battered soul? Abby wondered as the plane taxied down the runway. He’d stood up for her against Greg. Not that she’d needed his help, she reflected. She’d done pretty well on her own. Now that she knew who Greg really was, she could avoid all his tricks. Did that mean she was ready for a new relationship with Dorian?

A relationship with Dorian had a lot to recommend it, she thought. Namely, the attraction they’d been denying for twenty-five years. Was that enough to build a new life around?

Not necessarily, came the answer. She still had months of work to do untangling her life from Greg’s. Twenty-five years came with a lot of attachments, financial and emotional. The last thing she wanted to do was to mislead someone else the way Greg had deceived her.

Momentum pushed her back against the seat as the plane left the ground. Her ears popped. Abby stared out the window at the island growing smaller with each passing second. She had to say something now, before any more time passed and Dorian got anymore ideas about their future.

“Dorian--”

He’d been staring out the window as well. Now his green eyes focused on her and he smiled.

“I really do appreciate all that you’ve done to help me,” she began.

He read the warning in her tone and his smile faded. “But?” he asked.

“But so much of my life is up in the air right now.” Her eyes shifted to the clouds rushing by them. “No pun intended.”

Dorian didn’t laugh at her attempt at a joke. Instead he sighed. “I know, Abby. I know you have to decide what you want to do with your life. And who you want in it.”

“You do?”

He nodded. “I never meant for what happened between us to happen, at least not so soon,” he amended.

“You didn’t?”

He shook his head. “You were there, I was there. We were alone in paradise. I kind of got caught up in the moment.”

“So did I,” she admitted.

Dorian smiled at the memory. “Yeah, I noticed.”

“If I hadn’t read Greg’s email, I might have gotten more caught up,” she added. “I’m sorry I invaded your private space. I’m sorry I didn’t give you a chance to explain. And I’m really sorry about the money.”

“I would have thought the same if I were in your shoes. The ugly truth is that

Greg expected me to do as he asked.”

“But you didn’t.”

“No, I didn’t.” He looked out the window again, lost in thought.

“So what do we do now?”

He turned back toward her. “Now we get to know each other the way we should have twenty-five years ago.”

“That’s going to take some time,” she said.

The corners of his eyes crinkled when he smiled. “I have time. I’ve waited twenty-five years for you, Abby. I can wait a little longer.”

“Okay,” she said. And for the first time in days she smiled too. “Deal.”

With tender warm lips, he kissed her, just to seal the deal.

The flight attendant came by to fill her wineglass. Abby leaned back in her seat and watched the world fly by beneath them. This could work, she thought. She had much to do, but the Abby who had left on what she thought was her second honeymoon, was a completely different woman than the one who was coming home.

If she’d helped Greg build his business, surely she could find meaningful work of her own. Twenty-five years in a bad marriage had taught her a great deal about what she didn’t want in a man. Once she was free of Greg, she could build a more satisfying relationship. Unlike Greg, who wanted everything in the spur of the moment, Dorian said he’d wait.

Dorian put his arm around her and pulled her close. She leaned against him, letting the exhaustion of the past few days’ flow away from her.

Yes, it all could work, she told herself again, more resolutely this time. She could finally have the relationship she’d always dreamed of. Maybe some day ... she’d still have that dream wedding and a romantic honeymoon for two.

EPILOGUE

Abby stared at the sea of women in black cocktail dresses and men in dark suits and clutched her wineglass tighter. The bright red dress that had seemed like such a good idea in the store, now only made her feel conspicuous. Loud parties would never be her thing. Also business functions masquerading as parties made her uneasy. She'd grown her new consulting business from the ground up over the past few months. Business had been good, all considered. However, a few new clients wouldn't hurt. According to Dorian, this monthly meeting of the local business community was a good place to network.

Despite her bout of nerves, she'd traded business cards with several potential new clients. Her evening, so far, had been a success. Maybe the red dress hadn't been such a bad idea. If nothing else, it made her stand out.

Speaking of Dorian ... since he'd been running late on his own project, he'd promised to meet her there. Abby scanned the crowded room and found him nowhere. Obviously, he was running later than he expected, but she knew he'd be there. Dorian always kept his word.

A sudden movement at the bar drew her attention. A man staggered up to the bartender and loudly demanded another drink. *Wow, that guy's sure taking advantage of the open bar*, she thought, studying him further.

His untidy blond hair was just a little too long to be fashionable. Red ringed his blue eyes. Incredulously, she took a closer look. *No, it couldn't be! Greg!*

His suit had enough wrinkles that she wondered if he'd picked it up off the floor. He looked so unlike the Greg she knew, she couldn't help staring.

Even though she had Dorian's undemanding love, she'd been dreading the day her divorce had become final. When the day had arrived, she'd felt only relief. She watched Greg harass the bartender and shook her head. Whatever had she seen in him?

No slender blond hung off Greg's arm. Briefly, she wondered what had happened to the woman she'd seen him with in the tropics, and then decided she didn't care.

Suddenly, she felt a warm hand on her shoulder. She jumped. Before she could turn to confront the interloper, she recognized his cologne. Turning, she looked up into Dorian's face.

"Hey," he said with a wide smile. His gaze roamed over the red dress with appreciation. "You look wonderful."

He wore a black suit that set off his dark hair and green eyes. "So do you," she said.

"Sorry I'm late. Things got crazy." He followed the line of her gaze as it strayed back to Greg who was kicking up quite a fuss at the bar. His eyes narrowed. "Is that is who I think it is?"

"Oh, that's him all right. It seems his true nature has become evident."

Dorian gave her a wry smile. "I think you were the one keeping him in line. Now that you're gone, he's really out of control."

"And he thought he was the one controlling me," Abby said.

"I'm sure he did," he agreed. "But you took care of all the little details of running his business. You did just about everything for him. With you gone, I guess he just didn't know what to do."

She took one last look at Greg, then turned back to Dorian. "You could be right."

"Come on," he said, drawing her away from the spectacle. "There's someone I want you to meet. Someone who could use your business know-how."

That was just like Dorian, she thought. Even though he'd had a busy day of his own, he was still looking out for new clients for her. She cast one last backward glance at Greg. He wouldn't be making any business connections in his present state. Abby shrugged. She'd helped him for twenty-five years. There wasn't anything she could do for him now.

Greg was part of her past. Dorian had shown her that it was never too late—to start a new business or a hot new romance--that at forty-five she really could start over.

Taking Dorian's arm, she walked with him through the crowd, toward her new business, toward her new life.

THE END