

Cerridwen Press

# Pirate King

K.Z. SNOW

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Pirate King

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# *PIRATE KING*

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## Chapter One

Eve Kendrick stood motionless on her front lawn and bleakly surveyed the rubble of her farmhouse. Next to her left foot lay the overturned dish of a birdbath, chipped and scarred, like a flying saucer blasted from the sky. But the birdbath hadn't fallen from the heavens—it had been flung from her backyard.

Recalling the power of last night's assault, Eve crossed her arms over her midriff and shuddered. It *had* been like interstellar warfare. The thick and lowering sky, dark as a coal mine. The acrid chlorine stench of ozone hanging ominously in the still air. The thunderous rumbling drawing closer, closer, as if bison were stampeding through the placid Illinois hayfields.

And then the horrendous banshee wail of the sirens, enough to leave anyone's heart numb and faltering with panic.

Eve closed her eyes. *Mother Nature*, she thought, *it's not very nice of you to hurl around tornadoes.*

"Evie!"

Her eyes fluttered open and she turned toward the voice. Maureen Cooke was hurrying across the littered lawn, her face lined and drawn, her hair wiring out around her headscarf. Eve thought vaguely that her own ash blonde hair, naturally curly, must also look like an overused scouring pad.

Maureen seemed animated in a tense, abnormal way, as if her nerves were strung too tight. "God, do you believe this?" she gasped. "Do you *believe* this?" She loosely waved an arm and swiveled her head to take in the scene. "Five houses and the feed store are demolished, gone! Our roof is draped over the Ellis' LP tank like a tent! Andy Schulz's doghouse is sitting on top of the Dormeyers' garage! Do you *believe* it?"

Eve slowly shook her head. "No," she breathed, eyes fixed on her collapsed walls. Oddly, a few were standing upright and untouched, pictures still in place. There was no rhyme or reason to it. Her mind retreated again into blankness.

"You got hit hard," Maureen said with a touch of awe. She placed a pitying hand on Eve's arm.

"Yeah, well, I'm pretty much the proverbial sitting duck out here." Maureen's kind touch made Eve want to cry but she denied the tears an outlet. This was no time to be hysterical and fatalistic. "But I'm not pulling out."

Maureen was watching her face. "Do you have insurance?" she asked, as if fearing the worst.

Eve nodded. "The adjuster's supposed to be here today." She kicked absently at the birdbath, then saw her handmade loom, frame all askew, leaning against the well cap.

Eve had thought it would be safer in the house than in the shed where she did most of her work. The dismal irony in this assumption made her want to scream. A quilt on which she'd worked for ten months was twisted around the rusting hulk of an old tractor—its picture-squares were splattered with mud. "Not that insurance will do me much good." Eve ran her hands over her face as if she could banish the images of destruction. Then she drew a deep breath and raised her chin.

"There'll be a lot of rebuilding," Maureen said. "We'll all be pitching in."

"Damn right." Eve tried to muster determination. Material things might be vulnerable to nature's fury but the human spirit was unassailable.

Well, for the most part...

"Just be thankful you weren't hurt," Maureen went on. "How'd you get through it anyway?"

Eve sighed, reluctant to discuss yesterday evening. She'd never, ever felt so fragile, so alone. "I spent two hours in the root cellar with an oil lamp, a transistor radio, three crocks of sauerkraut and God-knows-what crawly companions." There was a trace of dour amusement in Eve's voice as she recalled her fear of these imagined critters—as if some skittish mouse or lethargic toad posed more of a threat than that maniacal twister. "All I could hear were these horrible thumping and snapping and banging sounds—"

"And that infernal howling," Maureen interjected with a shiver.

Eve glanced at her and felt an immediate bond. "Yes, and the howling." The fear crept back for a moment. "It was like listening to some battle of the titans. When the calm came—it must've been within minutes but it seemed like an eternity—I just couldn't bring myself to come out. When I finally did..." Her voice dwindled. "I didn't realize how bad it was until I got back just a little while ago."

"Did you spend the night at the high school?"

Eve's smile was tinged with guilt. "No. I went to the first place that came to mind."

"Ah." Nodding, Maureen looked at her with shrewd, insinuating eyes. "Alex's place."

Eve shrugged. "A port in the storm." A skein of bright yarn rolled against her ankle like a psychedelic tumbleweed. She picked it up, eyed it with a mingled pang of rage and despair, and cast it aside. "What else are ex-boyfriends for?"

"I can think of a few things."

Eve had to chuckle at her friend's hunger for juicy tidbits, even under these circumstances. "You've been reading too many sleazy novels," she chided. "*Nothing happened.*"

"Whatever you say, Evie." Maureen adjusted her slipping scarf and then the waistband of her pants. "I'd better get back to town. Don's just been pitching fits over that roof. It's only eight months old. We've gotta wait for our own insurance man and then come up with some kind of game plan." She looked around again, appraisingly, as

Eve walked her to her car. "Well, barn's in pretty good shape," Maureen noted. She was obviously trying to be encouraging.

"Yeah, great. I'll just move in there while my house is being rebuilt. Hollow out a bale of straw and nest with the chickens." Hard as she tried, Eve couldn't seem to keep her tone light. The burden of this catastrophe was locked onto her spirit, picking away at it like some malformed, gluttonous crow. She *had* to shake free of it, replace it with her usual buoyant optimism.

Maureen paused as she was about to climb into her car. "Where *will* you be staying?" she asked with real concern.

Eve shoved her hands in the pouch of her overalls and shrugged. "I don't know. Probably with friends in Champaign."

"Champaign? Oh, Evie, that's so far! Don't you want to stay near the farm?"

"Sure I do. But everyone around here will have their hands full enough without taking in houseguests."

"Well...what about Alex?"

Eve closed her eyes to the suggestion and shook her head. "I definitely do *not* want to stay with Alex. We're just friends now and I'd like to keep it that way."

"But what about last night?"

"Last night was an emergency. Besides, several hours of sleeping on a couch is a lot safer and less complicated than several months of cohabitation."

Maureen let out a sigh of concession. "Okay, but I still think you can do better than Champaign." She slid behind the steering wheel and clunked the door shut. "Get in touch if you need anything. Please."

Eve waved. "Thanks. I will." Her smile was wan but appreciative.

She stood there for a moment watching Maureen's car pull laboriously away, its tires gouging ribbed tracks in the mud. Then she turned back, reluctantly, to her newly formed junkyard.

For the second time, Eve noted with some wonder that her minivan had escaped serious damage. Tornadoes had a habit of picking up vehicles and scattering them like autumn leaves. But hers had simply been nudged across the lawn until it butted up against a fencepost and it was there the wind's hand had apparently released it.

*Thank God for small blessings.*

Eve ambled up to the house, head lowered, while random thoughts continued to bounce through her fog of disbelief. So this was where her big risk had gotten her...

She could have remained in Chicago, comfortably ensconced in her middle-class-neighborhood duplex, comfortably trundling off to teach art five days a week at a monstrously large high school. But two years ago, when she was twenty-eight, Eve made the fateful decision to spend her summer break working in Door County, Wisconsin. Virtually every Chicagoan above the poverty line seemed to vacation there.

Eve's stay, however, was more than a vacation. It was a turning point.

Amid the lush orchards and modest villages of this “Cape Cod of the Midwest,” Eve found a thriving community of artists. Many owned year-round or seasonal residences—usually cottages or farm buildings surrounded by cedars and renovated down to the last rustic detail. Door County artists only taught when they felt like it and then at some peaceful woodland retreat. They enjoyed a degree of creative freedom and financial success Eve had never known. Their lives seemed charmed.

So when Eve returned to Chicago in the fall, she began saving money like a miser. She knew she couldn’t afford her own place on that idyllic but pricey peninsula—the tourists were insufferable anyhow—but it did seem possible that she could buy a small amount of acreage on the plains of northern Illinois.

She made her move at the end of the school year. By then Eve was thoroughly fed up with routines and bureaucracy, and saddened by the apathy and unruliness of teenaged students and a general lack of parental involvement. She eagerly bought the old Beckworth place—a house, with ramshackle barn and outbuildings, on ten acres—and joined the ranks of early retirees from a disappointing education system.

Squinting against the sun, Eve looked around and wondered what Charles Alvin Beckworth would think if he could see his homestead now. The merciless wind had chewed gaping holes in the dome of the silo, flipped implements like tiddlywinks, pummeled the lovely clapboard house inside and out. But maybe ol’ Chas had lived through many a June twister. Maybe he and his family had crouched in the root cellar the same way Eve had, huddled around a kerosene lamp’s smoky halo of light. She could almost see their wide and gleaming eyes as they listened to the fearsome thrashing above their heads, as they prayed and waited for the stillness.

Yup, the Beckworths were probably accustomed to nature’s frenzies. Decades of living on the plains certainly instilled such folk with stoicism.

But Eve had only been there for a year.

She ran a hand over a leaning porch post and released a breath through clenched teeth. *Got to be strong. Got to learn from those tough-skinned farmers and their pioneer ancestors.*

A car came churning up the driveway just as Eve pulled a shred of batik from a sharp thorn of wood and felt her eyes moisten. She dropped the piece of cloth—it came from one of her best executed fabrics—and stepped off the porch. *Got to be strong.*

The visitor could only be her insurance adjuster. His car was metallic silver, shiny as a newly minted coin—shiny, that is, until it reached the head of the driveway. There, its wheels suddenly spun through a clot of mud. Eve winced as the car lurched forward, fishtailing slightly. A spray of dirt covered its spanking bright wax job in a pattern of smears and blotches.

*Poor guy, Eve thought. Should’ve come here in a tank.*

She approached the sadly splattered vehicle as it came to a stop. The driver opened his door, then paused before stepping out. He distastefully surveyed the murky puddle



just beneath his polished shoes. Eve smiled with a bit of wicked amusement. *What are you going to do now, Mr. Spitshine?*

As if he'd read her thoughts, the man glanced up scowling.

"Go for it!" Eve shouted.

He hesitated a moment longer, then seemed to sigh in resignation. One perfectly shod foot came down with a *plotch*. The man grimaced and, trying to conceal his misery, stood up.

Tittering, Eve applauded.

He didn't seem to appreciate her sense of humor. "I should've brought waders," he muttered, sloshing up to her.

"Sorry I didn't have time to pave the driveway before you got here." Eve extended her hand. "I'm the proud owner of this disaster area. And you must be from BroadShield, come to see how much this little mess is going to set your company back."

The man pulled off his sunglasses with one hand, clasped Eve's fingers with the other and fixed her eyes with a somewhat haughty, no-nonsense look. "I'm the adjuster, yes, Jared Kayne." He reached back into his car and pulled out some type of camera, which he slipped into his pocket.

*My, aren't we professional,* Eve thought. Mr. Kayne obviously wanted to have done with her effrontery and get on with his work. Certain businessmen really irked the hell out of Eve. If Kayne couldn't be jovial, he could at least be sympathetic. Or *pretend* to be.

Eve swept an arm toward the remnants of her house. "Go to it. And please excuse me if I'm not terribly glad to meet you."

Kayne's eyes seemed to soften ever so slightly and Eve surprised herself by noticing how beautiful those eyes were—a dark, bewitching blue. He held her hand for a few beats longer before releasing it.

"I understand." The simple declaration was filled with sincerity.

Eve felt a little twist of bewilderment sweetened with gratitude. Could it be a nice guy was lurking beneath that three-piece suit? She watched him, wondering why her interest was suddenly piqued, why one direct look and prolonged handshake and diplomatic phrase should make her pay more than superficial attention to, of all people, some stodgy insurance adjuster.

Kayne pulled a clipboard from beneath his arm and began riffling through the papers it held. "Well," he said, his low voice crisp again, "I *had* better get to work. I've got quite a few stops to make today,"—he extricated a small sheaf of papers from the middle of the stack—"and you'll undoubtedly want your settlement as quickly as possible." His mouth snapped into a perfunctory smile that was almost immediately withdrawn. It gave Eve the impression of disuse, like a broken leg in the process of mending. She again felt a twinge of interest.

*This is ridiculous. I've got enough on my mind.*

Annoyed with herself, Eve stepped backward. She raised her arms several inches and let them flop to her sides. "By all means proceed," she said. "Let's get this over with."

Kayne lifted his eyes from the clipboard only briefly, to indicate he'd heard her. He had already yanked a pen from his breast pocket and was filling in some form. Eve stood patiently before him, waiting for the inevitable questions, wishing he'd loosen up. She needed some warmth and levity right now, some diversion from this painful scene of ruin. Temporary comfort was better than no comfort at all.

But Kayne was the model of businesslike efficiency. He strode away to examine the outbuildings, turning his head up to scan the silo's punctured dome. Mr. Nice Guy had vanished as abruptly as he'd appeared.

*I should've expected as much*, Eve thought, sliding her hands into her pockets. Her parents had always chided her for being unduly idealistic. Kayne was here, after all, to do a job, not to offer succor or entertainment.

Eve shuffled after him. She stopped and rested one hand on the unscathed pump—as if this iron sentry could give her strength—while Kayne entered the barn. Few people would be lending their support through this crisis. She'd better get used to that fact.

Eve sighed and gave the pump handle a lackadaisical jerk. It was rusty and resistant. *Such is life*.

Kayne emerged from the barn, his forehead furrowed in concentration. The sun caught his hair and drew out shades of autumn—a rich russet with coppery highlights. He stopped beneath the fractured branches of an ancient red oak and made a few more notations.

Eve cocked her head as she watched him. He would really be an appealing man, she decided, if he weren't so tight-laced and fussy. Kayne was probably in his late thirties, tall and lithe, nicely proportioned. His auburn hair was thick and glossy, but the style was too much like a sportscaster's—a sleek, lacquered helmet, not at all to Eve's taste. She thought his facial structure was his greatest asset—a smooth forehead more high than low, arrow-straight nose, clean jawline and shallowly cleft chin, stark, sexy cheekbones. His mouth would be stunningly sensual if he didn't compress it so much, stitching those finely molded lips and making them look impenetrable. And his eyes, if he'd let them, could be devastatingly intense.

Eve shook her head. Why would anyone so blessed with good looks try to blanch and freeze them into mediocrity? If Kayne's face were animated rather than impassive, his body fluidly vigorous rather than rigid, he'd probably have a personality to match. And that would make him very alluring, indeed.

Chuckling, Eve silently chided herself. Her property looked like a Lincoln Log fort that had been rammed by a Tonka truck, and here she was, analyzing the desirability quotient of her insurance adjuster. Well maybe she was just manufacturing her own diversions. For a few minutes, at least, Mr. Kayne's "potential" had taken her mind off her losses.

He approached her, finally, his face locked around a question. "I just noticed some confusion in your policy," he said, "regarding your name and occupation."

"Oh?" Eve craned her neck to see his clipboard but only glimpsed lines of numbers and typescript.

Kayne stepped next to her, his eyes moving guilelessly up to her face. "Probably a computer screwup."

"Mm. Probably." Eve felt an unraveling in her stomach that progressed faintly through her arms and legs. Her face suddenly pulsed with heat. Startled, she found it difficult to meet Kayne's gaze. She tried to tell herself its sultriness was unintentional, just a quality of his eye color. But she wasn't entirely convinced of that.

In any case, her feelings were at once disconcertingly familiar and peculiar...and, Eve thought, pretty damned inappropriate, given the situation.

Kayne appeared oblivious. Thank God.

"We've got two names down here and two occupations," Kayne went on, sounding mildly baffled. "Eve Estelle Kendrick and," —his face contracted briefly, as if he'd just taken cod liver oil— "Astra Sharpe." Kayne glanced at her, and Eve thought she detected a glimmer of humor in his eyes. He looked back at the clipboard. "And I see both teacher and...fabric designer listed as occupations."

"Oh well, that's easily explained. You see my given name is Eve Estelle Kendrick —"

"'Eek' for short," Kayne murmured.

Eve's gaze jumped to his face. His handsome mouth was tightened around a teasing smirk, keeping it in check.

"Cute," she said snidely. Was this man flirting with her or ridiculing her? Eve couldn't tell. She couldn't pierce that starchy smugness of his. "Anyway, I *was* a teacher up until a year ago. In the Chicago public schools, that is. Now I only teach occasionally. You know, artsy-craftsy classes for adults, that sort of thing. But I'm primarily," —Eve shrugged, finding no title adequate— "a self-employed fabricist."

A low subdued chuckle rolled from Kayne's throat. "Fabricist?" he echoed. "Is that spelled with a second i or a y?"

There it was again. "I beg your pardon?" Eve asked, stiffening.

"Nothing, nothing," Kayne said, his mouth still toying devilishly with that smile. "Just a little word play."

Eve put her hands on her hips. "Okay, Mister Jared 'Webster' Kayne, sorry if I couldn't come up with a more conventional term to pigeonhole myself. Why don't I just explain what it is I do for a living and let *you* come up with a label?"

"Whatever works."

This time Eve *knew* she detected an impish glimmer in the depths of his astonishing blue eyes, like platinum fish darting near the bottom of a pond. The look almost left Eve speechless...but she wasn't sure why.

"I have a master's degree in fiber arts," she said carefully, trying not to betray her unease. "I do weaving, batik, silk screening, needlework and other things, from my own designs. I sell my pieces either directly or on consignment." Eve paused, then added like a hypodermic injection, "Is that within your realm of comprehension?"

"Quite," Kayne assured her. "In other words, you've raised domesticity to an art form." Eve's mouth dropped open but before she could deliver a tongue-lashing, Kayne was speaking again. "Now what about this Astra Sharpe stuff?" His face had resumed a masklike blandness.

*Oh great,* Eve thought. *I'm just going to be setting myself up again.* Kayne had a sense of humor, all right. Like a viper. "It's...it's a professional name I adopted. On a lark," she said a bit defensively. "I like pseudonyms sometimes. They can be colorful and expressive and intriguing. You, however," —Eve tossed the rest over her shoulder as she walked away from him—"probably find anything outside the mainstream either ludicrous or offensive."

"Only if it is," she heard him say.

Eve pivoted, eyes narrowing murderously.

Kayne began striding up to her. "For the most part, though, I'm exceptionally tolerant...especially of kids playing dress-up."

He stopped beside Eve and wrote something down. While she marveled, dumbfounded, at his chameleon temperament, she caught the mild but tantalizing scent of him—a grassy freshness, likely from soap, sweetened with a touch of cologne and lightly laced with a duskier pungency reminiscent of pipe tobacco.

"Actually," Kayne murmured, "I think kids playing dress-up are rather charming."

And with that, Jared Kayne flashed Astra Sharpe a genuinely charming smile.

## Chapter Two

Eve was momentarily stunned. This flagrant conformist, impeccably clothed and coiffed, was rattling her cage for no apparent reason and without even trying very hard. Maybe it was his way of lending sparkle to a dull job. Eve simply didn't know. She didn't know what to make of the man or his motives. Kayne, from what she could tell, was one big jumble of contradictions varnished with repression.

But so what? That wasn't her concern.

Eve followed Kayne as he approached the shambles her house had become. He took notes and occasionally picked something up to study it. But he said nothing, didn't even acknowledge her presence. Strangely, Eve found it irritating that he was ignoring her. And she found it even more irritating that she noticed and cared.

"I know what you're thinking, Mister Kayne." Why did she want to engage this mannequin in conversation?

He glanced at her with arched brows, dark and well shaped.

"You're thinking I'm a latter-day hippie, some beaded and paisley-printed helium-head whose fondest wish is for a Woodstock revival."

Eve heard Kayne mutter, "That wouldn't be the worst thing in the world," before he slapped down the lid of the clipboard and pivoted to face her. "Miz Kendrick or Sharpe or whatever your name might be this week, I'm not paid to—" He paused, looking mildly flustered.

Eve erupted into laughter. "You're not paid to do any thinking?" This time *her* brows crept up, slyly. "Is that what you were going to say, Mister Kayne?"

"I'm not paid to pass judgment on our policy holders."

"How commendably objective," Eve murmured. She loved pulling the batting out of stuffed shirts.

Kayne continued to pick through the rubble, sometimes asking Eve to identify an object pounded beyond recognition. She followed him with hands linked behind her back. Now and then, her gaze tripped uncontrollably along the lines and planes and fetching mounds of his tall form.

"I know what *you're* thinking," Kayne suddenly said without looking at her.

Eve was abashed, as if he'd caught her admiring his body. But that couldn't be—his back was turned to her. "Do tell." She tried to sound nonchalant.

"You think I'm probably a colossal, conservative bore." He sounded unconcerned.

Eve suppressed a grin. "Let's put it this way, Mister Kayne. I think you probably personify the wild and crazy world of insurance."

Kayne made a half-turn and glanced at her out of the corner of his eye. Eve thought she saw the beginnings of a dimple sink into his cheek but the tawny skin quickly smoothed out again.

"Really," he drawled, his indifference peppered with a hint of superior knowledge.

"Mm-hm." Now Eve was enjoying herself. In some perverse way, this banter was the kind of antidote she needed for her depression. In a much less conscious, more skewed way, it was also an antidote for her unlikely and irksome attraction to this man.

Kayne finally straightened and turned toward her. "All right, I'll play along," he said, scribbling more observations. "Since you're such a sharpie, Miz Sharpe, what is it you've managed to infer about my—for lack of a better term—lifestyle?"

He looked up and gazed impassively into Eve's face. Beneath that blank screen, however, his eyes were perceptive. They probed and challenged and dared her.

Eve dropped her lids. "Let's see..." She tapped a fingernail on her bottom front teeth. "You get to the office—when you're not on the road, that is—between eight and eight-ten. You spend perhaps thirty minutes perusing trade journals while drinking black coffee with sugar. On your lunch hour, you play racquetball whenever you can—in a rather cute, color-coordinated outfit—or else dine at an unpretentious but tasteful restaurant."

She circled Kayne and, just to throw him off balance, gave him the once-over. The fit of his suit certainly did suggest a well tended physique. "You eat lightly but you treat yourself to a bottle of imported beer, a lager or pilsner. And after work, you often stop at a businessmen's lounge for a gin and tonic...with a twist of lime."

Kayne frowned slightly. "Handball," he said, "and a *dark* beer. No 'cute' outfit, either, by the way."

Eve widened her eyes and smiled, surprised by her accuracy. "On weekends," she continued, "there are golf outings with underwriters and actuaries and assorted other luminaries."

Pause. "Occasionally. And I despise them."

"And you have more suits in blue and gray than the Union and Confederate armies, and enough plastic credit to get a small nation out of hock."

Pause. "Some."

"You brush twice and floss once a day, and,"—Eve sniffed the air—"you wear an unscented but highly effective deodorant."

Kayne cleared his throat, sucked in his cheeks and flipped up the lid of his clipboard—for no apparent reason, it seemed to Eve. Had she really bested him? She searched his face, trying to determine if he was angered or embarrassed or maybe even secretly delighted. In any case, she was having a grand time.

"In the evenings you do homework while listening to...shall we say, 'innocuous' music. Afterward you watch your favorite TV shows with your wife, who is pretty and petite and a pillar of the PTA."

Kayne's expression became triumphant. He shot a forefinger in Eve's direction. "Gotcha!" he shouted. "I *hate* watching TV, unless there's a movie on I like or one I've wanted to see. I don't have a pretty and petite wife." Kayne emphatically jabbed his finger through the air. "And I most goddamn certainly do *not* listen to 'innocuous' music!"

Dumbfounded, Eve blinked at him. "Oh," she uttered lamely. She didn't expect to be so far off the mark after scoring so many points. And she wasn't prepared for the sheer assertive force of Kayne's declarations. Maybe he really was sick to death of being viewed in two dimensions. "Well that punches a few holes in my stereotype, doesn't it."

Kayne reassumed an unflappable calm. "I imagine it does."

Before she thought better of it, Eve heard herself asking, "So, what *is* your wife like?"

Kayne lifted his lower lids a fraction, as if launching a psychic probe. "I don't have a wife," he said, his voice a shade lower and peculiarly flat. "I'm...divorced."

Eve could have crawled back into the root cellar. "Oh, I see. Pardon me." She nervously rubbed her forearms. "I, uh, guess I won't be making any more assumptions."

"For a while," Kayne said under his breath, then returned to his work.

Eve stared after him, perplexed and fascinated. The whole situation was absurd. How, in the midst of such devastation and with so many overriding concerns, *how* could she take any interest on any level in any man?

There must be a psychological term for this kind of behavior. Eve absently toed a bent nail, protruding like a poisonous fang from a cracked sheet of paneling. The best she could figure, her mind had leapt at and latched onto Jared Kayne just to escape, temporarily, her dismal plight.

Yes, that was it.

Eve studied Kayne more critically. He really was just another officious, petty bureaucrat. So he didn't like watching television, so what? That hardly made him multifaceted or intriguing.

No, but the incongruities did.

Eve shifted her weight uncomfortably.

Here was an undeniably handsome man who downplayed his physical gifts. Here was a potentially scintillating man who imprisoned his humor and imagination in a shell of propriety. Eve couldn't help but wonder just how inhibited Jared Kayne really was—and why.

*Ach, but what difference does it make?*

She pushed those thoughts aside and moved to catch up with Kayne, who was busy snapping pictures. As soon as she was beside him, he began firing off terse questions about Eve's property. She answered them as best she could—arguing some issues, acquiescing on others—as they stepped over mounds of pulverized plaster, cardhouse

heaps of shingles, crisscrossed beams and studs. Eve kept trying to impress upon Kayne the value of her battered possessions but he appeared unmoved.

*Commendably objective.*

A cloud settled over Eve's features. *He's quite the efficient s.o.b.,* she thought a bit resentfully. *Must have gin and tonic in his veins – liberally iced.*

Then, in what had been her bedroom, Eve mewed in anguish and slumped to her knees. All semblance of control abruptly crumbled. Hot tears pooled and spilled as her trembling fingers picked through a knot of splintered wood. "Oh no, not this," she whimpered.

Kayne immediately knelt beside her and examined the cruelly twisted boards, some of which still bore parts of a lavishly painted design. "What is it?" he asked, his voice softening.

"You mean, what *was* it," Eve choked. She sniffled and swiped at her nose. Another sob rose in her throat.

"Whatever it is, or was, I'm really, really sorry," Kayne whispered.

Eve rocked toward him without will and his arms came around her so surely and tenderly that she quivered, feeling a balmy ripple of comfort. "It...it was a cradle. My father built it before I was born. My mother painted it. And my..." Eve's breath hitched, then loosened with a pathetic moan. "My grandmother crocheted the blanket. Oh God...*why?*"

Kayne petted her windblown hair and gently tightened his embrace, as if trying to impart to Eve some of his own strength. "Don't torture yourself," he said, "by asking questions that can't be answered...except by meteorologists and God. Meteorologists' answers wouldn't give you any philosophical satisfaction, anyway, and God's answers—well, you aren't going to get those period. It's not as if you were singled out for attack by some rational force, Eve. So just dispense with the 'Why me?' pity trip and draw upon whatever support and comfort you can derive—from yourself as well as others."

Kayne's statement so epitomized sanity and common sense, Eve couldn't take offense at the "pity trip" part. The man was right—case closed. Besides, the fact that he held her and oh-so-soothingly stroked her was evidence enough of his warmth and caring. So Eve simply closed her eyes and drank it in. Slowly, the pain did abate. It would never be entirely gone, she knew, but this unusual man had certainly blunted it more quickly than time alone could have done.

*Unusual. Not conventional, unusual.*

"Thank you," Eve murmured, looking up into his face. She was struck by the change in it. The sternness had melted away.

Kayne smiled. "Wipe your eyes." He handed Eve a pristine handkerchief. "I'd do it for you, but we don't know each other well enough. Besides, you'd probably think I was being condescending and chauvinistic."



Eve had a feeling that she wouldn't think that at all. She returned Kayne's smile and swiped at her cheeks with the hankie. "I don't understand you," she said, handing it back to him.

"You don't have to. But just for the hell of it, here's a clue. Do you know what I wish, more than *you* wish for a Woodstock revival?"

Eve chuckled. "What?"

"I wish my whole line of work would be eradicated. I wish there wasn't any need for insurance, for actuaries and underwriters and similar 'luminaries'."

"And adjusters?"

"Especially adjusters," Kayne said with a laugh. His expression gradually sobered. "No more fires or natural disasters or car accidents. Lord knows, I've had my fill of them."

Eve watched him, her face still upturned, reluctant to lift her head from his chest. *The incongruities...* "Why do you do it, then?" she asked, trying not to sound like she was grilling him.

Kayne's hand was stroking her back now, the movement languorous and soothing. He sighed into her hair. "It's a job," he said without enthusiasm. "My father was an agent. He busted butt peddling crop-hail policies. Those commissions got me through college. Maybe, in a way, I feel I'm repaying him."

There was a brief silence, punctuated by the trilling of songbirds and the rustle of trash left in the tornado's wake.

"Where did you go to school?" Eve finally asked. She wanted to prolong this conversation. It was a pleasant, a *very* pleasant, distraction.

But Kayne merely answered her quite brusquely—"Northwestern"—as if she'd come too close to unearthing a secret. Then he began to rearrange his body. Eve straightened, sensing their unexpected interlude was coming to an end.

"We must look pretty ridiculous," she said. "A woman in overalls and a t-shirt, a man in a three-piece suit, sitting together in the middle of a..." She waved an arm vaguely, unwilling to put a name to the scene.

*A dump.*

"I suppose we do look ridiculous," Kayne said, "but no one's around to see us. Besides,"—he helped Eve to her feet—"I wouldn't give a damn if half of Chicago had ringside seats. C'mon, let's get this tied up."

They walked back to his car under the clean, cheery face of a cloudless atmosphere. Kayne stopped, leaned against the passenger door and crossed his long legs. His shimmering midnight eyes contrasted starkly with the thinner blue of the encompassing sky.

"Now," he said, "it would help both you and us if you could provide the company with a household inventory, including values. And receipts to substantiate them."

Eve rolled her eyes, then put a hand to her forehead. "Mister Kayne, that's pretty nearly impossible. Look at that house." She swung an arm in its direction. "It's virtually a complete loss. Even if I did keep inventories and receipts and videos, which I generally don't, how in the world would I go about finding them? Besides—"

Kayne reached out and grabbed her flailing hand. Eve felt the words clog in her throat as soon as she felt his touch, looked into his eyes.

"Please," he said quietly but firmly, "just try. Do what you can. I'll do everything I can—believe me—but I can't help the way the company operates. I know you don't need this kind of hassle right now but it will expedite the processing of your claim."

Eve sighed. "All right. I might have some of those things in my safe deposit box."

Kayne gave her hand a small, encouraging squeeze before releasing it. Again, his finely shaped mouth seemed to struggle with a smile, as if unable to accommodate it.

Eve was mystified by his ambivalence. Compassion and humor were at once natural and alien to him. Why?

*Well, it's none of my business.*

"Will I be reimbursed for everything?" Eve asked. "I mean, will I be able to rebuild the house, replace what's been destroyed?"

"Umm..." Kayne ran a hand over the back of his neck. When he broke eye contact, Eve felt a nudge of alarm. "You don't have a replacement-cost policy," he said. "Your payment will be based on depreciated values."

Eve gaped at him. "B-but what...how am I—" She swallowed, trying to prevent another onslaught of tears. "I can't...I can't *afford* to make up the difference!"

Kayne still wasn't looking at her, as if he felt stricken with guilt. His cheeks puffed out and he expelled a breath. "It's your agent's fault. He should've—"

"Should have'," Eve repeated. "Well that's just dandy, isn't it, Mister Kayne—finding out *after* the fact what my dumbass agent *should've* done. Do you realize my loom alone—" Eve covered her face with her hands and tried to regain her composure. None of this was the adjuster's fault. When she looked up, Kayne was watching her with excruciating sympathy. "My loom is handmade," Eve explained, her voice quavering with restrained emotion. "It's...it's an excellent piece of craftsmanship—sturdy, precise, responsive. I bought it years ago, used, for a song. BroadShield will give me next to nothing for it just because it's old. I'll have to pay a small fortune to get a loom of that quality today."

Eve's face was pinched in despair and disbelief. She wanted to implore Kayne to do something. Weren't insurance companies supposed to be the saviors of the bereft? But he looked lost, helpless. "I'll never get my home back the way it was," she said, then turned and began shambling away from his car.

There were hurried, soggy footsteps at her back. Eve kept walking, almost blindly, until Kayne's hand closed on her bare arm.

"Listen," he said with breathless intensity, "it's going to be all right. I'll do everything I can." He forced her to face him. "Eve, I promise I'll help you."

There was enough voltage in Kayne's voice and manner, and especially in his use of her first name, to shock Eve out of her misery. "You don't have to promise me anything, Mister Kayne. This isn't your problem. I'll make it. I just feel...a little overwhelmed right now." Eve sniffled to keep her nose from running, then tried to muster a self-possessed smile.

"I know this has turned your life upside down," he said. "But yeah, you'll make it. With a little help from your friends."

*My friends are all as flat-broke as I am*, Eve thought, but her mind was too beleaguered to pursue the issue. Her head seemed to be filled with dandelion down and stinging nettles—a fuzzy nest concealing cruel barbs of anxiety. Vaguely, she wished she knew Jared Kayne better. He seemed so...dependable.

"Where can I get in touch with you?" he asked, prodding Eve out of her fog.

She shook her head. "God, I don't know. I haven't thought about it. I spent last night at a friend's house—"

"Will you be staying there?"

*With Alex?* "I doubt it. As a last resort, maybe, but I seriously doubt it."

"Why don't you give me that person's phone number," Kayne said, "and maybe another one where I can at least leave messages for you." He pulled a notepad and pen from his inside breastpocket. Eve recited Alex's and the Cookes' telephone numbers and Kayne wrote them down. "You know," he went on, "you're covered for loss of use. Why don't you check into a nearby motel? Better yet take a hotel room in Chicago and live it up for a while. Become Astra Sharpe, the decadent bohemian. Suck champagne and entertain hordes of flamboyant male artists."

"I don't think I'm in the mood," Eve murmured through a smile. "Besides, I prefer musicians to artists. They're more exciting."

Kayne's eyebrows rose. "Really? They're an ugly breed, if you ask me."

"No one's asking you. That's out of your milieu anyway."

The pen clicked as Kayne retracted it. "Yup, it sure the hell is." Still watching Eve, he returned pen and notepad to his pocket. "So are you going to take advantage of that coverage?"

Eve sighed, linked her hands on the top of her head and considered this option. "No," she said, dropping her arms and crossing them over her chest. "I can't imagine anything more depressing right now than living out of a suitcase in some sanitized, impersonal motel room."

"Why am I not surprised?" Kayne murmured. "You really should consider it though. Maybe you can find something more to your liking in the city."

Eve shook her head quite definitely. "I couldn't stand living in Chicago again. I've put in my time there. Besides it's too far to travel every day."

"Well what *are* you going to do then?"

Eve thought for a moment, then chuckled softly. "I told a friend that I should just bed down in the barn. That might not be such a bad idea."

Kayne stared at her. He looked appalled. "You must be joking."

"No, not at all." At that moment, five white leghorn pullets blundered out of the barn, squawking and fluttering their wings. They immediately began scratching at the damp grass. One pecked doggedly until it came up with a saturated redworm. "See?" Eve said, forcing a breezy tone. "I'll have plenty of company."

Kayne eyed the hens. He didn't seem to approve of their company as much as Eve did. "I suppose they all have names."

"Of course they do. They're good layers. They deserve individual identities."

"That must be Moonbeam," Kayne said in a lilting voice, pointing in the general direction of the chickens, "and that's Xanthe, and that's Serena –"

"Try, One, Two, Three, Four and Five," Eve said with a small laugh.

Kayne muttered something unintelligible that culminated in, "I don't believe it." He pulled off his suit coat, loosened his tie and undid the top two buttons of his shirt. "You can't live with five perpetually pooping, vermin-eating chickens in a leaking shell of a barn."

"Vermin eaters are good to have around." Eve couldn't dispute the pooping part. Those birds were crap *factories*. "Plus, chickens are very expressive and entertaining. They carry on quite eloquent conversations, you know. Before you diss their company, spend some time around them."

The force of Eve's chicken defense was dulled by her reaction to Kayne's partial and entirely innocent striptease. His vest and shirt fit him beautifully. They sheathed his body with enough snugness to reveal the firm, broad contours of his chest and shoulders. *What a gorgeous landscape that must be*, Eve thought. Her eyes fell to the base of his throat, now lightly glazed with sweat, and the V of skin exposed by his open shirt. Eve saw no hair, only the faint, topmost demarcation of his chest muscles, also misted...and *very* warm-looking.

She swallowed with difficulty as her eyes floundered back to Kayne's face. He, thank goodness, was rolling up his shirtsleeves, head downturned. Eve hoped he'd been too preoccupied to notice her indiscreet scrutiny.

God, what was happening to her? Kayne wasn't her type at all. He could be funny when he wasn't launching insults, kind when he wasn't being aloof. He could be an all-around regular guy when he wasn't being the quintessential professional, but...he *still* was not her type.

*I'm too vulnerable right now*, Eve thought. *I'm having trouble keeping things in pers –*

"I wish you'd reconsider."

Eve blinked rapidly, refocusing on Kayne's face. "Hm? I beg your pardon?"

He tossed his jacket into the car and put his hands on his hips. "I said, I wish for your own good that you'd reconsider. That rattletrap of a barn is no safe haven."

Another vehicle came slogging and grinding its way up the drive. Kayne gave it a cursory, over-the-shoulder glance and Eve's gaze took the opportunity to stray again. It flickered back over his chest, then down his veined and cabled forearms. Their coverlet of hair, surprisingly dark and fine, glowed sweetly in the sun.

"Well I've got to hit the road." Kayne turned back to Eve. "This is going to be a long day."

"Thanks for your..." Eve paused. The word *help* didn't seem quite accurate or adequate enough. "Help," she concluded. "I'll get to work on that inventory and get in touch with you."

Kayne handed her a business card just as the new visitor—it was Alex, Eve saw—parked his truck. "My home phone number is on there, too. Don't hesitate to use it. Call collect. If I don't hear from you *soon*—"

His statement was aborted by the approach of Alex, a lanky, slouching man of thirty-two whose red hair had been chop-cut...by himself, obviously. Eve thought he looked like his head was on fire.

Alex circled Kayne's car. "Hey, dollface, got your insurance squared away?"

"More or less," Eve muttered. "Or maybe I should say, more less than more."

Kayne gave her a look of shame mingled with mild resentment, as if she'd just branded him a villain. Eve immediately regretted her sarcasm. Alex, smiling pleasantly, stopped beside her and circled an arm around her waist.

"Alex," she said, "this is Mister Kayne, the adjuster. Mister Kayne, Alexander Maximillian Orlovsky the Third."

Kayne's right eyebrow hitched up when he heard Alex's name, and the tiniest of wry smiles danced at one corner of his mouth. "You must be one of Miz Kendrick's artist friends."

Alex, Eve noticed, was eyeing the adjuster with growing curiosity as they shook hands. "Uh, yeah. Probably her *best* friend. I'm hoping she'll stay with me until she gets back on her feet. How'd you know I'm an artist?"

"Oh...just a hunch. Excuse me, Mister Orlovsky, but I've got to run." Kayne went to the other side of his car and opened the door. "You know," he said to Eve, "that barn isn't really so terrible. And those chickens probably do make excellent company." With a minute shift of the eyes he glanced at Alex, then slipped behind the steering wheel.

Eve sucked in her cheeks and stared at her feet as Kayne drove away. Why he didn't want her to stay with Alex was as much a mystery as why she felt flattered. She liked Kayne. She actually God-knows-why liked him.

"Evie," Alex said, "how does that guy spell his last name?"

She shrugged. "Beats me. I suppose it's C-A...oh wait." Eve fished the business card from the front pocket of her bibs and read, "K-A-Y-N-E."

Alex was rubbing his long chin and staring off at an angle. "Can't be," he mumbled, then scowled and waved a hand. "Nah."

"What can't be? What are you talking about?"

"That adjuster." Alex jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "He looks familiar." Shaking his head, Alex added, "Actually, he kind of looks like the Pirate King."

## Chapter Three

Eve laughed. “*Who?* Alex, that man ain’t no pirate and he ain’t no king and, besides, where on Earth would you have met him anyway? He’s probably five or six years older than you so you couldn’t have gone to high school or college together. And, let’s face it, you and he travel in entirely different circles.”

“I didn’t say I met him,” Alex corrected, still musing. “I just said he looked familiar. Someone I might’ve seen before.” He finally gave up the game and tossed his hands in the air. “Oh well, not important. Let’s go sit down and you can fill me in on what happened with Mister Kayne. I get the feeling you kind of took a shine to him. Then you can give me the grand tour.”

Eve kicked a vulnerable bottle of mustard. “Alex, you know I never ‘take a shine’ to suits with heads.”

Alex gave her a tight-lipped, skeptical look. “There’s a first time for everything.”

“No, not everything.” But what *did* happen with Kayne? Eve wondered. The thought unsettled her because it was linked too tightly in her mind with seeing him again. And *that* was linked too tightly with—

“Oh sweet mystery of life, at last I’ve found you,” Alex warbled as they neared the house.

Eve shot him a mortified look that dwindled into simple embarrassment. Damn if he hadn’t tapped into her thoughts.

“And your name is havoc,” Alex concluded. He eyed the house with disapproval, as if some inept carpenter were responsible for this bad piece of work. “Sometimes Mother Nature is a pure bitch,” he muttered. “I’m really sorry, Evie.”

“I am too.”

They extricated a couple of chairs, nicked and soiled but still serviceable. Alex set them carefully on the lawn as if he were organizing furniture for a garden party. The chickens followed suit. They perched on an overturned sun umbrella near a corner of the barn and seemed as content as they’d ever been.

Eve was again struck by the absurdity of the scene—especially when Alex, the picture of urbanity, crossed his legs and lit a long, slender cigarette. She felt like Alice at the Mad Tea-Party. “*Have some wine,*” the March Hare said...

“So,” Alex mumbled around his smoke rings, “how is BroadShield going to rip you off?”

Eve recounted the adjuster’s visit, prompting Alex to fly into a diatribe aimed at the evil wiles of profiteering insurance companies. Eve merely sat back, as she always did when he got windy, and nodded whenever Alex seemed to expect her concurrence.

In all fairness, Eve had to admit that he'd mellowed out some since moving to the country. But their bizarre former romance, she knew, would never be rekindled. It was a quaint and colorful bit of history, like the court of Louis XIV, and was destined to remain such.

They'd met while Eve was going to night school for her master's. Alex, who'd just gotten his, was teaching sculpting in the same building. They'd quite literally run into each other at the coffee machine. He was a really strange bird then, eccentric as all hell, and seemed to be aping Salvador Dali. He dressed entirely in black, sported a pencil-thin mustache almost too pale to discern and had a blaze of hair barely restrained in the back by a black satin ribbon.

Eve and Alex enjoyed an appropriately bohemian relationship—innumerable trips to art galleries and museums and theaters, long discussions over pitchers of sangria, soirées with other folk of culture and erudition. It had been wonderfully exciting at first. But then Eve began to notice how often Alex repeated himself, how he enjoyed hearing the sound of his own voice, how he delighted in his strutting and posturing to the point where he began to take them seriously. Alexander Maximillian Orlovsky III wasn't even his real name. His real name was Arnie Schimper and his father had been an auto worker in Kenosha. What had initially been stimulating about Alex became predictable and tedious. Eve still thought he was a dear man—colorful and even-tempered and always there to lend a helping hand, however bumbling—but too much about him no longer rang true. Eve had simply outgrown their youthful charade.

Alex was the first of them to defect from the teaching profession. He'd done so just before he and Eve “officially” broke up, as she was preparing for her stay in Door County. But they'd remained friends. Alex, in fact, was instrumental in finding the Beckworth place for Eve. It was just four miles from his own farmette—which the tornado, thanks to those perverse weather gods, had skipped right over.

“You know what I think?” Alex had said while he was helping Eve move in. “I think in your crinoline heart of hearts you want to be courted and won...by some gorgeous, gallant soul in a white Mercedes. I think you want to be the perfect wife and mom. I think you want to live in the suburbs and eat shrimp Pierre—broiled on a state-of-the-art gas grill, of course—with artichokes a la Grecque on Super Bowl Sunday.”

Laughing, Eve had replied, “You only got parts of that right...and I won't tell you which parts.”

Now, Alex concluded his tirade. He let his cigarette drop into the tall grass where it glowed like a malevolent insect eye. After cracking his knuckles, he rose and stretched.

Eve's thoughts drifted back to the present. “I don't think I want to leave this chair,” she said. The alternative was to walk around, face the desolation yet again, discover more heart-wrenching losses that might never be recouped.

Alex extended a hand to help her up. “Stiff upper lip,” he said in a crisp English accent. “Never say die and all that crap.”

Eve slid him a sour look. “Sure, sure. You don't live here.”



"And you *barely* do."

Eve didn't need to be reminded.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jared Kayne didn't return home until nearly seven o'clock that evening. He hadn't eaten anything since breakfast and his stomach kept telling him so, but there just hadn't been time. Besides, he didn't have much of an appetite today.

He parked his car in the driveway and sat there for a while, staring at his modernistic house. It had been designed by a student of Frank Lloyd Wright. As if privileged through its heritage, it hadn't been touched by last night's storm. Jared crossed his arms on the steering wheel and rested his chin on them. There he was, insured to the teeth with no need to be. And there was Eve Kendrick, insured maybe to the knees and her need was so great.

His coworkers all had a standard glib response to such inequities—*Hey, who said life is fair?*

Bone-weary, Jared grabbed his briefcase and got out of the car. This was inarguably the worst day he'd had since becoming an adjuster some three years ago. He just wasn't able to steel himself against all the sorrow and desperation he'd encountered. He felt beaten and drained.

And he couldn't shake Eve Kendrick's image from his mind.

After tossing his briefcase in a corner of the foyer, Jared went straight to his bedroom to change. He *hated* wearing suits but it was part of an appearance package. Ever since he'd gotten into the "industry", he'd had to work hard at becoming a certain kind of person.

Jared caught his reflection in the dresser mirror as he peeled off his vest and tie. Truth be told, he didn't like that person very much but it was what both his company and customers expected. A more important truth be told, it was also a *safe* way to be. He didn't have to give of himself or reveal too much of himself. He just had to be moderately courteous and highly efficient and pay attention to detail.

Jared chuckled at the realization. He could just as well have become a doorman—same psychological and emotional benefits without the hassles.

Hassles like Eve Kendrick.

The sight of his naked body in the mirror reminded Jared of how Eve had looked at him. He smiled. Once in a while, between their sparring bouts and her private lapses into despair, he'd either caught or sensed her studying him...and not altogether critically.

Jared felt a prickle of gooseflesh and a deeper, more disturbing change in his body. Ms. Kendrick would be a hassle, all right. But it was a hassle he didn't exactly shun.

That worried him.

Jared grabbed a pair of faded jeans and a blue velour pullover from his dresser and headed for the bathroom to shower. He'd start out, as usual, with scorching water and then gradually turn the temperature down until the cold was almost numbing. Then he'd jump out and vigorously dry himself with a thick, coarse towel. Best therapy in the world, next to music and –

Jared got under the spray of water, unwilling to complete that thought. It was tied, however tenuously, to Eve Kendrick.

He soaped his body, trying to cleanse himself of the residue of ruin as well as those untoward fantasies about a certain policyholder. But he couldn't help recalling his first glimpse of Eve or the subsequent time they spent together.

Jared had known immediately that she wasn't...well...*typical*. She was insanely pretty, for one thing, standing there against the sky and fields, her hair a tattered cloud of gold, her body proud and erect and yet somehow delicate—delicate as a stalk of wheat, even in those outsized Oshkosh B'Gosh overalls. Jared had forced himself to feign consternation over his muddied car and shoes. He couldn't very well gape at the woman. He couldn't just glide up to her and sweep her into his arms.

But he'd sure as hell wanted to.

That disconcerting impulse at first made him stand-offish. He fell back on his professionalism with a vengeance. But his aloofness was doomed. Eve's presence just couldn't be ignored.

At some point during his visit, Jared realized that Eve reminded him of certain people he knew and cherished some years ago, before his world split open. She made him feel good. So Jared, however unconsciously, decided to return the favor—he wanted to make *her* feel good. He tried teasing Eve out of her misery. If he couldn't make her laugh, he figured, he could at least make her spark.

To his delight, she'd done both...and then some.

The shower was suddenly spitting out cold water like toothpicks made of ice. Jared yowled and jumped from the tub. His hand must have slipped while he was daydreaming. Shivering, he grabbed a towel and buffed himself pink. His hands stilled as he glimpsed his reflection again, little more than a tall ghost behind the mirror's fog. Letting the towel fall to the floor, Jared slowly reached across the vanity and rubbed the condensation from the glass. He straightened and stood before it, appraising himself.

Women still noticed him—not as much as in the old days, but that was an entirely different situation. He was a kind of celebrity then, not a mild-mannered insurance adjuster who tried his damndest to fade into the woodwork.

"You can't judge a book by its three-piece cover," Jared murmured. He lifted his chin, struck a bodybuilder pose and flexed several prominent muscles. Then he broke into laughter and collapsed against the wall.

He glanced into the mirror again. Even though he was a thirty-eight-year-old pillar of society now, shined and sheared and deodorized, he was still a damned fine

specimen. Six feet, two-and-one-half inches tall, hard-muscled and slender, good-looking in both a weathered and boyish way.

Satisfied, Jared pulled on his jeans and shirt. By the time he'd finished dressing, a small, thoughtful frown had replaced his smile. He leaned over the vanity, met his own gaze in the mirror and shook a reproachful finger at it.

"Okay Kayne, something's goin' on here," he scolded, narrowing his eyes. "Why do you suddenly give a damn how well you're aging?"

The answer came to him in a two-word flash—*Eve Kendrick*.

He straightened, his frown deepening. *Why? Why* her?

That was no mystery, either. Eve was bright and courageous and independent. She was perceptive, too, and her observations had amazed and delighted him. Even the woman's impudence made Jared respect her. It was a sign of her resilience as well as a sense of humor.

All those qualities, in addition to Eve's physical appeal, had chipped away at his defenses while he was with her. But what finally did him in and laid his heart bare was Eve's vulnerability. Jared couldn't help but respond to it. He knew any real sensitivity on his part was one huge mistake—not quite a breach of conduct but certainly a tactical error—yet, his human instincts had overridden his professional judgment. Without knowing it, Eve had undermined his detachment, blown his cover.

Jared sighed. He scrambled his hair with his fingers then pushed it back from his face. He wanted very much to see Eve again.

*Idiotic notion...* Jared grunted and stalked out of the bathroom. They were two entirely different people. Eve belonged with men like that artist with the phony name. Jared couldn't be like that—not anymore. He couldn't afford to be. His free-spirit days were long gone. Pursuing Eve Kendrick, a.k.a. Astra Sharpe, would be purely self-destructive. He'd end up tearing down the whole secure, risk-free environment he'd built for himself over the past three years. And she probably wouldn't accept him—hell, probably wouldn't even *like* him very much—unless he did change.

Jared moved down the hallway, its polished maple floorboards creaking beneath his bare feet. At the end of the hall he pushed open a pair of French doors, stirring their red sheer curtains, and stepped into a room without carpeting or furniture. The setting sun had lit the space with neon. Shellfish tones of pinkish orange glowed on the black and white marble floor tiles, on the curtainless windows and white walls. Jared closed the doors behind him.

Forever accepting, she sat in the middle of the room, glittering like a gilded princess, waiting for him. She was the one thing that could blot everything from his mind. Eagerly, he went to her.

\* \* \* \* \*

After coaxing the pump into operation, Eve washed up and brushed her teeth—a bracing experience, considering the temperature of the water. Then she picked her way across the yard, following the narrow path made by the flashlight beam. She could see the barn fifty yards away, an imposing, angular hulk tintured blue here and there by the moon’s soft glow. It didn’t look very inviting.

She was too tired to care about its worthiness as an inn. With Alex’s help, Eve had spent all day moving whatever was salvageable from the house into the barn’s upper floor. Her muscles ached ferociously but at least she’d taken the first step toward putting her life back in order. It gave her a sense of accomplishment, a feeling that she was regaining control.

And the outbuildings, Eve had discovered gratefully, were still in pretty good shape. The largest one—an old machine shop, which she used as a studio and which contained, therefore, most of her materials and equipment—had lost one window. At least she’d be able to keep working. Only the outhouse had been blown away completely. It was the one loss Eve didn’t mourn. That dilapidated, weed-choked anachronism had finally been catapulted into the halls of history where it belonged.

From what she and Alex had observed, they deduced the tornado had come roaring through the fields behind Eve’s property. It knocked off the latrine and battered the house, then rose up into the air again, kicking at the silo’s dome as it did so. After that it whirled away, high off the ground.

Eve stubbed her toe on something, root or rock, and cursed. The sound of her voice was a shock in the nighttime stillness. She limped on and finally made out the open barn door, a huge black maw waiting to swallow her up.

Eve paused, suddenly tempted to take Alex up on his offer. Did she really want to set up housekeeping in a potentially rat and bat infested barn? Wouldn’t Alex’s seven-foot couch be preferable to a heap of straw?

Then Eve remembered that her resident tomcat, one she called Phantom because she rarely saw him, was one of the world’s best mousers. And the only trace of bats she’d ever seen was in a far corner of the hayloft. These comforting facts strengthened her resolve. As much as she enjoyed Alex’s company on occasion, she’d go stark raving mad if she had to live with the man. Besides, she didn’t want to give him any ideas.

Fortified by these realizations, Eve took a deep breath, squared her shoulders and marched into the fathomless darkness. She was greeted by the mingled odors of age-old manure and damp earth, musty grain, rotted wood. In the inky distance a chicken squawked, obviously roused from its snooze. Eve moved on cautiously until the flashlight illuminated the “bed” she’d made up earlier in the day.

*Not so bad*, she thought. Alex had fetched a few amenities for her, so a thick sleeping bag covered the straw and a sheet and blanket covered the sleeping bag. There were pillows too, and an overturned crate to serve as a nightstand. Atop it stood a travel alarm clock, a pitcher of water, a drinking glass and a small bag of toiletries.

*Not so bad at all.*

As her eyes adjusted to the darkness, Eve could make out the vague lines of milking stalls and feed troughs and various pieces of livestock equipment, decrepit with age and disuse. The moonlight made a silvery pattern of lines and dots as it filtered through gaps in the barn boards. Feeling more at ease now, she stripped down to her panties and t-shirt and climbed onto her bed. It was surprisingly comfortable. Eve linked her hands behind her head and stared up into the cathedral vastness of the barn. As exhausted as her body was, her mind still ticked on. There was so much to plan...

Then why in hell was she thinking about Jared Kayne?

Eve shifted her legs and the straw rustled. She saw his face, inches above hers, smiling. She felt his arms around her, felt the warm toughness of his chest beneath her cheek. She smelled his soapy and smoky aroma, so heady and compelling.

A soft moan escaped Eve's throat and she rolled over on her side. One of the chickens gurbled in response. Eve liked and appreciated Kayne—that was fine; he was a very capable man—but she couldn't justify any attraction to him. It was like...hell, it was like Cyndi Lauper being attracted to Clark Kent. Eve grimaced at the analogy and turned over again.

*Yeah but who was Clark Kent's alter ego?*

The image of Kayne unbuttoning his shirt zinged into her mind. Eve recalled the soft throb of his pulse at the base of his throat. She felt herself being soothed and gladdened by his unexpected smiles, mesmerized by the rich color of his eyes.

Eve clapped her palms to her temples. That she found Kayne sexually magnetic was appalling to her. He represented everything she'd escaped from—unquestioning acceptance of authority, mindless adherence to rules and regulations, suppression of individuality, tangles of red tape. Kayne was a man stuck in a rut and reluctant to leave it. He thrived on routines. He was, for crying out loud, an insurance company clone!

Eve flipped over yet again and squeezed her eyes shut. Why was she having so much trouble convincing herself of those things? Why did an inner voice keep telling her that Kayne was far more complicated than she cared to admit, that his conservative lifestyle was only—

Something creaked sharply far over her head. Eve's eyes flew open. Her lungs froze in midbreath. There was a low, rasping groan, the leaden rattle of a heavy chain...and silence. Then, suddenly, a lunatic volley of clanking sounds.

Eve yelped in fright and threw a pillow over her head. You're being childish, she told herself. You're like a kid who needs a nightlight.

The silence returned.

*Stupidly chi—*

Footsteps moved through the barn door—a few tentative, crunching strides.

*Omigod!*

Eve cemented herself into absolute stillness, not even daring to breathe. Through the space beneath her pillow she saw a dusty beacon sweep over the opposite side of the barn.

A looter? Or someone more sinister and dangerous?

"Miz Kendrick?"

Puzzled, Eve remained quiet a few seconds longer. Then, frowning, she pulled the pillow from her head. A looter or rapist would hardly be that polite.

"Eve?"

"Who...who is it?"

An exhalation of relief sounded near the doorway. "Jared Kayne."

Eve's bottled-up breath came out in spasms. "Mister Kayne?" she echoed in disbelief. Her heart began to jig, but not from fear.

"Yes. Where are you?"

"About...fifteen paces to your left. Near the wall." The light beam swung in her direction. "What are you doing here?"

Jared was careful to keep his light trained on the floor. He didn't know where the hell he was setting his feet down or where exactly Eve was. "I figured you might be pigheaded enough to stay here." The light beam cut across a pile of straw, the edge of a blanket. *She's a gutsy lady*, he thought with a smile.

Eve seemed to sit up. Jared's eyes strained to define her form in the darkness. The light beam crawled up her lap, then sliced to one side.

Jared paused, jolted by the small explosion beneath his rib cage. The aftershock tingled through his arms and legs, lodging for an unsettling moment in his groin. His light, inching up the pile of straw and bedding, had found something he hadn't planned on seeing – a pink t-shirt sumptuously filled out by Eve's unfettered breasts.

"Mister Kayne," Eve said, "I don't know what you think you can do for me –"

"I heard you scream a little while ago." Jared dropped to his knees beside the straw. "That alone made me think I could do something for you."

"I just heard some noises...in the hayloft," Eve explained. "I'm sure it was nothing. But you still haven't told me why you came here."

Jared's gaze glided over her face. She looked dead tired. "I was worried about you."

Tentatively, Eve reached out, then withdrew her hand. "Do you, uh, make a habit of checking up on all your crisis victims?"

"Only the ones foolish enough to sleep in old barns," Jared said with a smile, "and get straw in their hair." He gently pulled a stalk from Eve's, his fingers playing for a moment with the golden strands.

He saw Eve close her eyes and swallow before she spoke. "I can take care of myself, Mister Kayne."

"Will you please start calling me Jared so I won't feel so damned presumptuous about calling you Eve?"

"All right. Jared, *leave*."

He sat down, crooking his arms around his knees. "Nope."

Eve stared at him in complete bafflement. "In case you've had a memory lapse, let me remind you that this is still my property."

"You are taking a considerable and unnecessary risk by staying in this barn," Jared reminded her. He looked around at the cobwebbed chunks of shadow. "This place hasn't seen a lick of maintenance in years. The tornado certainly weakened the superstructure. What if another big storm comes along? One good blast of wind, and you might wake up some morning with the roof around your ears and the silo at your feet—if you wake up at all."

"You didn't seem to think it was such a bad place when you left here today." Eve's tone was unmistakably sarcastic.

Jared studied his intertwined fingers as he felt heat rise in his cheeks. "I was being facetious," he murmured. "Obviously I'd rather see you stay with What's-his-name than end up in the hospital."

Eve pursed her lips and toyed with the blanket. "I can't deny your argument makes sense," she admitted—a bit resentfully, Kayne thought. "But the fact remains, 'What's-his-name' is not an option, my parents are in New Mexico, the people in town have their own housing problems and my other friends live too far away. So I have to take my chances."

Kayne, who still had his eyes averted from Eve's thinly clad body, felt a surge of tenderness dappled with excitement. Then he rose to his knees. Emboldened by what seemed like an eminently logical plan, he braced his hands on the straw next to Eve's body. "I'm not leaving until—"

A thud reverberated through the barn, followed by hollow clatterings and clankings. Jared jumped at the sound just as Eve let out a clipped scream...

And suddenly, shockingly, her arms were around him, her face burrowing into his neck. Jared moaned in unexpected pleasure as he felt Eve's breath pulse against his skin. His arms curled around her back and he nuzzled her hair.

"I'll go check it out," he whispered.

He couldn't have said more, because the press of Eve's full, loose breasts was paralyzing him. Her nipples hardened against his chest and Jared had a wild urge to rip off her t-shirt and fondle her.

He moaned again, struggling for restraint, and felt Eve's heartbeat quicken rather than slow. Their breath was beginning to saw erratically through the trilling of the crickets. Eve's hand moved to the back of his head and up into his hair. "Yes," she sighed. And then, simultaneously and hungrily, their mouths glided together.

## Chapter Four

"Jared?"

The hoarse, frantic whisper jerked him out of his fantasy. He felt his face regather around attentiveness. Eve hadn't even come close to flinging herself at him. She sat stiff and alert on the makeshift bed, her hands gripping the blanket instead of curling seductively through his hair. The discomfiting tightness of his jeans was the only bit of reality in the whole scenario.

"That's the sound I heard before," Eve told him.

Jared struggled to come out of his daze. "I'll go check it out," he said, realizing his voice sounded flat. He hoped Eve wouldn't assume he was unmoved by her fear.

She touched his arm. "Maybe you shouldn't bother. It's probably nothing."

"I don't mind, really."

"Then I'll come with you. I know my way around this barn a lot better than you do."

"I'll figure it out," Jared murmured, reaching for his lantern.

"No." Eve grabbed his arm.

Jared's gaze flew up to hers. He felt a sizzle of electricity as soon as their eyes met.

"I...I don't want you breaking any bones on my property," Eve said with an unsteady smile.

Jared's smile was just as unsteady. "Damn, foiled again. I was hoping I could stage an accident and get rich off the settlement. Don't forget, lady," —he winked at her— "I know how much liability coverage you have."

Laughing, Eve began to peel the covers back then abruptly stopped. "Would you, uh, hand me my overalls, please?"

Jared felt himself blush like a schoolboy. *Shit*, he thought, *she's probably wearing nothing but panties beneath that blanket*. He glanced around, saw a denim heap on the floor and picked it up as if it were a satin gown. Regarding him, Eve reached out to take the overalls. Jared quickly delivered them into her hand, jacked himself to his feet, and turned away.

"For a man who's been married, you're awfully shy around partially dressed women."

"Just respecting your modesty, madam." Jared heard the crackling of the straw beneath Eve's body. Although amplified by the silent immensity of the barn, it became a teasingly sensual, intimate sound. He moved away from it by a few safe paces. *She must think I'm one inhibited wimp*.



"Am I tickling your tender sensibilities, Mister Kayne?"

Clearly she was teasing him. Jared found it both enticing and irksome. "My sensibilities aren't all that tender, believe me. I just know when to be a gentleman."

"Is that so? By the way, I'm dressed now."

Jared turned and saw Eve stretch. She clambered up from her bed, grabbed her flashlight, and walked to where Kayne was standing.

"Lead the way," he said, making a sweeping gesture.

Eve minced out of the barn and back into the yard as Jared followed. She led him up a small rise to the back of the barn and approached wide, double doors. He circled in front of her and pulled them open. Their lights scoured the barn's second story.

"I see you got the house cleaned out," he said.

"Mm-hm, with Alex's help. We used his truck."

"Oh. Well, that's good." The statement wasn't absolutely sincere, and Jared felt irritated with himself for resenting Alex's aid. Eve certainly needed it.

They stepped inside and moved carefully in different directions. The spacious area had become a cramped warren of furniture and other household goods.

"Seems you pulled everything out," Jared said. The space looked like a furniture infirmary. He stopped beside a bashed cedar chest and felt a wash of sadness. The pieces of a life were in here, lovingly gathered and protected. "Some of this stuff is pretty well done-for, Eve."

"I know." She stopped and let her gaze roam over the remnants of her possessions. "But I just couldn't bring myself to pitch it all. Maybe...maybe some of these things can be fixed."

She sounded so pathetically hopeful that Jared wanted to go to her, hold her again, promise her she wouldn't be let down. He was bemused by this guardian angel impulse—it was certainly out of character. "Well, let's go find the lurker in the hayloft."

Eve angled up her flashlight until its beam struck a wooden ladder. Hesitating, she looked over her shoulder at Kayne. "Want to go first?"

He smiled, indulging her timidity, then ambled up to her. "Well it *was* my idea."

Givng Eve a thumbs-up, he began climbing the ladder to the hayloft. She waited until he'd finished his ascent before starting hers. Below them, something scurried through what might have been old newspapers. A shiver snaked through Jared's body.

He poked along and soon found the source of the disturbance. "Eureka!" he shouted, turning to look for Eve. He stood with one hand resting on the open hay door. "C'mere. This should make you feel better."

Hoisting herself onto the hayloft, Eve scraped past a stack of bales and hurried toward Kayne's light. Dust drifted like tarnished glitter around her shadowy form. He stood with one hand resting on the open hay door, unable to take his eyes off her.

"Listen," Jared said. He pulled the door toward him—it grated and creaked mournfully. He jerked it with more force and a ponderous, thudding rattle broke the silence. "See? There's a length of heavy chain draped over the door. And that other noise—" Jared shoved the door all the way back. The clanking sound was startlingly repeated. "A metal box of some kind, sitting against the wall. Didn't you know it was here?"

Eve let out a sigh of relief that ended in a chuckle. "I forgot about it. I guess my imagination was too busy conjuring Marley's ghost." She hugged herself, probably against the night chill. "God, this place gets spooky after dark."

Jared strolled over to Eve and put an arm around her shoulders. "Another reason why you shouldn't be staying here. You won't get any sleep."

Eve looked up at him, her eyes shimmering in the moonlight. "I'm fine now. Really, Jared." She put her hand to his cheek. "Thank you...again."

Jared's smile faltered. He impulsively covered Eve's hand with his own then slid it to his mouth, pressing his lips to the base of her thumb. "You're more than welcome," he whispered against her palm.

*Why am I doing this to myself?*

Eve moved away from him and walked to the small, square door. "It's...it's a beautiful view in the daylight," she mumbled. "Makes you think you can see...well, maybe not forever but at least all the way to Iowa."

Jared saw Eve lightly stroke the spot on her hand where he'd kissed her. It was stupid of him to have done that, stupid and grossly presumptuous. He shouldn't have even come here in the first place. Now Eve must *really* feel put off by him. She'd never consider his offer.

"The view is beautiful even now," Jared said, his gaze slipping down the length of Eve's body. She looked so lovely to him just then, silhouetted against the infinite expanse of farmland, her winsome form outlined in phosphorescent moonlight.

*But she's the wrong woman for me. She hates my life and everything it stands for.* Still, he couldn't help feeling protective of her. "Eve, please don't stay here," he urged. "It isn't safe."

She wheeled around. Her face was drawn with strain. Lack of sleep had carved hollows beneath her eyes. "Don't you understand? I don't have anywhere else to go!"

"Yes you do."

Eve leaned her head against the door and closed her eyes. She seemed so sick and tired of the whole issue, of this whole no-win situation. "I will not stay with Alex. Now quit trying to be a one-man Red Cross, Jared, and just go home."

"I will. If you come with me."

Eve lifted her head and gaped at him in bewilderment. "Come with you...where?"

"Back to my place." Jared's heart was skipping but he held Eve's astonished gaze. "I live eighteen miles east of here, and I have enough room for —"

"That's out of the question," Eve said, turning away from him. She appeared shaken. "We don't even *know* each other."

Undaunted, Jared took a few steps toward her. "Listen, Eve, I don't have any ulterior motives. You're in a jam and I feel bad about it, that's all. I don't make it a practice to put up homeless women just so I can seduce them. Believe it or not, I don't have to resort to phony charm to find female companionship. I'm all set on that front." *Since when?*

"Well how nice for you," Eve snapped, then seemed embarrassed by her outburst. "But that's not what I was implying."

Jared watched her, his curiosity piqued by her behavior. Nervously, Eve's hands played along a support timber. A sliver must have rammed into her finger, because she uttered a muted curse and held her hand up to her eyes.

"I have more than enough space," Jared pressed on, "so you wouldn't be intruding. I'm not a pest so I'd certainly respect your privacy. I'm gone much of the time anyway. Everything in the house would be at your disposal." He paused, studying Eve's face to gauge her reaction. It was difficult to make out in the gloom. "So tell me if you have some objection I haven't covered."

"Isn't it obvious?"

"No, it isn't at all obvious." *Who're you kidding, Kayne?*

Eve must've known damned well he was attracted to her, all his honorable reassurances aside. Jared suddenly felt shamefully transparent. Still, he truly believed—no, he *knew*—that he had no intention of acting on that attraction.

"Jared, your invitation is very generous, very kind. I know you're trying to be charitable. But I...I just don't know you well enough to accept it. I'd feel I was taking advantage of you, getting in your way."

"I think the opposite is true," he said with a rueful smile. "You're a very self-sufficient lady, Miz Kendrick, and you're probably convinced *I'd* get in *your* way. You just plain don't want to live with someone, anyone, no matter what the terms." *But you especially don't want to be that close to me.*

Eve shrugged. "You could be right. In any case, I respectfully decline your offer." She smiled self-consciously and dipped into a deferential bow. "Thanks anyway."

Jared threw up his hands, then slid them into his pockets. "Okay, I tried. I'm not going to pressure you. But the offer stands." He picked up his electric lantern and switched it on. After taking a few steps toward the ladder, he paused. "By the way, I, uh...only kissed your hand because—" Jared's thoughts faltered. How was he going to talk his way out of *this* one? He cleared his throat and started over, feeling Eve's keen attention press at his back. "I kissed your hand because—"

"Because it was there," Eve said, obviously to bail him out.

"Yeah. Because it was there." *Shit, I have to get out of here. She's driving me crazy. "See ya."*

Jared took another step. But suddenly his foot wasn't *on* the floor, it was going *through* the floor. He pitched forward, growling in surprise and pain, as two halves of a broken floorboard trapped his ankle between jagged wooden teeth. The lantern sprang from his hand and tumbled into the darkness below the hayloft.

"Jared!" Eve bounded over to him and dropped to her knees.

"There's my lawsuit," he gasped. "Maybe I can retire...before I'm forty. Damn!" Pain wound around his ankle like barbed wire.

"Shut up about lawsuits," Eve said, trying to pry the boards away, "or I'll shove your other foot through and leave you here as rat food."

Grimacing, Jared twisted his head to look at her. "God, you've got a vindictive streak. Grisly imagination, too. A regular...female Stephen King."

"Will you just be quiet and lie still!" Eve carefully broke away the sharpest spikes of splintered wood, then worked on loosening the boards again. "Now don't move your foot until I say it's all right."

"What is wrong with this picture?" Jared grated. Grain dust got in his mouth and clung to his lips. He spat, trying to dislodge it. "I'll tell you what's wrong. The woman is the one who trips and falls. The woman is the one who sprains her ankle and bruises her shins and needs help getting up again."

"Kayne, you're talking like a jerk." Eve wrenched another piece of wood away from his leg. "If you don't watch your mouth I *will* leave you here." One of the boards screeched as its nails began to give.

"Seriously," Jared said. "Think about every monster movie you've ever seen. Hollywood thinks," —he inadvertently turned his foot and groaned— "that's part...of the natural order of things." Panting, he dropped his head to his arms.

"In case you haven't noticed, Jack, this ain't Hollywood. *Dammit*, you've got big feet."

"The better to walk on water with."

Grudgingly, Eve grinned. "You mean, the better to walk through floors with."

"That too."

Grunting with effort, Eve snapped one of the offending boards downward. It dangled for a moment before plummeting to the floor below. Carefully grasping Jared's calf, she eased his foot up and out of the widened hole. "Now turn over, slowly, and try to sit up."

Jared did so. Pain zigzagged through his ankle, sending side-shoots as high up as his thigh. He gritted his teeth.

"It doesn't seem to be broken," Eve said, gently probing the afflicted area. "Doesn't even feel swollen...yet. But you *could* have a chip fracture." She sat back on her haunches and drew a hand over her forehead. "Unbelievable. You come here because you're worried about me, and you're the one who gets hurt."

"That's justice for you." Jared leaned back, bracing his hands on the floor, and watched Eve watch him. "What do you suggest we do now? I don't think I can climb down that ladder—not at the moment, anyway."

"I've already deduced that. But I don't have a clue where my cell phone is—could be in the damned septic tank, for all I know. I'll just have to drive to the nearest working phone and get an ambulance over here."

Jared raised a hand in protest. "Whoa, wait a minute. That's a little too drastic. First of all, one does not call an ambulance for someone with a twisted ankle—especially after a disaster. How much sleep do you think those local EMTs have gotten lately?"

"I told you, you could have a frac—"

"It's twisted," Jared said, closing the issue. "Second, you're so tired you're ready to drop. So am I, for that matter."

"Well for crying out loud, Kayne, I can't very well sling you over my shoulder and carry you down that ladder myself!" Obviously beginning to feel frustrated, Eve picked up a handful of hay and threw it down.

"Of course you can't," he agreed. "What I'd like to do—with your permission, of course—is cuddle up to one of these bales of hay and wait for the sandman."

Eve rolled her head back and sighed. "Well...I guess that *is* the most logical course of action. Short of x-rays, only time will tell how badly your ankle is injured. The best thing right now would be to keep your leg elevated and immobile." She peered in the direction of Jared's foot. "How does it feel?"

"How does what feel? My ankle, or being reduced to begging for shelter in a hayloft?" Jared flashed her a taunting smile.

Eve stood up and gave him a disgruntled look. "Your ankle." She began to pull hay from the bales and gather it into a pile, similar to her bed of straw below.

Jared gingerly rotated his foot. "Better, thanks. That knife inside there seems to be dulling."

"I'll wet a rag at the pump so you'll at least have a cold compress. I think I have some aspirin, too." Eve stood still and absently scratched her forehead.

"What's the matter?"

"Umm..." Still looking perplexed, Eve finally dropped her hand to her hip. "Jared...I, uh...well, there's a problem."

He tensed. "What problem?"

"Well...the air is getting pretty damned nippy and I have a shortage of blankets, so it looks like we'll have to," —Eve helplessly turned up a hand—"sleep together."

He suddenly became very alert. "What was that?"

"You heard me!" Eve barked. She covered her face with her hands for a moment. "I'm sorry. It's just that this is so...unorthodox. I mean, there's not enough bedding for both of us, so the only solution is —"

"To share it."

"Right."

They brooded on in silence. Jared saw how distraught Eve was and immediately regretted his well-intentioned meddling. Now he was nothing but a burden and a nuisance to her, and she already had enough of those to last a year.

"Eve, I don't need any bedding. The hay's just fine. I can cover myself with it as well as lie on it. Go back down and get some sleep."

"Oh Jared, I can't do that," Eve moaned. She went over to him and knelt down. "You're hurt and it's cold and damp up here. Besides, it's not such a big deal. I shouldn't be acting like some virginal teenager. We're two respectful, responsible adults who out of necessity have to sleep under the same blanket." Eve studied his face, apparently trying to gauge his reaction. "Do *you* mind?"

"Me? Uh..." Jared pulled a frown and shrugged, trying to feign indifference. "No. I...no, of course not." An image of Eve in t-shirt and panties waltzed through his mind. He pushed it aside. This was an arrangement, not a tryst. Although the surest way to ease his pain would be—

"I'll be right back," Eve said, brightening. She shook a finger at Jared. "Don't move."

He wouldn't move, but he couldn't keep his blood from singing.

Trying not to think, Eve hurried down to the yard. She grabbed the towel draped over the pump, soaked it, and wrung it out. Then she reentered the barn, tied the bedding into a bundle and stuck a bottle of aspirin in her pocket. Her movements were brisk and feverish, as if she were rushing off to...

*Rendezvous with my secret lover.*

Eve expelled a frayed breath. Hovering far back in her mind was an engaging picture of Kayne's long body stretched out beside her, radiating heat like a woodstove. Would they touch each other? Would they awake with their arms and legs intertwined, Kayne's sensuous mouth just inches from her face? Would that mouth deliver a passionate kiss?

Hard as she tried, Eve couldn't stave off the images and reactions that kept replaying in her addled mind. They alone made her slightly dizzy. She saw Kayne's strong, handsome features bathed half in shadow, half in diffuse yellow light as he stood over her bed of straw, his legs sheathed in faded denim. He must have showered at home, for his hair was full and wavy and charmingly unkempt. And when he pulled that stalk of straw from her hair... Eve still trembled at the thought of it, still wondered how there could be a neurological connection between her scalp and her stomach. She remembered how he'd occasionally looked at her—his eyes like steaming lapis lazuli beneath lowered lids, his lips slightly parted and unbearably inviting. And, God, when he'd kissed her hand, her knees had come close to buckling. The heated softness of Kayne's lips was very persuasive indeed.

He looked even taller and more wiry than he'd looked that morning. The tight jeans seemed to elongate his lean legs. The soft, loose shirt seemed to emphasize the breadth of his shoulders. He moved more casually, too, with a fluid sureness that was marvelously virile. It seemed that being alone with him in the enveloping darkness and being the recipient of his touching selflessness had upped Kayne's desirability quotient and made him...

*...a gorgeous, gallant soul.*

"Stop it!" Eve hissed under her breath. She hoisted the bedding over her shoulder and tramped back outside, heading for the upper-level door.

Jared sat still, rigid with expectancy, and listened to the sounds coming from the yard and the lower reaches of the barn. His muscles were already beginning to crawl with desire. He hadn't been this close to a woman in a long time, especially someone he cared for, and it would require a mammoth exercise of willpower to turn his back to Eve once they were under the covers together.

*Yeah, but you'll be a better man for it.*

Jared smiled wryly and shook his head. *Bullshit.*

He heard Eve lumbering up the ladder. At the top, she heaved an unwieldy sack of bedding onto the hayloft and climbed up after it. "Here," she said, tossing Jared the aspirin. "Can you take them without water?"

"Do it all the time." Jared popped open the bottle, shook three tablets out, and tossed them into his mouth. Wincing at their bitter graininess, he choked them down. "Real men chew aspirin, doncha know." He coughed once and shuddered.

Eve slid him a dubious look. Still catching her breath, she moved on hands and knees to Jared's feet. She pulled off his shoe and sock and wrapped the cold, damp towel around his ankle.

"God, I *hate* being waited on," Jared said with sullen embarrassment. It bothered him to see Eve so put out, so demeaned. "You don't need to be saddled with an invalid — not even for one night."

"Enjoy my subservience while it lasts." Eve flashed him an accommodating, good-natured smile. "Just don't get too used to it." She tentatively patted his ankle and moved off into the murky corner of the hayloft where their bed waited.

Jared's stomach felt jittery even though Eve was trying to project a lighthearted mood. He knew damned well they both needed to steer clear of neurotic guilt as well as romantic expectations. This situation could easily lead to one or the other, and either would damage their working relationship.

And all they could ever have, realistically, was a working relationship.

Eve seemed to be making sure the pile of hay was large enough for two people — Jared thought it looked large enough for five — before she arranged the bedding on top

of it. He fought to stand up but his ankle lodged a painful protest whenever he tried to put weight on it.

"Here, let me help you." Eve hurried over to him and guided his arm around her shoulders. The support still wasn't adequate for walking. "Well, what are you waiting for? Go ahead and put your other arm around my waist." She put hers around his.

Jared compressed his lips in disapproval and did what he was told. It was a rotten and quite humbling state of affairs—he and this lovely woman with their arms around each other, just to facilitate his walking. He looked down into Eve's face. "You've been terrific. I owe you one. *Please* reconsider."

"No. Just forget it. I don't do favors expecting to get repaid. Honestly, Jared, I enjoy helping people." She smiled up at him. "It makes me all warm and gooshy inside."

"Well, don't get *too* gooshy or we'll both collapse."

Laughing, they reached the hay mound and Eve helped Kayne ease himself onto it. She took off his other shoe but pointedly didn't ask how much, or how little, clothing he wanted to sleep in. Taking the damp towel from his hand, she rewrapped his ankle then propped the injured leg on some rolled-up burlap sacks she'd found on the floor. He was sitting up and watching her. Again, he felt a bit hazy.

"Aren't you going to lie down?" Eve asked, circling to her side. "You've got your own pillow, you know."

"Hm? Oh, yeah, right."

Jared lay down on his back, pulling the covers to his waist. He put his hands behind his head and, out of the corner of his eye, watched Eve crawl in beside him. She kept her overalls on, he noticed, and left a good eighteen inches of space between their bodies. Darkness thickened around them as the moon slipped away from the small hayloft door.

"Are you comfortable?" Eve asked. There was a tiny quaver in her voice.

"Yes, very." Jared was comfortable yet he wasn't. The old hay made a fragrant, cushiony mattress...but he was tensely aware of his bedfellow. Forget she's there, he admonished himself. He closed his eyes to strengthen the illusion of solitude.

"Good night," Eve whispered. "I hope you sleep well."

"Good night, Eve. And thank you." Jared heard a rustling and felt the pile shift slightly as she turned over, undoubtedly to face the wall.

*Won't be any roll in this hay*, he thought glumly, then drifted off to sleep.

His moaning pulled Eve from the well of a dream. She blinked into the darkness and tried to orient herself. *The barn*, she thought. *Tornado...drove me into the barn*. The pieces fell lethargically into place. But there was something else—

*There is a man beside me.*



Eve turned to Kayne then checked her watch. They hadn't been asleep long. *Is his ankle getting worse?* Worried, she was about to check it when she heard Kayne mutter something. She froze, propped on her elbow, and listened.

He grumbled on in a more panicky way. Then a name came out on a low, agonized sigh— "Maggie..." His head began to roll on the pillow. "No-no-no-no-nooo. I didn't..."

Eve touched his forehead. It was slick with sweat but not feverish. "Jared?" she whispered. He didn't respond.

She closed the gap between them, putting one hand on his shoulder and the other on the side of his face. "Jared, wake up." Soothingly Eve stroked his cheek, then kissed it. She paused and kissed it again, her lips lingering on his moist, salty skin.

Jared's eyelids pulled up heavily, spasmodically. His breathing began to slow.

Eve's fingertips caressed his cheek. "It's all right," she murmured. "You're not alone."

His gaze shifted to her face. "Hi, babe," he breathed, the sound soft and deep and seductive.

Then, with a small turn of the head, Jared put his lips to hers and flexed them provocatively.

## Chapter Five

A soft breath exploded from Eve's lungs. Jolted by excitement, she returned the gentle exploratory pressure of Jared's mouth. His lips were mildly humid, shockingly warm, and they moved as if the experience of a kiss were entirely new and wonderful to him.

Eve felt the world spin away when she heard his guttural groan of pleasure. Their kiss gradually intensified. Jared's hand moved up her bare arm and tenderly cupped her neck. Eve slid her trembling fingers inside his shirt and was thrilled by the tight ripple of muscle along his abdomen, the silkiness of his flesh, the pronounced mounds of his chest. A fine drift of hair curled between his pectoral muscles. Other than that, his skin was bare and taut and smooth.

"Jared," Eve whispered against his mouth, and he captured the whisper with his tongue, guiding its tip slowly along the insides of her lips until Eve opened her mouth wider, urging him to probe deeper. Moving sinuously, his tongue met hers with compelling hunger, at once forceful and delicate.

Their breathing became harsher, more urgent. Jared's hand moved into Eve's hair and began a tender massage. "You're beautiful," he murmured, kissing her neck. His lips glided up to her ear. "I love being with you. I can't keep you out of my mind."

Eve shivered at the words and at the hot pulse of his breath.

Her hand slid around to Jared's strongly molded back, then down to his small, firm ass. His hips pressed against her and subtly rotated. Eve's will drained away in luscious waves as she felt the commanding swell of his erection. She pulled back from Jared just far enough to gaze into his face.

Eve hadn't been imagining it—whatever feelings had been flooding through her, indefinable as they might be, were mirrored in Jared's scintillating eyes.

He blinked at her and began to look troubled. "Eve," he said, touching her face.

And then a cold, mortifying realization sliced through Eve's haze of passion. Jared had been making love to "Maggie", not to her. Chin quivering with humiliation, she rolled onto her back and pulled the blanket up to her chest.

"Eve?" Jared's hand covered her shoulder. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," she said curtly, lips immobile. "You were having a bad dream and I tried to comfort you, that's all. Now I'm getting sleepy again."

"You're getting sleepy?" Jared echoed. He sighed. "Go to sleep, then."

Hurt and angry, Eve flipped over on her side.

The barn's silence pressed around them. Eve drew her lips between her teeth to keep from weeping in frustration and disillusionment. How idiotic to think Jared Kayne

really felt something for her other than sympathy and minor concern and, later, gratitude. How idiotic to think *she* felt something for *him*.

The eighteen-inch buffer zone between them reappeared.

\* \* \* \* \*

Birdsong and sunlight woke Eve early the next morning. She rolled onto her back as stealthily as possible and snuck a glance at the other figure on the hay bed.

Kayne's eyes were closed. He was in the same position he'd been in the night before, his foot still propped on the burlap sacks. Eve had a feeling he wasn't asleep.

One question kept plaguing her like a persistent fly. It had tripped through her dreams—she couldn't remember in what context—and loomed in her mind as soon as she touched consciousness again. Summoning her courage, Eve turned in Kayne's direction. "Jared? Are you awake?"

"Mm." He remained motionless.

"Who's Maggie?"

Jared's eyes flew open and his face contracted, as if Eve had slapped him awake. He jacked himself up on one elbow and gaped at her. "What makes you ask that?"

Startled by his reaction, Eve looked down and silently cursed her rashness. "Oh," she said nonchalantly, fiddling with a piece of straw, "you just happened to mumble that name in your sleep last night." She glanced at Jared to see how he was taking this. He was scowling at her. "Forget I asked," she muttered, and began getting up.

"Eve," he said, reaching up and grabbing her wrist.

She pivoted to face him and her breath caught. God, he was striking. His face was flushed, his hair a chestnut swirl. Indirect sunlight glimmered in his eyes like the stars trapped in sapphires.

"I'm sorry I snapped at you," he said.

"Hey it's okay." Eve gave him a conciliatory smile. "I shouldn't have pried. They're *your* dreams, after all."

"No, no it's not okay. I acted like you were attacking me and you weren't. But you did catch me off guard. It's more than a little embarrassing to, um...you know, find out your dreams have gone public." Jared chuckled while his flush deepened.

"I understand. Let's just drop it." She was about to go on with her business when she paused, still bothered. There was a flutter of anxiety in her stomach. "I take it Maggie isn't your sister, then...or some maiden aunt."

Silently, Eve cursed herself for not being able to keep her mouth shut and mind her own business. Now it sounded like she was obsessing over this.

And, of course, she was.

Jared's mouth jerked briefly into a crippled smile. "You're right."

Eve nodded, feeling a bit sick. It was definitely time to change the subject. "How's your ankle?"

"Better, thanks. I told you it wasn't hurt badly."

They held each other's gaze a few beats longer then simultaneously broke the connection.

"Well, I'm going down to the pump to wash," Eve said. "Do you need help getting up?"

Jared put his foot on the floor and tested the ankle's strength. "No, I don't think so. It's a little tender, but I can manage."

"Okay, just don't tackle this ladder until I get back." Eve stepped onto it and disappeared beneath the floor.

Jared ran a hand over his face. His skin felt tight and clammy. Damn, that was a shock. What lousy timing his subconscious had, overflowing through his mouth while he was sleeping with a woman.

But maybe he was overreacting. Eve obviously didn't *care* who Maggie was. She was just curious because he'd uttered the name in his sleep. Jared could see she wasn't going to grill him...but now she probably thought he was a hair-trigger paranoid.

Suddenly he recalled their near lovemaking, how he'd turned to Eve in a blurry moment of weakness and how she'd gone from volcanic desire to overwhelming exhaustion in a split second. Either he was losing his touch or she'd had one big change of heart. If the latter...why?

Jared tried boosting himself to his feet. When his ankle complained, he sat down again. Why *did* Eve reject him? Was it because, when he'd turned to her, she'd only responded out of pity? Maybe she'd thought that rebuffing his overture would have added insult to his injury. Then, as their intimacy became more intense, she'd realized what they were doing wasn't what she wanted. *He* wasn't what she wanted.

"Gotta get over this," Jared murmured, annoyed with himself for letting Eve get under his skin.

Gathering his determination, he forced himself to stand. The pain was tolerable. With adolescent insouciance, Jared limped over to the hayloft door and unceremoniously relieved himself. *Pennies from heaven*, he thought, then remembered with a jolt those were Maggie's words...sputtered while he was performing the same act on New York subway tracks...very late at night, after a show and after a party...eons ago.

Growing reflective, Jared hobbled back to the hay pile and sagged into it. He wrestled on his shoes. What *had* he been dreaming last night? The same old horrific reruns? He dropped his head to his hands and tried to recall what bearing those dreams might have had on his need for Eve and her subsequent abrupt withdrawal. But last night was already misted with unreality, as if *everything* had been a dream. All he

remembered with any clarity was how much he'd wanted Eve, how right it suddenly felt.

And then how wrong.

"Shit," he whispered.

Jared felt a creeping, niggling alarm. Over the past few years he'd managed to infuse his life with a glassy calm. He'd come to equate uneventfulness with security and stability. "Emotional anesthesia," an old friend called it—but Jared didn't care. Equilibrium was more precious to him than those wild highs and lows he knew in days of yore, those oceanic crests and troughs that had dashed his marriage and then, finally, dashed Maggie and his career, too.

But now that well-guarded equilibrium was teetering—or, as his friend might put it, the anesthesia was wearing off. Maggie was coming back to haunt him in his sleep, Eve Kendrick was haunting him in his wakefulness, and Jared didn't know what the hell to make of any of it.

He was starting to feel enormously relieved that Eve wasn't going to take him up on his offer. With a woman in the house—a woman who, after all his years of miserly self-possession, made intimacy something appealing rather than threatening, and damn if it wasn't the truth!—he could kiss his serenity goodbye. And in the process he'd surely have to kiss his past hello again.

Jared shuddered and got up. He had to go home. He had to resume his life of comfortable tedium.

"Brrr, that water must've come from a glacier!" Giggling and shivering, Eve rolled from the top rung of the ladder onto the hayloft floor.

Jared regarded her warily. "Why are you so effervescent all of a sudden?" He still felt uneasy, eager to be gone before things got sticky again.

"I wouldn't call it effervescence," Eve said, sitting up. "More like shock. Delirium. Did you ever wash your whole body at an outdoor pump in fifty-degree weather?"

Jared's face was melting into a smile despite his new hard-nosed resolve. Eve was all bright-eyed and breathless, her shiny, flawless skin bursting with roses. "You mean you, uh...stripped in the yard?"

"Exposed every last pore to the universe," she said with a sweeping, careless gesture. She jumped to her feet. "I'm clean as a newborn. Here,"—Eve put her hand behind Jared's head and pulled him toward her neck—"scratch 'n' sniff."

Jared sniffed without scratching and then inhaled more deeply. Eve smelled fresh as a Canadian lake. Her natural warmth was beginning to surface through the temporary glaze of cold and he was sorely tempted to lap at it. Just as his lips parted, Eve stepped back.

"Don't want to bring out the vampire in you, Kayne."

"There's none to bring out," Jared murmured, feeling his cheeks flame. "I see you changed clothes."

Eve held out her arms. "I do have a few frocks left that weren't entirely ravaged."

Jared watched her, bemused. "Amazing what a ritual baptism can do."

"Yup. A new beginning. Today is the first day of the rest of my life," Eve added in a lilting voice. She ignored Jared's groan at the cliché and went to collect the bedding. "Well, Kayne, looks like your stay is over—along with your white-knight aspirations. This damsel in distress is announcing to the world that she can fight her own battles."

"Bravo," Jared muttered, limping toward the ladder. "Frankly, I can't wait to get home and tumble into the lap of luxury."

Eve's smile shrank and she hurried up to him. "Can I help you down the ladder?" she asked, touching his arm.

"No thanks. Like someone else here, I don't need any help."

Eve raised her eyebrows. "Was that a barb, Mister Kayne?"

"No barb, babe." He eased his good foot onto the top rung. Eve was just too radiant for comfort, her flag-waving independence too galling. So maybe he did want to be rid of her...but he didn't appreciate the rush she was in to be rid of *him*.

"I've offended you, haven't I."

Jared glanced at her with a constricted smile. "I don't offend that easily." This *is* for the best, he kept assuring himself. We really shouldn't spend too much time together.

"Are you hungry?" Eve asked.

Jared paused, his bad foot resting gingerly beside his good one. Its sole barely touched the rung because it still resisted carrying its fair share of his weight. "Come to think of it, I am." He began descending the ladder again, relying on his arms more than his legs.

"I am too."

Jared practically sank onto the floor when he reached the bottom of the ladder. His ankle ached, but not unbearably. He remembered his electric lantern and looked around for it.

Eve peered over the edge of the hayloft. "Are you ignoring me, Kayne?"

"I'm trying to."

"Why?"

"Because you're fishing for something. Like a free meal. Either that or you want me to scout around the property for fresh eggs."

Eve frowned at him. "Jared?"

"Hm?" He found the lantern lying in an open box of books. Snatching it out, he gave it a cursory inspection.

"I'm sorry if I hurt your feelings. I didn't mean to. I'd like us to be friends. You're a good man, Kayne."

Jared met her contrite gaze and smiled. "C'mon, Lady Liberty, let me take you out to breakfast."

"God, I thought you'd never ask."

\* \* \* \* \*

Eve mopped up the last of her maple syrup with a wedge of oatmeal pancake as Jared concluded his detailed explanation of her insurance coverage. He'd already told her he could, with a few phone calls, get the area's best builders out to her place for estimates. Eve had balked at first, relenting only when Jared assured her it would be no trouble for him. Besides, he had a certain amount of "influence" which could result in low bids.

They studiously avoided any discussion of their midnight interlude. It was, by unspoken agreement, something that hadn't happened.

The Sparrow Cafe's front door opened with a clatter of Venetian blinds and the convulsive tinkling of a bell. A few of the regulars turned on their counter stools to eyeball the new customer. Eve and Jared, still engrossed in conversation, didn't bother to look up. Elbows resting on sun-spangled Formica, they cradled their coffee mugs and stared into one another's eyes while they talked in hushed tones.

"Hey, sweetheart, I've been looking all over for you!"

The third voice was like the jangling of an alarm clock, an unwelcome intrusion. Eve blinked and snapped her head in its direction. Jared slid his eyes up, then down again. Alex loomed over the booth, smiling affably.

"I thought we'd get started on that inventory today," Alex said. "Hello, Mister Kayne."

"Hi," Jared mumbled. He grabbed the check and prepared to leave. "I'll keep you updated," he said brusquely to Eve.

She kept looking at him, reluctant to let their time together come to an end. Even though their breakfast had been little more than a business meeting, Eve had sensed a deeper communication in the language of their eyes, the tone of their voices. And even though last night had been an emergency "arrangement," it had turned into something much more meaningful. Eve couldn't entirely dismiss that fact, despite its ambiguity.

"Thanks for breakfast," she murmured, placing a hand on Kayne's arm. "And for the information."

"Don't mention it. It was the least I could do." He stood up. "Nice seeing you again, Count," he said to Alex.

"Yeah, same here," the artist muttered, looking befuddled.

Eve smiled into her coffee mug and felt affection for Kayne blossom like a flower in a time-lapse film. She wondered vaguely why she appreciated him most when she was about to be deprived of his company.

"Jared!" Eve called as he stood at the cash register.

He wheeled abruptly and looked back with some impatience.

"Get that ankle checked, okay?"

He made a circle with thumb and forefinger.

Alex was gaping at Eve. "Jared. You called him *Jared*."

"That's the man's name...Count." She tossed him an impish smile.

Alex bolted away from the booth and grabbed Kayne's arm as he was opening the door to leave. "You're Jared Kayne?" he asked breathlessly, eyes fired with excitement.

Jared's brow furrowed in annoyance and bewilderment. He started feeling squirmy again, the way he had when he'd met the artist. "Yes," he said, "I thought you already knew that." He pulled back by several inches, leery of Alex's acute interest. It didn't bode well.

"The most brilliant technician since Coleman Hawkins," Alex burbled. "The most innovative stylist since Lester Young. *That* Jared Kayne?"

Jared's heart seemed to go cold and hard as a lead ball and plunge into his stomach. "I'm sorry, but I don't know what you're talking about," he murmured on a tight thread of breath.

Alex looked stymied. His eyes lost some of their euphoric sheen as his gaze continued to scour Kayne's face. "You *do* know what I'm talking about," he said with quiet definitude. "Why won't you admit it, man?"

"I've got to go," Jared said, then wrenched his arm from Alex's grasp and pushed through the door.

Stupefied, Eve had taken in the whole confrontation with unblinking eyes. She watched as Alex moved to one of the windows facing the parking lot. He stood there for a moment, apparently gawking at the unlikely man-of-the-hour, her insurance adjuster. Eve heard an engine rev aggressively, then the furious crunch and spatter of tires biting through gravel.

Alex had touched some major nerve in Kayne, that much was obvious. Not just touched, Eve amended mentally, more like twisted.

With a sigh that made his shoulders heave, Alex shuffled back to Eve's booth.

"What the hell was *that* all about?" she whispered.

Alex shoved his hands into his hair and kept them there for a moment, as if glue were setting between his palms and scalp. He looked shell-shocked.

"Alex?"

"Man, he looks different," Alex murmured. "I'm not surprised I had trouble recognizing him. I wonder why he's so uptight? He obviously doesn't *want* to be recognized."

Eve yanked irritably on his sleeve. "Dammit," she grated, "if you don't start telling me what's going on, I'm going to dump my coffee in your lap!"



Alex leaned back and vacantly studied the littered table. "Remember when we drove into the Loop during that big snowstorm—oh...five, six years ago—and ended up staying in a hotel? It was on Wacker, I think."

"Clearly," Eve drawled. "One of your 'indestructible' snow tires blew out on the Eisenhower."

Alex rolled his eyes. "Well, before that unfortunate incident I took you to the Carnation Club—you know, that little hole in the wall below street level."

Eve nodded. "Yeah, I remember. We got inside the door and you were about to pay the cover charge—some ridiculous amount, as I recall—but the place was already so crowded and smoky we couldn't see five feet beyond the steps. So I asked to leave."

"And we did. Hell, Eve,"—Alex brought a hand down on the table, rattling its silverware—"I should've made you stick it out. You don't know what you missed!"

Eve snapped her fingers. "That's right. There was some jazz group you wanted me to see."

"Not just *some* jazz group," Alex corrected. "It was Intaglio. Stupendous."

"Now that you mention it, I do seem to recall the name. You talked about them a lot." Eve watched Alex attentively, wondering what his effusions had to do with her insurance adjuster.

"Well," Alex muttered, "now you'll *never* get to see them. They broke up around four years ago."

"Oh?" Eve's interest was faint at best. She assumed Alex was digressing...but, then again, maybe he wasn't. Maybe this sidetrack was the more direct route to Kayne. "What happened?"

Reflecting on this, Alex took a sip of Eve's orange juice. "I'm not sure. Last I heard, Intaglio was doing some really unusual, evocative stuff with computers. They'd just started a European tour and had a contract in the works with a major record company. Then the bottom fell out for some mysterious reason. They just dropped from the scene. I heard a few vague rumors about some kind of scandal, but hell, it all happened on the Continent, so no one over here ever got the whole story. Intaglio wasn't exactly *National Enquirer* material."

Alex threw his head against the backrest and clamped his hands over his eyes as if blocking out an unpleasant image. "God, *insurance*," he hissed. His head lolled from side to side. "Whatever possessed him—"

"Will you get on with it?" Eve cried, exasperated. Damn, why did he have to turn every simple story into a five-act play?

Alex leaned forward, crossing his arms on the table. "Sweetheart, did you know anything about Intaglio? When they were together, I mean."

"Only what you used to tell me—all of which I've since forgotten, along with ninety percent of the rest of our conversations." The jibe was friendly, but Alex was too preoccupied to catch Eve's humor.

"Let me recap," he said, uncrossing his arms and linking his hands. "There were only three guys in that group, but they were monumentally talented. Produced music that was almost otherworldly. Gorgeous harmonics, as lush and intricate as Belgian lace. Compelling rhythms. Intricate riffs. I don't know how to describe the overall effect, except to say it was hypnotic. Critics loved them. And I know *I* was spellbound."

"Impressive," Eve murmured. She was sitting stock-still now, her pulse thumping like two small fists in her throat. "Who were the three guys, Alex?"

He ticked the first one off on his finger. "Logan Murphy was their string man. Acoustic bass, twelve-string guitar, violin. Hell, I even saw him play the pedal harp at one concert."

"And?" Eve said tightly. She felt a sizable shock coming and tried to prepare herself to absorb it.

"Then there was the percussionist, Giles 'Jambo' Pennoyer. He didn't just play drums and cymbals and cowbell. He's worked instruments I can't *describe* much less name. He and Murphy shared the keyboard work, too."

Alex reached for something in his pocket just as the cafe's front door jangled open again. Eve flipped a vacant look in its direction, then did a double take.

In three long strides Kayne was standing beside the booth. Flushed and winded, he forked a hand through his hair. "I'd like to talk to you, Alex," he said in a low voice.

Alex looked up, his broad mouth stretching into a grin. "Monsieur Kayne! We were just—"

"Outside," Jared interrupted. "If you'd be so kind."

Alex shrugged compliantly. "Sure. Let's go."

Dumbfounded, Eve dropped her forehead to her hand and watched them leave the cafe. She was tempted to follow but thought better of it. Alex and Kayne stopped just beyond the front door. Through the picture window, Eve could see the adjuster standing with his head slightly lowered, one hand on his hip. He raked his hair again and began talking—haltingly, it appeared. For perhaps the first time in his life, Alex listened respectfully and intently, nodding now and then. After five minutes he reentered the Sparrow—without Jared Kayne. He looked edgy.

Eve stared at him. "What was *that* all about?"

"Nothing much." Distractedly, Alex played with a napkin.

"Well? Aren't you going to finish your story?"

"Hm?"

"Don't play dumb, Alex."

"Oh, that." He gave Eve a crimped smile as his thin fingers rolled the napkin into a tight tube. "Shit, I totally forgot what I was going to say."

"In a pig's eye," Eve grated. "Why did Kayne come flying back here, Alex? Why was he in such a lather to talk to you?"

"He just...wanted to press me into service. Get me to help you with the house and stuff. There's a lot to do, you know."

"I'm aware of that."

"Well, let's get started then. We'll do your inventory today." Alex unfolded himself from the booth. "I can even drop it off at Kayne's house later."

Eve eyed him suspiciously. "I'll drop it off at Kayne's house."

## Chapter Six

*Musicians are an ugly breed, if you ask me.*

Eve stood in front of the red-enameled door, her heart galloping. The folder in her hand quaked like an aspen leaf. It was a good enough ruse, she kept assuring herself, showing up at Kayne's house to deliver her inventory. Got to rush the ol' claim through.

Affecting a businesslike attitude, Eve lifted the brass knocker and tapped it against its plate. But her hands were still trembling and the knock came out less than assertive. It sounded like the stutterings of a feeble woodpecker. She clamped her arms to her sides again and waited, rigid as a tin soldier. Two or three minutes passed without an answer.

Eve considered shoving the folder in Kayne's mailbox and slipping away. What on earth was she going to say to him once she got inside? *Here's my inventory – by the way, what is it you're hiding from the world?*

The door swung open as if a gust of wind hit it. Eve jumped.

"Well...hi," Kayne said, a touch of surprise in his voice. His gaze roamed over Eve's face.

"I brought my inventory, along with some receipts." Eve couldn't quite manage a smile. Her nerves felt too brittle. Seeing Jared again, and in his own home, compounded Eve's tension. A peculiar excitement licked along her spine. "And a videotape Alex shot right after I moved in. I'd forgotten all about it. He still had it so he dug it out for me."

"Great." Jared opened the door wider and stepped aside. "Come on in."

Eve moved stiffly across the threshold. She found it difficult to look at him.

"You drove eighteen miles to give me this?" he asked a bit suspiciously. "It could've waited."

"I wanted to make sure I'd done it right. I thought if you had any questions or suggestions, we could take care of them on the spot. Best way to avoid delays."

"Right," Jared said, sounding unconvinced. "Please, come in and sit down." He guided her into the living room.

Finally, Eve let her eyes take in the house. It had a kind of saucy hauteur—clean lines, bare surfaces, rather severe-looking Eurostyle furniture, but livened here and there with unexpected, bold patches of color. *A reflection of the man himself*, Eve thought. Jared seemed perfectly in his element here, with his own no-nonsense urbanity tempered by those expressively sensuous features. As coolly as he regarded her right now, his crystalline blue eyes had an eloquent glimmer.

Jared sank onto the couch. After a moment's hesitation, Eve sat on the opposite end of it. He *has his guard up*, she thought uneasily. *He can smell trouble and he's probably tracing it back to the Sparrow Cafe.*

"You have a beautiful house," Eve said, still feeling self-conscious. "Tasteful. Sophisticated."

"Thank you." Jared kept watching her, likely waiting for clues to surface so he could decipher her motives.

"Did you live here with your wife?"

Swiftly, "No." Again, a cold fire leapt in Jared's eyes. Eve had seen the same look that morning. "I bought it two years ago," he added more casually.

*Ah, so his divorce is over two years old.* Eve flicked the edges of the folder. "I hope I'm not disturbing you." She winced inside at her choice of words and quickly tried to deflect Kayne's attention from them. "I would've called but working phones aren't easy to come by in my area."

"I know. It's all right. I wasn't doing anything important." He glanced at the folder. "Well, let's see what you've got."

Eve handed over her file.

After taking out the VHS tape and putting it on the coffee table, Jared spent a few minutes flipping through the pages the folder contained. "Looks good," he murmured. "This should do it." He laid the folder down, too, next to a walnut pipe stand. "I'll take it into the office tomorrow. The rest of the paperwork is ready to go. You should have a check fairly soon."

"Great," Eve sighed. "Thank you so much."

"No problem."

"How's your ankle?"

Jared held his leg out. The ankle was snugly bandaged. "A minor sprain. I got it taped up at a walk-in clinic. My limp is almost gone already."

Eve was glad, although she still felt responsible for all the discomfort and trouble it caused him. "I'm really sorry about the accident. You *should* be reimbursed from my homeowner's, you know. I certainly wouldn't hold it against you—all previous threats aside." She smiled sheepishly.

"Oh, forget it, Eve. I got myself into it by coming around in the first place. And you more than reimbursed me by taking care of me all night."

The words fell between them like thunder. Their eyes met uneasily before Eve looked away. She knew a blush had colored her cheeks. All day, while her conscious mind grappled with Alex's revelations, her subconscious was awash with vivid images of Kayne's lovemaking.

He got up and began crumpling newspapers into the fireplace. Eve wondered if that was a signal for her to leave. Jared said nothing, didn't acknowledge her in any

way, just started arranging sticks and heftier branches on top of the newspapers. She felt more and more like an intruder but couldn't seem to rise and make a gracious exit.

A question in her mind kept clamoring for release.

"What does the word *intaglio* mean to you, Jared?"

His movements abruptly stopped. "Intaglio? Hm, let's see. I think it's the opposite of cameo. A design carved or engraved beneath the surface of —"

"You know that's not what I'm referring to." Eve watched him, stunned by her own gall.

Jared sighed heavily and rubbed his eyes. "I was afraid of this. Alex had a chance to say plenty, didn't he."

Emboldened by this concession, Eve forged ahead. "He said enough. Your arrival at the Sparrow cut him off at the pass, but he'd already gotten through Murphy and Pennoyer. And since there were three, the next name was obviously going to be Kayne."

"Obviously." Without bothering to start the fire, Jared stood up and faced Eve. He planted his feet apart and stuck his hands in his pockets. "Let's begin from this end. How much *don't* you know? And why does any of it matter to you?"

"I don't know more than I do know. Like, why this is such a big, awful secret, for starters." Eve waited for a reaction but there was none. "I don't really know the history of the group or why you broke up. Hell, Jared, I don't even know what your part in it was."

He smiled privately and a bit sadly. "It's still difficult to share this, like discussing a loved one's death."

"I'm sorry," Eve murmured. "I didn't mean to poke at a wound." She did feel contrite, especially since Kayne was being so gracious.

"Don't worry about it. The wound's had some time to heal."

Eve could tell just by Kayne's demeanor that it wasn't gone yet. He was downplaying his sensitivity. "And I'm not really sure why I care," she confessed. "Just intrigued, I guess."

Kayne pulled down his mouth and inclined his head. "I suppose I can see why."

Eve nodded. "Most insurance adjusters don't come from that kind of background." She looked away from him for a moment, trying to marshal the rest of her questions. "Were you the vocalist?"

Jared chuckled soundlessly. "Only backup and only occasionally. Logan handled lead vocals. My part in it," — he pointed down the hallway — "is in that room."

Eve turned to see where he was pointing. "May I?" she asked, glancing back at him.

"Go ahead," Jared said with a careless toss of the hand. "Have a look. Just don't touch."

Eve got up and almost tiptoed to the hallway. She peered down the length of it, at French doors with filmy red curtains. Not wanting to seem too eager, she took her time approaching those beckoning doors. The hallway seemed to go on forever. Her footsteps, thudding on the maple floorboards, sounded too aggressive, an intrusion on Kayne's privacy. She was tempted to let the whole thing go.

*I don't know why, but I have to see the hidden side of him.*

Eve paused before the doors, then opened them.

She drew in her breath and smiled. The room was predictably elegant and Spartan—no pictures, no furniture, no draperies. A white baby-grand piano shone in one corner. But the room's dominant feature stood exactly in the middle of the floor.

The gleaming, graceful curve of a tenor saxophone, lounging imperially in its stand.

The mouthpiece cap was off, a reed screwed into place. A black neckstrap curled on the floor like a garter snake. Kayne must have been playing when she arrived.

At that moment Eve knew who the love of his life was—not Maggie, but this beautiful instrument—and she was certain it had made him a star.

She softly closed the doors and returned to the living room.

"Now you know," Jared said. He was still standing where Eve left him.

"I *should've* known when Alex mentioned Coleman Hawkins and Lester Young. But I wasn't thinking."

"Neither was Alex. I'm afraid he was exaggerating."

Slowly, Eve shook her head in refutation as she met Kayne's indecipherable gaze. "I know that man a whole lot better than you do. I know when he's exaggerating and when he's simply trying to find the words to describe something extraordinary. I have a feeling your talent is one of those extraordinary things."

Jared arched one eyebrow. "A psychic music critic," he murmured.

"Play for me," Eve urged. "I love the sound of a tenor sax—I mean, when it's played by someone who knows what he's doing." More than that, though, she had to hear *him* play it. She had to learn more about this other Jared Kayne, quite possibly the real one, through the language he knew best.

Jared turned down his eyes. "I don't generally play on request—too contrived. It makes me self-conscious."

His refusal dismayed Eve. "Then tell me whose playing yours most resembles."

Frowning, Jared shrugged. "Hard to say. I don't really listen to myself. I mean, I do, but I hear my music differently from how other people hear it. I guess I more breathe the music, more feel it, than hear it."

"But you are good, aren't you." Eve made it a statement, not a question. "Sounds like you had quite a following."

That elicited a modest smile from Jared. Eve noticed a pink flush in his cheeks. *He must still find pleasure in admiration*, she thought.

"I'm good," he said without a trace of vanity.

It sounded like he was stating his shoe size. "Then show me," Eve cajoled, "by playing for me." As soon as the words were out of her mouth she could tell she'd said the wrong thing.

Kayne raised his chin slightly. His expression was tintured by indignation, his gaze frosty. "I don't have to prove myself to anyone."

Eve's eyebrows hitched in surprise. *He's not that modest.* "Ah, the temperamental artiste shows his true colors. Are we a bit of a prima donna, Jared?"

He sucked in his cheeks, apparently to keep from smiling at her impertinence. "I'm a virtuoso. You, on the other hand, are just a brat." He walked away, heading for another part of the house.

"Brat or not," Eve called after him, "I won't fully put stock in Alex's stellar opinion of you until I hear you for myself."

"You already *have* put stock in it," Jared called back. "Not that I give a damn one way or the other."

Eve shook her head and smiled in wondering amusement. The various facets of Jared Kayne were finally beginning to display themselves and they were proving him to be the kind of man Eve never thought he could be—fascinating and enigmatic.

His voice cut through her reverie. "Well, are you just going to stand there all evening meditating on a saxophone?"

Eve made her way through the dining room and found him in the adjoining kitchen. It was large and airy and whitewashed, sleek with glass, tile and stainless steel. Like the rest of the house, it was both stringently utilitarian and very classy.

Jared had set the table and was now carrying platters of food to it—French bread, cheeses, sausage, grapes. A bottle of German wine, already uncorked, stood on the counter. Jared swept two glasses from an overhead rack, neatly sliding the stems between his fingers, and grabbed the wine.

Eve stood in the doorway, arms folded. "Expecting someone?" she asked, noticing the second place setting. It wasn't precisely a coy question. Eve honestly didn't think Kayne would want her hanging around, lobbing questions at him.

"I try not to expect anything," he said, sitting down, "much less anyone. I just thought you might be hungry."

"Why? Was I drooling when I walked in?" Eve put her hands to her face. "Are my cheeks sunken?" She pulled out a chair and joined him.

"You've got a long way to go, *fräulein*, before you wither away." Jared gave her a waggish glance. "Actually, I deduced from the way you wolfed down breakfast that you had an appetite to rival Paul Bunyan's."

Eve gave him a phony, sneering smile and tore off a chunk of bread. She lavished it with butter and, biting in, plucked a wedge of Gouda from the cheese plate.



Jared took a sip of wine and rested his chin on his palm. "Awesome," he murmured.

"As awesome as your playing?" Eve asked without missing a bite.

Jared dropped his hand to the table with a thud of annoyance, "Damn it, why are you turning this into a personal crusade?"

"No crusade," Eve mumbled around a hunk of sausage, "Just curiosity."

Jared leaned across the table. "Then let me satisfy it in one sentence. I'm a not so young man with a horn. End of story." He popped a grape in his mouth.

"Hardly," Eve said. "You were with the hottest jazz group in the Midwest. Things were really beginning to take off for you. Then *pffft!* You went from stardom to squaredom. Overnight." She sipped at her wine. "What happened?"

"Problems," Jared muttered, toying with his silverware.

Eve's jaw slowed as she studied her host. If she'd overstated his fall, he was certainly understating its cause. "Ah, just generic 'problems'," she said skeptically. "The kinds that typically lead to band breakups."

"Mm-hm." Jared finished his wine in one gulp.

"Then why the secrecy? Why the obsession with anonymity?"

"Let it go, Eve."

"Why would you drop out of the music business completely, do a one-eighty, become a corporate lock-stepper?"

Jared pushed his chair back from the table so forcefully Eve almost toppled backward in surprise. "What the *hell* makes you think it's any of your business, and why the *hell* do you care?" he shouted, springing to his feet.

"I know it isn't any of my business," Eve shouted back, "but I still care! I don't know why, and God knows I don't want to, but I just do!"

And there it was.

They were frozen in tableau for an eternal moment, their eyes locked, their breath pumping through the silence. Eve finally broke away and marched back across the dining room and into the hallway.

"Hey, where are you going?" Jared called.

"I'm going to my van, if you don't mind." Eve pulled the front door open and tried to bang it shut but it was too heavy. It just glided sluggishly back into place without drama.

She reentered the house and approached the kitchen just as Jared spun toward the counter and banged his fist down. "Piss on it," he grated. He ran a hand over his hair and expelled a harsh breath. Eve stood in the kitchen doorway, content for a moment just to watch him, to take in the long body and broad back leaning over the counter. *I'm going crazy, she thought, and I'm making him crazy. I made his patience evaporate and worked him into a full boil. But I want to be with him.*

"Well, you told me the offer stands," she said.

Jared turned, eyes wide, just in time to see her drop a suitcase and duffel bag onto the floor. He started snickering, then laughing.

"What's so funny, Kayne?"

"You. All of this. I don't believe it..." Eyes tearing, he walked up to Eve and gathered her in his arms.

A blissful smile lit Eve's face as she returned Jared's embrace. She closed her eyes and snuggled against his chest.

"I'm not sure what's going on here," he murmured into Eve's hair.

"I guess we both care."

"Yeah, I guess we do."

\* \* \* \* \*

The bottle of wine on the edge of the whirlpool looked like a vial of liquid gold in the candlelight. Eve's tension had long ago drained away into the frothing warm water, and her strength was rapidly following. She rolled her head to one side and watched Jared's cabled arm rise, dripping silver, as he reached for his glass. Eve smiled.

This was a dream. Must be, could only be. The world where bloodless bureaucrats in suits gazed impassively over ravaged landscapes had no place here.

"Are you glad I'm your houseguest?" she asked.

Jared took a drink and set his glass down again. "I don't know yet," he said with a small, bemused chuckle. "Are *you* glad you're my houseguest?"

"Mmm." Eve's mind and body seemed to drift on the bubbles. "Right now, very glad. This beats washing at the pump. You've got style, Kayne, I'll grant you that."

"And you've got very lovely shoulders."

His fingertips inscribed delicate curlicues on the shoulder closest to him. The unexpected touch sent a branching current of excitement throughout Eve's body. She slid a glance at the man beside her. For the umpteenth time since they'd stepped into the hot tub, she had to suppress a clamoring urge to turn to Jared and stroke his glistening flesh. It looked like oiled marble. The effect could have been a trick of light and water but Eve strongly suspected that wasn't the case. She'd been seeing the tautness of fine skin over tough muscle — *that's* what she'd been seeing. Eve ached to see more, and to touch it all, reverently.

Only the top of Jared's chest was visible. The rest of his body disappeared below the waterline, where the whole sleek sculpture wavered obscurely, a tantalizing ghost. They'd both been swaddled in terrycloth when they entered the room. Jared got into the water first while Eve modestly turned her back; she got in while he respectfully looked the other way. But once they were submerged, Eve noticed, their glances took in each other's veiled nakedness with almost palpable longing.

Rolling her head back, Eve closed her eyes in a futile attempt to squelch her longing. Kayne was likely determined to settle into his usual reserve and that meant she must try to do the same. She didn't want to repeat what had happened the night before, when she'd misread him. Besides, their respective circumstances made intimacy unadvisable.

Eve lazily opened her eyes again, saw the blue-black dome of the skylight, the encircling row of tall windows, the dense, shadowed clusters of potted plants. She sighed, more or less in contentment, as she admonished herself to enjoy this experience for what it was. Still, she couldn't help thinking only one more thing was needed to *perfect* the experience.

She looked at Jared and felt a soft swell of emotion.

He was watching her, too, from beneath partially lowered lids. The tenor of his gaze was unmistakable. "Why did you turn away from me last night?" he asked in a low voice. His fingers trailed along Eve's arm as it lay on the rim of the bath.

A shudder snaked through her body. She thought dimly that Jared might feel its vibration and know the intensity of her desire for him. "Your dream," Eve said, "the bad dream I woke you from."

Jared's forehead furrowed. "That's when I called out Maggie's name."

"Yes. I didn't make the connection at first—between the dream and your attention to me—but then you paused. You looked bewildered, as if you'd just then recognized me. It seemed to bother you. I got the impression that you thought you'd been—"

"Making love to Maggie." Jared shook his head and leaned toward her. "God no. No, Eve, not for a second. I was making love to *you*...from the moment I opened my eyes and saw you. I couldn't help myself. It just seemed so natural."

"Is that the truth?" Eve whispered, hopeful and yet afraid to hope. Her blood was already surging.

"I swear. If I seemed troubled it was because *you* were the one who pulled away."

"But I only pulled away to look at you!"

Jared briefly put a hand over his face and shook his head. "I guess I was too unsure of myself to see that. I thought you'd just been sort of putting up with it because you didn't know how to disengage yourself,"—he half smiled—"from my steely embrace."

"No," Eve said with a faint chuckle. "I relished your 'steely embrace'. I wanted more. I still want more." Her voice dwindled. "You excite the hell out of me, Kayne." Eve couldn't wait any longer. She slid next to him, her hips and thigh pressing against his. Risking brashness she said, "I assume, man of the world that you are, you have condoms in the house."

Jared's lips parted. Audibly, his breath pumped through them. After a moment he answered. "I'm clean, Eve. I don't play around. Besides, I had a thorough physical three weeks ago. But if you want..." He watched Eve—expectantly, she thought—and she realized he wasn't lying. She needed no more encouragement than that.

With a soft *whoosh* Eve mounted Jared's lap, facing him. His swelling shaft nestled against her groin.

Jared gasped as his hands reflexively braced Eve's back, then swept along her water-slicked flesh. Aware that her full, high breasts were mere inches from his mouth, Eve felt lightheaded. She wanted to press herself against him.

"A dream," Jared murmured. "A beautiful dream." He tenderly kissed each breast.

"No, not this time." Eve grasped the back of his head.

"You'll never know how much I need it," Jared murmured against her flesh, "how much I'll treasure it."

Quickly, his tentative kisses became more assertive. He held Eve's breasts, closing his sumptuous mouth over one nipple while teasing the other with his nimble fingers.

Eve whimpered at the electric thrill of Jared's touch. He was claiming her now, possessing her, his nimble hands working her body the way they likely coaxed heavenly music out of that saxophone. Eve's muscles began to liquefy. She wilted helplessly against him.

Jared kissed her then, letting his lips linger on her mouth. "I love feeling your skin gliding against mine."

"Yes," Eve could only breathe in response, feeling his gorgeous naked body, lithe and hard and strong, moving against her, loving her...

Eve cradled Jared's head. His hair was full and silky soft beneath her hands. She traced her fingers across his temples, his cheekbones, his jaw, then touched his soft, supple lips. Jared flexed them against her fingertips.

"I love your kisses," Eve rasped. "I think...I'm beginning to love everything about you." She dipped down and pressed her mouth fervidly to Jared's satiny chest, to the shallow gully between his sweeping pectoral muscles. His skin, water-fresh, smelled delicious.

Jared's breath pulsed harshly through his parted lips. He began wildly kissing Eve's hair, dragging his hands over her writhing back as she greedily twined her arms around his body.

"God, you're magnificent," Eve said against his neck. His whole torso was a smooth, perfect patchwork of tight muscles. Eve rubbed her face against Jared's chest, against the fine embroidery of hair that embellished the center of it. She lavished him with hot kisses as her hands scrabbled over his body, fingers squeezing and caressing, nails scoring his skin. Jared's body, exquisitely responsive, seemed to vibrate beneath her touch.

He groaned continually, without restraint, as one hand drifted between her legs and his lips kept working their magic on Eve's face and neck and body. She crushed herself against Jared, rubbing her breasts across his sleek, wet chest. As his slim hips bowed against her, his rock-hard arousal ground slowly against her abdomen. Eve gasped sharply, feeling a keen stab of desire.

Jared rested his lips as lightly as dust on her ear as he delivered a promise. "There'll be so much more of this."

Eve moaned weakly as his words rolled over her, seeping into her skin, invading each willing cell. The whole room seemed to wheel and jog and tilt like a haywire carousel. She kissed him insatiably, reveling in the expressive succulence of his mouth, the expressive shift and glide of each tense muscle in his body, the expressive finesse of his ever-moving hands, at once delicate and forceful.

When Jared finally lifted his head, his eyes were so sultry they seemed to impart their own kind of heat. He stroked Eve almost reverently from neck to waist, down and up and down again, until his hands slid beneath her butt and coaxed her hips even closer to his body. It seemed a stone pillar was wedged between their bellies. The insistent, hammering ache tormenting Eve suddenly sharpened.

She breathed his name. "Soon," she implored. Her hand dipped beneath the water and slid demandingly up and down the length of Jared's fierce erection, forcing an agonized moan from his throat.

In response, Eve's breath came out in tatters. Almost desperately she pressed her mouth against Jared's lips. Their tongues met in a fevered, sinuous expression of passion. Grasping his upper arms, she carefully lifted herself up and noticed with another surge of desire that his arms felt like polished granite.

Shrouded in a euphoric haze Eve lowered herself onto Jared's lap again. His hard thickness filled her, making her gasp. He pressed her to him, burying his face in her neck and wildly kissing it, sucking it, lapping at it. Eve was aware of nothing but the driving force of their desire, the perfect interlocked rhythm that made her whimper and tremble. Physical pleasure and feelings that far surpassed it rolled through her in a heightening wave.

Jared grasped and guided and stroked her hips. He cooed at her—words sweetly romantic, stunningly sensual, things Eve had never heard from a man before. And then, as she began to lose herself to him, her body tensing and quivering, Jared's words melted into a growl. Gripping him tighter, Eve soon felt the strong pulsations of his release. Although she'd already been satisfied, her hungry body answered each throb that came from his. Finally, drained of strength, she collapsed against him.

Eve took a moment to catch her breath as she smiled in joyous fulfillment. Then she kissed his darkly shimmering eyes. "Kayne," she murmured, dropping her head to his shoulder, "you are still a star."

He panted out a chuckle and gently caressed Eve's hair. "Except now, you're the only one in the audience."

"Mmm, and I feel very, very honored."

Jared lifted Eve's face. "Do you still want your own bed?"

She kissed his nose. "Only when we fight."

"That will never happen. I'm a confirmed pacifist."

They lounged in the hot tub a few minutes longer, languidly stroking each other's weakened limbs. Jared had closed his eyes and seemed to be drifting in oblivion. But the more Eve relaxed, the more thoughts her mind unleashed. They gathered around one question that could no longer be ignored.

She turned to her lover, hoping their new intimacy gave her some license to look for answers. "Who is she, Jared? Who's Maggie? Your ex-wife?"

He at first sighed deeply, eyes still closed. The question didn't seem to unhinge him this time. Maybe he knew it was inevitable and he'd more or less been waiting for it since Eve announced her intention to stay.

But his answer, when it came, was a shock.

"I lied," he said. "I'm not divorced."

Eve's stomach seemed to curl into a weak and palsied fist. She stared at her lover, her mind self-protectively on hold. *Don't jump to conclusions.* "I...I'm not sure what you mean."

Jared looked at her. "Maggie's my *late* wife." His voice was barren, stripped of vitality. He stood up and stepped from the whirlpool.

Bewildered, Eve couldn't stop staring at him. She felt relieved, but her relief was tainted with sadness for Jared and an inexplicable sense of foreboding. "But why would you lie about that? Are you...are you afraid of something?"

"It's not what *I'm* afraid of," Jared said in the same lifeless tone, "so much as what *you* might be afraid of. Because you see, Eve,"—he glanced at her, his look as coldly bleak as a winter's night—"I allegedly murdered her."

## Chapter Seven

Eve wasn't in Jared's bed when she heard the music. She was in the guestroom he'd shown her before they'd gone to the whirlpool, before they'd made love. Turning over, she checked the nightstand clock. It read 12:43.

She had no idea where Jared had gone after he'd left her alone in the tub. Stupefied, she'd dragged herself out of the water, wrapped herself in a towel and sat paralyzed for a while on the tiled floor, staring sightlessly at the blank opacity of the windows.

*Murdered.*

*No, allegedly murdered.*

The clock's numerals, a kelp green, rearranged their luminescent lines — 12:44.

Eve heard Jared's car pull away perhaps fifteen minutes after he'd left the whirlpool. It was then she'd picked up the candle and found her way to the guestroom. It wasn't that she was afraid to sleep with him or suddenly found him repugnant. Rather, she respected his need to be alone. Eve felt unwelcome now. Her questions were like a grappling hook that had inadvertently dragged something ugly from his past, something he'd been trying desperately to forget.

*What does it all mean?*

Jared had returned about twenty minutes ago. Eve, still awake, heard the car pull in, then his footsteps moving restlessly from one part of the house to another...and then silence.

Until the music started. At first Eve thought he'd simply turned on a radio, the sound was so faint and sporadic. But now it was beginning to assert itself, to grab at notes, to spiral in volume and energy.

Eve sat up in bed. Kayne was in the music room, playing his saxophone.

She scrambled to her feet and moved swiftly to the door. Cracking it open, she slipped out and felt her way through the darkness. A soft light wavered behind the music room's curtains, casting a dim reddish glow at the end of the hallway. Eve tiptoed up to the doors and peered through a narrow gap between the sheers.

A single white candle flickered atop the baby grand. Jared was standing in the middle of the room, one leg slightly bent, the gleaming sax curving down the side of his body like a golden serpent. His eyes were squeezed shut. Sweat had begun to bead and glisten on his forehead and upper lip.

He was racing through improvisations, his fingers bouncing rapidly and with consummate precision on the instrument's keys. Transfixed, Eve stared at his hands. The notes they produced whizzed around her like a meteor shower. Her mouth opened

farther. She took faster, shallower breaths, as if Jared's maniacal playing required some of her own air.

And then, as subtly as a kaleidoscope shifts colors, the music melted into a low tremolo. On the throaty voice of the instrument, a song began to build. It seemed Jared didn't just string the notes together, he wove them seamlessly into a complex, molten tapestry.

It was as if he were playing especially for her, directly to her heart.

Jared began to rock back and forth slightly. His face was less strained now, more relaxed. The music became increasingly melancholy, and Eve recognized the old torch song "Since I Fell". Jared's saxophone wailed softly through the melody, as soulful as distant weeping in the night.

Again without discernible transition, he segued into Bill Withers' "Ain't No Sunshine." Eve rested her head against the door frame and closed her eyes. The haunting music flowed throughout the house, seemed to filter into her veins and mingle with her blood. She felt a simultaneous rise of gooseflesh and tears.

*Monumentally talented...*

*No, Eve thought, there's more to it than that.* It took more than talent to produce such sounds. It took an almost preternatural gift...and extraordinary sensitivity.

The music gradually faded. Eve opened her eyes and looked through the curtains again. Jared stood with head lowered, one arm curled almost protectively around the sax. Eve suddenly felt like she was spying on him, intruding on a private moment. Sniffing quietly, she hurried back down the hallway and into the guestroom.

The door's squeaking hinges woke her some time later. She rolled over groggily as a dream fragmented and crumbled. It had been about Kayne, she knew that immediately. She'd been in a boat, alone, but the boat wasn't on water. Or maybe it was, but the water was also music—long, rolling swells of it. And she'd been filled with a blissful peace, a feeling very much like being in love...

"Eve?"

"I'm awake," she answered.

Jared moved toward her, his tall form shrouded in shadow. "Everything's changed now, hasn't it."

Eve sat up. "Come here."

Jared walked slowly to the bed and sat on the edge of it.

"What's changed is that I heard you play."

He said nothing.

Eve found his hand in the darkness. "I've never heard anything so beautiful, Kayne, or so moving." She lifted his hand and kissed it. "And I've never known a man so appealing. Never."

A sigh cut through the air. "But you don't know me."



"After listening to your music, it seems I know everything about you that matters. The rest...the rest is just so much history."

There was a heavy silence. "I want to be honest with you, Eve. I don't want to deceive you. About anything."

"I do believe that."

The bed creaked. The mattress shifted. "Will you hold me?"

Jared was close to her now, and Eve could dimly make out his features. "That's something you never have to ask," she said, reaching for him. *Thank God he still wants me.*

Jared quickly returned Eve's embrace, holding her tightly, kissing her face and neck. "Love me," he whispered.

"Yes, I'll love you," Eve said. The ardor in her voice surprised her. As she began unbuttoning Jared's shirt, she wondered vaguely just what she'd meant.

When he kissed her she was on the boat again, the boat in her dream. And the same rapturous feeling flooded through her soul.

\* \* \* \* \*

Cradling her mug of coffee, Eve watched Jared across the kitchen table. He knew she was patiently watching him. Even though his attention was turned inward, he could feel her steady gaze.

"I'm afraid I've upset your life by entering it," Eve said. "I've poked around and stirred up a lot of sludge you don't need to have churning around you again."

Heavily, Jared turned his eyes to her. "I can't dispute that." He tried to lighten his concurrence with a smile.

Eve reached over and touched his arm. "I can leave at any time, Jared. Honestly, it wouldn't bother me. I just can't stand seeing you like this."

His smile broadened for an instant as he cupped a hand over Eve's. "I don't want you to leave."

After giving her fingers a reassuring squeeze, Jared wearily got up and carried their breakfast dishes to the sink. The morning's gray flannel light matched his mood. Even a night of impassioned lovemaking, even the sweet affection of a woman he deeply cared for couldn't exorcize his demons. "I told you I'd be honest with you and I will. It's about time I quit pretending my past doesn't exist." He stood at the sink and gazed blankly out the window.

This would be the first time he'd confided in anybody about Maggie's death.

With a sigh of resignation, he turned from the window and joined Eve again at the kitchen table. She immediately took his hand.

"Let's get one thing straight, right from the start," Eve said. "I don't care what's been alleged or by whom. I know you're not capable of hurting anyone."

Jared smiled ruefully as he knit Eve's fingers through his own. "You don't know that, babe...any more than I do."

Her brows drew together. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, I fell asleep one night and Maggie was alive. I woke up the next morning and she was dead. What happened in between..." Jared shrugged. The memory still steeped him in a feeling of helplessness.

Eve shook her head. "Wait, wait. Start at the beginning."

Jared's free hand toyed with the salt shaker. "Okay." He drew a fortifying breath. "Paris. Four years ago. April in Paris, in fact." He chuckled dourly, then pinched the bridge of his nose. *Come on, Kayne, it's old news.* "We were nearly halfway through an eleven-week tour. Maggie...Maggie and I had been having problems for a while," —he waved a hand—"for years, actually. By the time we got to Europe there was no love being lost between us. There was none *left* to lose."

"Then why was she in Europe with you?"

Jared couldn't repress the sardonic smile this question provoked. "She wasn't with me so much as she was taking advantage of the situation. You see, Maggie loved to travel and she loved to party—two tastes she'd acquired in childhood. And she especially loved being around musicians. She thought they were—" Jared paused, feeling himself blush.

"Exciting?" Eve supplied.

"Yeah. Exciting, charismatic, sexy. I guess."

Eve smiled at him.

"In any case," Jared continued, "she coated us with a mystique we didn't actually have and then she sucked off it like a vampire. That, and whatever reflected glow comes from fame and admiration. So suffice it to say my lifestyle suited Maggie just fine, even if I didn't. And a week before she, uh...died, she really drove that fact home."

Jared stopped and ran a hand over his face, wondering why he was doing this to himself. But when he glanced at Eve, the answer came quickly — *because I want to build a relationship with this woman, and I want to build it on honesty and trust.*

"Jared, you don't have to go on if you don't want to. I'll understand."

"I want to," he assured her. "I have to." He took a moment to arrange his thoughts, and then the words spilled out like a waterfall. "The night Maggie died we were all at a party, a kind of celebration to conclude our Paris gig. It was quite a smashing success." Jared paused, briefly relishing the memory — the wild applause, the whistles and cheers, the jubilant shouting of his name. "The host was the president of some French jazz society. There were a lot of very chic, fashionably hip people there. A fountain in the courtyard was literally spewing champagne."

"When Maggie told me the previous week that she wanted a divorce, I immediately moved out of our hotel suite and into another room on a different floor. We didn't have

much to say to each other after that. She had her mind made up and I knew it was for the best. Hell, I didn't even like her company anymore.

"But the night of the party we were both drinking—she more than I, I'm fairly sure of that—and we got into an argument. A loud one. And after that..." Jared shook his head in bafflement. "I don't know. A blur. Then a blank. To this day I don't know what hit me. Giles told me afterward that some guy Logan had been talking to gave me a ride back to our hotel and helped me to my room. The next thing I remember is waking up on the chaise longue in Maggie's suite, the morning after, with a pounding headache."

Trying hard to suppress all the residual emotion, Jared forced his voice into flatness. "The housemaid came in as I was leaving. She, um...found the body. Maggie had been...had been suffocated with a pillow."

Eve's face blanched. Jared could see the mixture of horror and disbelief and pity in her expression. "You didn't do it," she whispered, her voice full of conviction. "I know you didn't."

Jared's mouth hooked into a sour half-smile. "That's not how the local gendarmes saw it."

"They *arrested* you?"

"They brought me in for questioning. Nearly forty-eight hours' worth. But the 'evidence' they had was all circumstantial, so they didn't press charges."

Jared dropped his forehead to his hand and kneaded the damp skin. Okay, so he'd simplified that part of the story. So he didn't tell her that he *had* been arrested, that he'd spent countless miserable hours in a jail cell before Giles bailed him out, that it took weeks before the charges were dropped. He didn't tell her most of his friends and European fans had become so disenchanted they'd turned away from him. No, Eve didn't need to hear *all* the sordid details...and he didn't need to relive them.

Eve rubbed his hand reassuringly. "What about the man who brought you back to the hotel? Was he questioned?"

"No," Jared said. "He was never found. Logan and Giles were apparently the only ones at the party who talked to him. I guess the guy was some high roller from Egypt or Jordan or something who happened to catch a couple of our concerts while he was in Paris. He introduced himself to Logan after the last show and Logan invited him to the party. He probably just moved on."

"And no one else saw or heard or knew anything that might lead to the real killer? What about the other party guests, hotel personnel?"

"Nothing," Jared said. "Not a clue. As far as everyone was concerned, *I* was the real killer, so there wasn't much of an effort to ferret out other suspects." Hands in pockets, he got up from the table and paced the kitchen.

Eve shook her head. "I just don't understand. Marital discord doesn't turn a decent man into a murderer...especially a man with so much going for him and therefore so much to lose. How could *anyone*, police included, come up with any kind of credible motive?"

Jared wheeled around. "Easy," he said with false blitheness, "Maggie was leaving me. People heard us arguing the night she was killed."

"But that's not —"

"That's plenty," Jared interrupted, his tone lapsing into bitterness. "Because Maggie was filthy rich — or rather her Newport blue blood parents are." He turned away again, wondering if he should tell Eve about Logan.

*No. That's not necessary, either.*

Eve got up and went to Jared. She wrapped her arms around him and kissed him tenderly, obviously trying to soothe him, trying to convey her faith in him. He gratefully rested his cheek against her head.

"If I could somehow erase it all," Eve murmured, "I would. You're a wonderful man, Kayne, and you don't deserve to be carrying this burden."

"You've lightened it a lot, babe. Thank you." Jared pressed a lingering, heartfelt kiss on Eve's hair. "You know, what weighs on me the most is the uncertainty. Maybe I *did* —"

Eve abruptly drew back. With a look of stern reproof she put her fingers to his lips. "Don't you *ever* talk like that. Don't even *think* such a thing. You are not a beast, Kayne. You're not capable of either cold-blooded greed or drunken rages. In fact, I can't for the life of me figure out why Maggie would've wanted to give you up."

He chuckled. "You'll appreciate *that* one. I think I was just too damned straight for her."

Eve chuckled too, probably at this indirect comment on her own initial judgment of him. "You? Too straight? Impossible."

They held each other a few minutes longer. "Eve," Jared said finally, "you're the first person who's believed in me in a long time. I can't tell you how much that means to me."

"I'm the first person you've *let* believe in you." Eve lifted her head and gazed into his eyes. Tenderly, she stroked the side of his face. "You've put your trust in me and I can't tell you how much *that* means to *me*."

Jared brushed his lips across her hand. "Maybe someday we'll both be able to tell each other," he whispered.

\* \* \* \* \*

After Jared left for work, Eve paced restlessly throughout the house. She entered the music room and approached the tenor sax as if it were a shrine. Timidly touching its gleaming surface, Eve was overwhelmed with a sense of loss. What a colossal waste, she thought, that this man hadn't been on a stage in four years, that misplaced guilt and shame had driven his incomparable talent from the spotlight.

Eve vowed, then and there, to reverse this travesty of fate by getting to the bottom of Maggie's death.

She suspected some if not all of the answers lay with that mysterious “fan” who’d given Jared a ride home. Logan and Giles must have learned *something* about him—name, homeland, business connections, *something*. She’d start with Murphy and Pennoyer, then. It shouldn’t be too hard to find out where they were.

Filled with a sense of purpose, Eve strode to Jared’s study. As she sat down behind his desk she told herself she wasn’t snooping, wasn’t violating his privacy. “Then why do I feel like a cat burglar?” she muttered. A Rolodex stood next to the phone and she slid it toward her. She flipped to M but found no listing for Murphy, flipped to P but found none for Pennoyer. Brow furrowed, Eve tapped the cards and wondered why Jared wouldn’t be keeping in touch with two of his best and oldest friends.

Still frowning thoughtfully, Eve pulled open the top desk-drawer. She hesitated, then rifled through it. But it contained nothing that could further her investigation.

None of the other drawers did, either, and Eve was about to pursue a different avenue when her mind backpedaled. Slowly, she opened the bottom right drawer again. She’d neglected to go through it thoroughly.

Some kind of scrapbook or photo album, concealed by a pile of folders, lay hidden and likely forgotten at the bottom of the drawer. Eve made a quick fist to warm her suddenly cold hand. She licked her lips and timorously withdrew the book.

It was plump with pictures, newspaper clippings and publicity pieces. Smiling in anticipation, Eve carefully turned the laden pages. Her fingers stilled almost immediately.

*Summerfest* read a handwritten caption beneath a photo. Then, following a dash, *Murph, Jam, The Pirate King*. Eve scanned the figures, their arms slung fraternally over one another’s shoulders. On the left was a thin man of medium height who was comically stuffing what could have been a bratwurst into his mouth. In the middle stood a stocky black man, grinning good-naturedly and saluting the camera with a plastic drink cup. And on the right was Kayne.

Eve made a soft sound of surprise and approval. Jared wore a Panama hat, rakishly tilted over one eye. His hair, full and wavy and creeping over ears and collar, exploded softly from beneath the hat’s brim. The lower half of his face was grainy with at least a day’s growth of whiskers, and his lazy, semi-dimpled smile was absolutely bewitching.

“The Pirate King,” Eve said on a thread of breath. Feeling a bit moonstruck, she suddenly remembered Alex using that appellation. “I’ll have to get an explanation of *that*, too.”

Further pages yielded more photos of the band, including a magical eight-by-ten of Kayne, alone, playing in a nimbus of purplish light. He didn’t look at all “straight” then, Eve thought, with his sunglasses and wealth of hair and five o’clock shadow. The image gripped her heart.

With increasing awe she turned more pages, let her appreciative eyes savor more photos and clippings. It seemed Jared’s wardrobe was in a constant state of flux,

ranging from a breezy kind of F. Scott Fitzgerald elegance to the hobo simplicity of threadbare jeans and baggy cords.

"You were beautiful, Kayne," Eve whispered. "Why did you give it up?"

After reading several reviews—all of them raves, all of them predicting a trailblazing career for the "phenomenal Jared Kayne"—Eve turned the final page. And her heart turned to ice.

In front of her was the only picture of Maggie in the album, a five-by-seven of a svelte, sophisticated-looking woman with short straight hair of shiny jet and eyes nearly as dark. Smirking slightly, she stared straight into the camera. Her gaze seemed to taunt the lens. She looked sublimely self-possessed, even arrogant.

Eve felt a ripple of insecurity as she slowly closed the album. How could she ever measure up to that image? More to the point, why did she care?

Eve tucked the scrapbook back in the drawer. She sighed loudly and pushed away from the desk. Then something clicked in her mind, a realization snapping into place.

Eve reached for the Rolodex again. She flipped to the J section and found what she was looking for—an entry headed *Jambo*. "Okay, Mister Pennoyer, we'll start with you," she mumbled, copying down the Minneapolis address and phone number.

With her hand poised on the landline's receiver, Eve mentally sorted through her options. There was little she could do without Jared's cooperation. If she were to try questioning any of his old friends or associates on her own, she'd undoubtedly meet with suspicion and resistance. These people didn't know fact one about her or about her peculiar relationship with Kayne. Why should they trust a stranger who descended on them out of the blue, demanding information on a very sensitive subject?

No, she definitely couldn't do this alone. But if she took the first and biggest step for Jared, maybe he'd be willing to follow through. Maybe he just needed an initial push and ongoing support. Eve was determined to give him both.

She pulled the phone toward her and punched up Alex's number. His voice was thick and drowsy when he answered.

"Alex," Eve said without preface, "I need your help."

"Not until I have at least a pint of coffee," he grumbled, thick-tongued from sleep.

"Alex, wake up. This is serious."

He replied with a protracted, mournful yawn, "Where are you?"

Eve hesitated. "I'm at Jared Kayne's house."

"Kayne's?" Alex's voice was suddenly alive with interest. "What did you... I mean,"—his tone became conspiratorial—"did you spend the night there?"

Why lie? After all, they were old friends. "Yes," Eve said as blandly as possible. "He offered to put me up for a while."

The ensuing silence was stuffed with assumptions. Eve rolled her eyes toward the ceiling and waited for Alex's response.

"I'll be damned," he finally murmured with a touch of incredulity. "The freakin' Pirate King has struck again."

\* \* \* \* \*

Sitting before the fire that evening, Eve went over all the arrangements she'd made throughout the day. She was certain it wouldn't hurt if she put things on hold for a week or so. There was a comfortable cushion in her savings account. She was caught up on both her orders and her bills. Alex and Maureen were more than willing to look after the farm—or what was left of it. And her settlement wouldn't be coming through for a while yet.

Eve glanced at the clock, then chided herself for behaving like an anxious wife. So it was six-twenty and Jared wasn't home—he often didn't work regular hours. Besides, she had no right to wonder.

Leaning over the side of the couch, Eve rolled the champagne bottle within its silver bucket full of shaved ice. She couldn't deny Alex's insinuation that she'd fallen for the Pirate King. That didn't give her any rights, but it gave her plenty of excuses...

Eve sighed shakily and looked at the clock again just as the front door opened. She jerked around. An irrepressible, elated smile blossomed across her face.

Jared returned it as he tossed his briefcase into a corner and strolled across the room. "Hi, beautiful."

Eve shot back an ebullient "Hi!" as she bolted up and hurried over to him.

They embraced as instinctively as newlyweds. Eve inhaled Jared's drugging scent, drowsy and spicy, uniquely his own. She rejoiced in the lean, strong length of him, the feel of his soft hair and sandy cheek on her face.

His lips feathered across her skin and finally claimed her mouth. The kiss was as passionate as if he'd been gone a month.

"What a nice scene to come home to," he whispered. "I could get real used to it, babe—a fire, chilled champagne, this..." He kissed Eve again, and she felt the beginnings of his arousal. "This is crazy, but I've missed being with you."

Eve nodded against his shoulder and fought down an urge to lead him to the bedroom. She felt dazzled by him, and this reaction left her giddily bewildered. He *had* only been gone ten hours.

"There's chicken Kiev in the oven," Eve said, more demurely than she was used to saying most anything.

Jared raised his brows. "Well I'll be. One day in this upper middle-class environment, and you're turning into a Stepford wife!"

Eve did a pirouette that ended in a curtsy. "Born to serve." Without betraying her trepidation, she stepped to the coffee table and picked up two envelopes. "That's why I got these," she said more seriously, handing them to Jared.

He opened one and examined the contents. His forehead creased. "Train tickets?" To Minneapolis?" He lightly flapped them. "Eve, why do you have two train tickets to Minneapolis?"

She shrugged and gave him a sheepish smile. "Because I'm deathly afraid of flying."



## Chapter Eight

The Empire Builder, bound for Seattle, coughed and rumbled out of Chicago's huge Amtrak station a mere twelve minutes behind schedule. Balancing with relative ease in the slowly rocking cars, Eve and Jared made their way to the lounge.

"Why did you get a room?" Jared asked, bracing one hand on the wall as the train lurched suddenly. He was a driver first, a flier second, a trainer not at all. Rail travel struck him as anachronistic, as alien a mode of transportation as a blimp.

"It's not a room," Eve corrected. "It's a kind of roomette—or rather, 'economy sleeper'."

They passed through the weird little accordion-pleated tunnel that connected one car with another. The floor was shifting. Jared felt like he was in a not-too-safe funhouse, and that didn't help his edginess.

"Why do we need a sleeper for an eight-hour daytime trip?" he fussed. "Isn't that a lot more expensive than two plain old seats?"

Eve pulled him back into the short passageway, where they were alone. "It's a pittance, Mister Kayne, especially when you consider a room's advantages."

Eve curled her fingers into his hair and drew him toward her, then kissed him long and deeply. As they parted, his breath came out in a gust of impassioned surprise. He didn't want to let her go—shifting floor or not.

"Do you catch my drift?" she murmured.

"If I caught any more of your drift, my legs would give out."

"Then quit your bellyaching, Kayne, and think about making love to the rhythm of the rails." Eve lightly clipped him on the chin and flashed him a promising smile.

"Shameless hussy," he muttered, grinning in pleasure. "Now let's get out of this space warp. I'm not used to rippling walls."

They entered the next car, its left side also lined with compartments, as the train trundled north out of the city. Jared glanced fondly at Eve. *Terrific lady*, he thought. *Not only has she taken on this mission for my sake, but she's determined to make it as painless as possible.*

Impulsively, he slid an arm over Eve's shoulders. She looked sweetly up at him, and Jared could've sworn he saw—was it possible?—something very much like love in her eyes. *Don't take anything for granted, my man. Besides, you're not ready to take that plunge again.*

"You're one special broad, Astra." Jared's smirk was only half teasing.

"I'm not a 'broad'," Eve said with exaggerated hauteur.

"Okay, you're one special dude."

Eve dug her fingertips into his ribs—he was wildly ticklish, she'd learned the night before—and Jared folded sideways, convulsing with laughter. A matronly passenger eyed them with disapproval.

"Behave yourself," Jared gasped as they entered the lounge. He quickly wiped the tears from his face. "What do you want? A drink? A snack? How about a side of beef?"

Eve compressed her lips at this ungallant reference to her appetite—now Jared's favorite form of harassment. "You're asking for it, Kayne." Her fingers darted toward his rib cage again.

Jared locked his hand around Eve's wrist. "You bet I'm asking for it. And I'll get it, too."

Eve rolled her eyes but couldn't seem to suppress a smile. Her hand moved to the small of Jared's back and rested there.

He liked the affectionate possessive nature of the gesture. *I'm going to get through this*, he thought, *Because of her, I'm going to get through this*.

Jared ordered a bloody mary for Eve, a gin and tonic for himself. They found an empty table—"Lilliputian-sized", Jared noted—and sat down to watch Illinois merge with Wisconsin.

"The landscape starts to get pretty west of Milwaukee," Eve said.

Jared nodded as he gazed out the window. Eve was obviously trying to give him things to look forward to. She knew this trip didn't sit well with him—he'd balked at first, quite stubbornly—and he'd felt distracted and peevish since they got up that morning.

He idly shaped the cocktail napkin around his glass.

Eve reached across the table and took one of his fidgety hands. "My dear Mister Kayne," she said with gentle encouragement, "there's no reason to have an anxiety attack. The least we'll get out of this is a leisurely, enjoyable train ride and a tour of the Twin Cities. The most we'll get—well, the most *you'll* get—is a lifetime of peace. And maybe something more."

Jared mustered a wan smile of gratitude. "God, you've been a blessing to me."

"Except when I'm tickling you senseless or eating you out of house and home."

"No. Even then."

Eve's smile softened. "You've been a blessing to me too, Kayne."

Jared's gaze wandered to the window again. Damn, she genuinely cared about him. But did she realize he *wasn't* the Pirate King anymore? Did Eve fully, clearly realize this little trip of theirs would not substantively change his colorless, humdrum life?

He finished his drink and thought about getting another one. Since it was closer to tea time than the cocktail hour, he abandoned the thought and instead speculated on how Giles would react to seeing him again. Minutes passed on the backs of miles.

"What are you thinking about?" Eve asked, her tone solicitous.

"Hm?" Jared's gaze flickered over to her. "Oh, just wondering how things will go with Jam. I haven't seen him since he left Chicago. That was right after we got back to the States."

"Why did he leave Chicago?"

Jared tilted the plastic cup to his mouth. The watery dregs of the gin and tonic trickled down his throat. "The band dissolved while we were still in Europe." With a wry smile he added, "Which isn't hard to understand."

"It is for me," Eve said. "Some hiatus would've been understandable, but not a complete—"

"You don't know the situation," Jared interrupted. "It wasn't just Maggie's death and the mourning and my, uh...brush with infamy. Logan and I...well, we'd developed a pretty virulent animosity for one another. And then Logan and Giles had some sort of falling out. I never did learn the reason for that. In any case, there'd been too much damage done, irreparable damage. So Jam did the smart thing—he got the hell away from the rest of us and got something going in Minneapolis. I mean, the man is just too talented to—" Jared glanced self-consciously at Eve, then pursed his lips and turned his eyes down.

"Too talented to let it go to waste," Eve supplied, a little too pointedly. "Jared..."

"We're in Milwaukee," he murmured, looking out the window.

*In other words, Eve, drop it.*

His gaze rolled over the noodly tangle of a massive freeway interchange, the clutch of downtown buildings too modest to be called skyscrapers. "We played Summerfest here," he said. It was a warm, welcome memory. "Great time. Food and beer and music everywhere, people dancing on tables." He looked at Eve, hoping she could share his appreciation of the experience. "You ever been to Summerfest?"

"Mm-hm. A lot. Maybe I was even there when you were."

"But you never actually saw Intaglio, did you?" Jared sounded more regretful than he wanted to. He tried to temper his mild indictment with a teasing smile.

"I wish I had," Eve said, settling her chin in her palm. Both her look and tone were wistful. "God, Kayne, that's a fantasy that could keep me enthralled for hours."

"You were probably too busy rock-n-rolling to take time out for some fine jazz," he taunted further.

Eve immediately took umbrage. She dropped her hand to the table and glared at him. "I've seen jazz performances."

Jared arched his eyebrows and nodded slowly, knowingly. "The watered-down commercial stuff, probably."

"Well, Kayne, if you're so damned superior you'd better get back on stage."

Even though he should have anticipated Eve's tart rejoinder, Jared found it disturbing. He studied her through narrowed eyes as the train chuffed and whined to a halt. "You're not going to give up, are you."

"No," she said, "I'm not going to give up. My dad always told me persistence pays off."

"That it does," Jared agreed in the same low, insinuating tone he'd used before. "But sometimes the payoff isn't the one we've been counting on." Wondering if Eve caught his implication, he rose from the table and carried their empty cups to the bar.

*Shit, is she going to keep forcing this issue?* Jared was simply reluctant to unearth his past. A full-blown resurrection of it was unthinkable...and he fervidly hoped Eve's support wasn't contingent on that course of action.

As Jared returned to the table gripping two more drinks, there was a flurry of activity in and around the train—passengers boarding, luggage being slung into the cars' holds, porters ambling around. But his attention was focused on Eve, who was watching him with a cryptic smile.

"What are you grinning at?" Jared asked as he sat down.

"I wasn't grinning. I was admiring you. And I think you know it."

Jared leaned back and crossed his legs. "Yes, I do know it. And I like it." He was smiling now, too...seductively. He drew on his drink and let his gaze lock onto Eve's. The Empire Builder and Milwaukee depot and everything beyond them spun away.

"God, Kayne, you are sinfully desirable," she breathed.

He felt heat stirring in his loins. "Then why don't we take advantage of our room?"

"What took you so long to ask?"

"Excuse me," a female voice said.

The world flooded back around the small table. The mantle of enchantment slipped away. Haltingly, Jared looked up just as Eve did. He saw a pretty, well-dressed woman roughly his age. The woman seemed flustered as he turned his eyes on her.

*Oh shit*, he thought. He knew that look, knew what was coming.

"I'm sorry to bother you," the stranger said meekly, "but aren't you Jared Kayne?"

His smile was perfunctory. "Yes, I am."

The woman let out a sighing laugh that seemed to combine relief with a kind of giddy pleasure. "I thought so. God, I've seen you with Intaglio so many times. I used to sit as close to the stage as I could and then I'd just *stare* at you. Honestly, Mister Kayne, you were just *mesmerizing*." She seemed abashed by this confession and suddenly blushed.

"I'm flattered," Jared said in a creamy voice. "Thank you."

Still smiling politely, he flipped a glance at Eve. Her eyebrows rose, fell. She looked away. Jared's smile briefly widened. *She's jealous.*

"I don't mean to sound like a groupie," the woman went on, her voice still tripping around that nervous chuckle, "It's just that...Mister Kayne, you really are *fantastic*. I don't know if you remember, but I put a rose in your sax when you played at the Riverside Theater." Abruptly, she giggled. "Well, come to think of it, you probably *don't* remember, because that was the same night some girl laid a bra at your feet with keys in it."

Eve bulleted a look at Kayne, her eyes round with astonishment. He cleared his throat. His smile felt as stiff and pallid as if it were cast in plaster.

"A rose can hardly compete with a bra full of keys," Eve murmured.

Kayne slid her a poisonous look, which she nonchalantly ignored. He turned back to the stranger. "I, uh...I'm afraid I don't remember. I mean, a lot of people, y'know...put things or threw things on the stage...almost everywhere we played."

"I understand," the woman said. "You had thousands of fans, Mister Kayne."

"The group did," he amended.

"Well, yes, the whole group...but especially you. Every woman I know who ever saw Intaglio," –the stranger shrugged and shook her head hopelessly – "went crazy over you."

Jared winced in embarrassment as Eve's eyebrows crept up again. She folded in her lips, but her mouth still stretched toward a smile. Jared began to get up.

"What happened to Intaglio?" the woman asked.

"We broke up." Jared hoped this curt answer made it clear he wasn't going to elaborate. "If you'll excuse me –"

"Oh, that's too bad. Are *you* still playing?"

"Not at the moment." Jared realized how idiotic that sounded as soon as he heard Eve snigger. "I mean," he quickly added, "I've taken a –"

"Hiatus," Eve supplied. She, too, rose from the table.

"That's right," Jared said.

"Is this trip a vacation?" the woman asked brightly.

"Sort of." Jared took Eve's arm.

"Where are you going?"

"Seattle," Eve piped in.

"Oh, great! So am I!"

"Terrific," Eve said.

Jared smiled his tight smile and led her to the door.

"It was a real thrill meeting you, Mister Kayne." The woman walked along beside them and extended her hand daintily. Jared hesitated, then took it. The woman closed her other hand around his, for the moment trapping him next to her. "I'm sure we'll see each other again over the next two days," she cooed.

Eve borrowed Jared's phony smile. "It's a big train," she said to the fan, and all but yanked the fettered Pirate King from the car. As soon as the lounge was safely behind them she muttered, "Well, *that* was educational."

Jared groaned and rolled his head back. "I wish they wouldn't do that."

"'They'?"

He motioned vaguely toward the lounge car. "People who've seen me play and think I'm some kind of god. I appreciate admiration as much as the next guy but not when it verges on—"

"Lust?"

Jared affected a look of disgust. "I was going to say idolatry."

"A rose by any other name," Eve said with a shrug.

"Whatever the name of the damned rose, I hate being fawned over."

"What else can you expect when so many women are crazy about you?"

*Aha!* Jared stopped in the middle of the aisle and faced Eve. "Which reminds me..." He put his hands on his hips and bent forward at the waist. "Has all that gushiness addled my brain, or are you actually jealous?" He scanned Eve's downturned, slightly sullen face.

"I'm jealous," she mumbled.

The car filled with Jared's delighted laughter. An elderly gentleman peeked out of his room and scowled. Jared saluted him. A querulous female voice drifted from the compartment and the old man ducked back inside, slamming the door soundly.

Eve snickered, then forced herself to look serious again. "I don't think jealousy is amusing, Kayne," she said in a lowered voice.

He put his arm around her as they moved down the narrow corridor to the next car. "It is, coming from a ballsy lady like you. Besides," —Jared kissed Eve's hair— "now we're even, Astra."

For the next two hours they talked and made love on the small foldout bed that virtually filled their closet-sized room. The lulling clickety-clack and rhythmic swaying of the train heightened their pleasure—and, Jared noticed appreciatively, had a remarkable effect on his endurance.

When the porter announced dinner, he was happily ignored.

Afterward, with covers tumbled and tangled around their feet, Eve and Jared propped themselves on the pillows and lazed in each other's arms. Beyond the window, lush green hills and twinkling rivers rolled past the train. It was snaking through west-central Wisconsin toward the bluffs and islands and wide, wide water of the upper Mississippi.

"We should go to the observation car," Eve said, skating her fingertips through the swirl of hair in the middle of Jared's chest. "We're getting to the best part of the trip."

He purred beneath her touch. "Whatever you say. You're the train expert."

They lapsed into contented silence without moving to get up. A prolonged shrilling whistle, commanding and somehow mystical, trailed through the air. The Empire Builder slowed.

"Another town," Jared murmured. "Should we pull the shade again?"

Eve sighed. "I suppose...not that we have anything to be ashamed of."

Jared knelt and leaned toward the window.

"Nothing to be ashamed of at all," Eve repeated in a throaty voice. Jared glanced at her over his shoulder. Smiling, she reached out and stroked his thigh. "Kayne, why were you called the Pirate King?"

Startled, he dropped down on his rump as the train came to a stop. "Where did you hear that?"

"Alex." Eve's caress moved up his leg, teasingly stopped just short of his groin, then moved back down his leg again.

Jared ran his hands through his tousled hair and looked around. "How can I use the sink and toilet if the damned bed is resting on them?" He suddenly felt irritable. And he knew why.

"Either fold the bed back in or rest it on your head. That was a piss-poor evasion, Kayne."

"Yeah, well, I'm out of practice."

"The Pirate King," Eve prompted.

Jared began dressing—a real challenge in such cramped quarters. "Hell, Eve, it's almost impossible to explain why people give other people certain nicknames." With a small bounce and grunt he got his jeans pulled up to his waist. Fastening them, he sat up and looked around. "Where's my shirt?"

"Under my pillow, I think." Eve felt for it, then extracted it. "Why won't you tell me?"

"Because it's inane and embarrassing and not worth talking about," Jared snapped. Then he paused, sighing. His shirt hanging open, he turned on the bed and lay next to Eve once more. "I'm sorry, babe. But you don't have to know *every* damned stupid thing, do you?" He rolled her toward him, nudging her breasts against his bare chest, forcing the rest of her body into contact with his.

Eve slid her leg over Jared's hips and began kissing his neck, sucking at his chest, kneading his back. "Right now I don't have to, no."

His jeans became uncomfortably snug as he felt an urgent swelling beneath his zipper. "Shit," he murmured as Eve's lips pressed against his mouth, "and I just wrestled these things on..."

The train chugged forward.

Eve looked out the high windows of the observation car. She always felt a queasy apprehension when she crossed bridges, and the trestle over the Mississippi River was unusually long and deceptive. It continually skimmed over islands, tricking passengers into a sense of security, then abruptly arrowed over the water again.

"It's a beautiful view," Jared said, "especially this close to sunset."

Shivering slightly, Eve snuggled against him. "I just wish we'd get to the end of this damned trestle."

Jared glanced at her. He seemed amused. "I can't imagine the dauntless Astra Sharpe being fearful of anything."

Still distracted, Eve gave him a weak smile. "The dauntless Astra Sharpe is only human." Her hand slowly explored the taut plane of his stomach. "What are *you* afraid of, Kayne?"

His expression sobered. His gaze became distant and unseeing. "This," he said after a moment. "I can't imagine it doing any good."

Eve knew he was referring to their trip. She lifted her head and touched Jared's cheek. "Please try not to be such a defeatist. Giles might know something he either neglected or refused to tell the police."

Jared shook his head. "It's been so long..."

"Then we'll jog his memory. Any scrap of information could be a clue, a lead. And enough of them put together could be an answer." Eve shifted and straightened in her seat as the train cruised onto solid ground in Minnesota. "In any event, you'll get to see Giles again."

Jared nodded without enthusiasm.

"And I'm sure you've needed a vacation," Eve went on. "You throw yourself into your work, and I don't think you even like it."

"It keeps me busy and it pays the bills."

"Oh, whoopee," Eve drawled. "And you mean to tell me that making music —"

Jared cupped a hand over her mouth. "I'm not telling you anything about making music, and you don't have to tell me things I already know."

*So he does miss it*, Eve thought, studying his handsome face. *The exhilaration, the communication, the sense of creative accomplishment...he misses it all so much it hurts. That's why he can't stand hearing or talking about it.*

The Summerfest photo took shape in her mind—that alluring image of the Pirate King with his shades and Panama hat and killing smile. He looked so happy. All of it just looked so *right*.

Jared gave Eve a cautionary glance before he dropped his hand. "You'll like Jam," he said, quite obviously changing the subject.

"I'm sure I will. I like most musicians."

Jared smiled. "Some more than others, I hope."



"One more than others." Eve lifted a hand to caress him but suddenly poked a forefinger at him instead. "Hey, I've been meaning to ask you...what happened between you and Logan Murphy? Why the animosity? It might help, you know, if we could see him too."

"I don't even know where he is," Jared said in a flat voice. "And frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn. He wouldn't be of any help, anyway."

"Why?" Eve hadn't expected such lingering hostility, especially between former friends.

Jared sucked a deep breath and expelled it forcefully. "Because Logan wanted to see me hang in Paris...more than anyone else did. He and Maggie had been having an affair. She wasn't just leaving me, she was leaving me for him."

Eve's face contracted in shock. "Oh my God. How *could* they?"

"I don't know. I couldn't read their conniving minds."

Eve took Jared's hand and held it tightly.

People trickled out of the observation car as darkness closed like a velvet curtain around its dome. The train hurtled northwest, clattering and rocking gently. Jared asked Eve about her background, her likes and dislikes and priorities, her triumphs and disappointments. He posed his questions with such natural, sincere interest that Eve was never reluctant to answer them. And his comments, whether droll or serious, were so perceptive she never felt patronized by them. Eve gradually realized with some amazement that Jared was turning her inside out...and, although a bit more guardedly, letting her do the same to him.

In the course of those intimate hours, Eve felt closer to Jared Burke Kayne than she'd ever felt to anyone else.

They were finally alone in the car. "You know what?" he said softly. "I suddenly feel like playing for you. I feel like playing my heart out for you."

Three very dangerous words rose to Eve's lips at that moment, but she couldn't get them out. Too many tears were in the way.

It was past eleven at night when the Empire Builder sighed to a stop at its Twin Cities station, roughly midway between St. Paul and Minneapolis. Eve paused on the platform as she and Jared were crossing over to the depot. Heart pattering, she watched him for a few seconds. A balmy wind stirred his rich hair.

"Kayne!" she called out.

He was already yards ahead of her, close to the windows' pools of light. He turned and regarded her curiously.

"I think," — Eve swallowed and felt most of her voice go down her throat — "I think I love you, Kayne."

## Chapter Nine

Jared stared at her. Eve felt apprehension pinching her face. Neither of them moved.

"Well...say something, Kayne." Eve's voice was small, imploring.

Jared walked slowly over to her. He stopped in front of her and looked down into her anxious eyes. "You *think* you love me?"

Eve's head bobbed in response, as if it were on a twitching string.

Jared softly grazed her cheek with the back of one hand and gave her a melancholy smile. "We'll talk about it more when you know."

"Is that all you have to say?" Eve couldn't help sounding dismayed, perhaps a bit irked.

"It's all I *can* say...for now."

Eve felt deflated. Even her voice came out thin and flat. "Let's get to our hotel," she said. "I'm suddenly very tired."

In the silence of their cab ride, Eve kept wondering if and why and how she could have read Jared wrong. By the end of the train trip she'd sensed a unique bond between them, a feeling of closeness that only came with love. When the word itself finally left her mouth, it seemed to do so of its own accord. Eve hadn't planned to voice her feelings any more than she'd ever planned to hug Jared or grasp his hand. Showing *and* telling had become a matter of instinct.

When they reached the hotel, they said only what was necessary to get checked into their room and settled for the night. Jared made a few attempts at levity, but Eve was too preoccupied to respond with more than a wan smile or halfhearted parry. The king-sized bed looked like a football field. When Eve saw it, she could only think of that unbridgeable gulf between her and Jared on the bed of hay, their first night together.

They undressed in the dark, their backs to one another. And after a goodnight kiss, they slept that way too.

\* \* \* \* \*

Eve awoke first. Her rest had been fitful, troubled by vaguely unsettling dreams. She stared at Jared for several minutes and her heart ached at the sight of him—tawny face flushed with warmth, sensuous lips slightly parted, gleaming auburn hair spread across the pillow like exotic embroidery. Eve kissed him, then slipped out of bed and got dressed. She left a note on the desk—*Went for a walk and some chow...of course—* before leaving the room.

It was close to seven. Nicollet Mall was teeming with buses and grim-faced people hurrying to work. Eve drifted like a wraith through the purposeful crowd, pausing briefly before Dayton's display windows and wondering how she'd fare as a yuppie consumer.

After spending the better part of a week at Jared's elegant house, the notion didn't seem so farfetched anymore.

Every time Eve did consider having breakfast her appetite fled. She was still fretting over her exchange with Jared at the train station and damning her impulsiveness. The only ray of hope she could find was the possibility she'd chosen her words poorly. Maybe saying she *thought* she loved Jared put him off; maybe it sounded too namby-pamby and equivocal. If she'd boldly declared *I love you*, he might have been more moved.

That seemed like a desperately grasped straw but it was all Eve had to hold onto. If Jared couldn't return her feelings she'd be devastated.

Eve spotted a phone booth. She hurried over to it, seized with a need to call Jared at the hotel just to make contact with him, to assure herself he was still there. She didn't want to stand in the middle of a busy street in a strange city, fiddling with her cell phone and straining to keep her words from being overheard. But when Eve reached in her purse, her hand came out with more than change. She'd found the piece of paper bearing Giles Pennoyer's phone number.

Spontaneously, without thinking, Eve placed the call. Her heart was jiggling madly when a very deep voice answered, "Yo."

"M-Mister Pennoyer?"

"In the flesh."

"I hope I didn't wake you." Eve was tempted to apologize. He sounded out of breath.

"No ma'am," he said. "Saturday, Sunday mornings, yeah, *then* I'm a slug." There was a low, throaty chuckle. "Weekdays I'm super jock." Pause. "May I ask which lady is gracing me with a call this fine morning?"

"You don't know me, Mister Pennoyer. My name is Eve Kendrick. I'm...a friend of Jared Kayne." She tensed expectantly, the phone cord wound in a stranglehold around her forefinger.

There was a thick silence punctuated by Giles' raspy breathing. "Kayne," he finally said with wonder. "Damn, Jared Kayne. Are you his lady?"

"Uh, sort of. I mean, we're more or less," —Eve's voice broke into a flustered laugh— "companions." She squeezed her eyes shut and cringed.

"Well, Kayne's companion, how would you like to meet me for breakfast?"

Eve drooped in relief, "I'd love to."

Thirty minutes later, in a packed café, Eve was on her third cup of coffee when Giles walked in. To her astonishment, he sauntered directly to her table.

"You're Eve," he said with a friendly smile.

She shakily set her cup down. "How did you know?"

"Because you're pretty and alone and you were daydreaming." Giles pulled out a chair and sat down. "Just what I was expecting." His smile shrank from playfulness to concern. "How's he doing?"

Eve touched a napkin to her lips. "I guess that's what I'd like to talk to you about."

"Talk," Giles folded his broad arms on the table. "I'll listen. Hard."

Eve took a deep breath. "Jared's dropped out. Or rather —"

"He's 'dropped in'. Kayne's gone button-down mainstream, hasn't he."

"Yes. But I get the impression he forced himself to."

Giles shook his head glumly. "I thought he would. Things got ugly for him and he blamed it on the business. The man's an idealist, Eve. Music's like prayer to him, like going to church. There's no room in that picture for unfaithful wives and scheming friends and users and boozers and addicts."

"And murder," Eve whispered.

Giles looked only moderately surprised. "You know."

Eve nodded as a waitress came to the table. She took their orders without small talk and quickly departed. Silently, Giles studied his new acquaintance. His gaze was so penetrating, so knowing that Eve felt made of glass.

"Kayne must trust you one hell of a lot," he murmured, "to have told you about Maggie."

Eve smiled self-consciously. "I care about him, Giles."

"I can see that." He leaned back in the chair and crossed his arms over his chest. "Now, why don't you give me some background info before we get to the reason for your call?"

Eve filled Giles in on her relationship with Jared and what he'd told her about his life over the past four years. Giles listened attentively without changing expression. He was mulling over these facts, Eve knew — assessing his old friend's new incarnation. When his poached egg arrived, he ate it without taking his eyes from Eve's face.

She picked at her French toast. "Which brings me to why I'm here," Eve concluded. "Giles, Jared's retreated from everything he once knew and loved. He's still disillusioned with the music business, still tormented by memories of Maggie's death. Something has to be done to turn him around."

Giles again shook his head. "What a damned crying shame," he grated. "Kayne's one of the finest men I know. And without a *doubt* the best musician — brilliant, Eve, brilliant. Sometimes, when we were in a hotel room or just hangin' out at someone's place, he'd pick up that sax and start makin' it sing. Made me cry more than once,

honey, that he did." Giles finished his modest breakfast and pushed the dishes aside. "I gave him my new address before I left Chicago but he never got in touch with me. I didn't know *what* the hell happened to him. Damn, I'd give anything to see the man again—more than that to hear him play."

Eve smiled. "All you have to give is a little of your time."

Giles looked at her over the rim of his juice glass.

"Jared's here, in Minneapolis. We came together. He wants to see you."

For a second Eve thought Giles would drop the glass. It actually began slipping through his fingers and he quickly set it down. "Kayne's *here*?" An effulgent grin spread across his face. "Hot damn! Kayne's really here?"

Eve nodded. "Still asleep in our hotel room. Giles..."—she reached across the table and put her hand on his wrist—"before he comes to see you, I have a favor to ask. Well, a couple of favors."

"Hey, shoot. Anything."

Eve felt a surge of optimism. She silently cautioned herself not to get carried away by it. "First of all, I'd like you to fill me in on a few things. Then—and I know this might be asking a lot—we need you to sift through your memory and try to come up with every single event or conversation or relationship that might have had a bearing on Maggie's death. Jared needs to start putting pieces together, Giles, no matter how inconsequential they might seem at first."

He nodded. "Ah, I see. That's what you meant about turning Kayne around. You're trying to solve Maggie's murder, put the whole mystery behind him."

"Yes, exactly," Eve said more urgently. She felt a rush of adrenalin. "Because I know Jared didn't do it. But he won't rest easy until *he* knows that, too—"

Giles put up a hand to silence her. "Hey, no need to explain. I knew right from the start Kayne wasn't responsible." Giles patted Eve's hand. "All right, honey. I'll scan the memory bank and see what I can come up with."

"Thank you," Eve breathed. "Jared might want to see you today...if that's convenient."

Giles nearly bounced from his chair. "Hell yeah! I'll *make* it convenient." His face melted into wistfulness. "I would *love* to hear that man play again."

"So would I," Eve said, and realized that wish had ever-broadening implications.

Giles drifted out of his reverie and leaned forward. "Now, sweetheart, what was it *you* wanted to know?"

Eve reconsidered her request, wondering if it was ethical to delve into Jared's past without his being there. She concluded it was all right. The things of interest to her weren't what Jared considered secrets—at least she didn't think so.

"Well," Eve carefully began, "I don't understand his relationship with Maggie. Why did she leave him? And for one of his best friends? I mean, if she thought Jared wasn't her type, why did she marry him in the first place?"

Giles snorted. Eve thought she detected a touch of contempt. "Ooo, that's a tough one. And yet easy, too. Margaret Bridswell Kayne...what a piece of work *she* was. Met Jared while he was a grad student. Northwestern School of Music, I believe. He was touring with his college jazz combo and she was attending some snooty Eastern women's school. They had a kind of whirlwind courtship and eloped. I guess you could call it a classic case of rebellion—spoiled rich girl meets rough-around-the-edges musician and thumbs her nose at High Society. Kayne was just a Chicago street kid, y'know. Came from a working-class family, had a hard-drinking old man."

"He told me," Eve said, recalling their conversation on the train.

"Okay, so this musician also happens to be drop-dead good-looking *and* talented. Margaret Bridswell thinks, 'Wow, what a gas! I'll latch onto this gorgeous saxophone player, become Maggie Kayne and live a wild and crazy life. I'll be the envy of every groupie and the darling of the jet set'." Giles made a face of disgust and sipped at his coffee. "Problem was, Kayne did not turn out to be all that wild and crazy. I mean sure, he had his loose moments, but he was first and foremost a serious musician. He and Maggie had entirely different values. And when Kayne started wanting to have a family, Maggie just kept wanting to have fun."

Eve loved Jared so much at that moment she thought she would burst. "I suppose that's how Logan managed to slip into the picture."

Giles nodded. "Yeah, that's it. Oh, Murph was a good kid at first. He and Kayne had been childhood buddies, came from the same neighborhood. But Kayne went to college and Murph didn't. Kayne got the chichi wife and Murph didn't. Kayne became a star and Murph...well, to put it bluntly, Eve, Murph became a sleaze. I think he always envied Kayne, tried to compete with him. So when Murph had a chance to best the Pirate King," —Giles turned up his hands— "he jumped at it."

Eve was tempted to ask Giles about that intriguing nickname but other questions took precedence at the moment. "I just can't comprehend what Logan had to offer Maggie that Jared didn't."

"Nonstop partying," Giles crooned with obvious derision. "They both had an 'I'll try anything' mentality...with drugs, especially. And to advance his cause Murph fed Maggie's jealousy too. Kayne, you see, was getting *very* popular with the ladies and that got under Princess Margaret's skin. He was never unfaithful—I know he wasn't, 'cause he isn't that kind of dude—but Murph planted some nasty little bugs in Maggie's ear. In fact, she started a fight with Kayne at a party the night she was killed. Got drunk and began flinging around all these accusations and insults, gave her own crude interpretation of the term *Pirate King*."

Eve couldn't let it pass this time. "Giles," she interrupted, "what *does* that name mean?"

He snickered in amusement. "Been getting to you too, huh? Not to worry, hon. Some slick critic hung it on him. Said Kayne plundered the audience with his playing and came away with women's hearts...some such tripe. We used to kid the hell out of

him about it. Sonofabitch does have great stage presence, I can't deny that." Giles narrowed his eyes and inclined toward Eve. "He's done it to you, hasn't he? You're crazy in love with Kayne."

Eve drew her lower lip between her teeth. She turned her head down, trying to conceal a fiery blush.

"Hm?" Giles prodded. He nudged up Eve's chin. "C'mon, don't try to fool ol' Jam."

Dewy-eyed, Eve looked at him. "Yes." She couldn't manage to say more.

"Then why the waterworks?" Giles asked. "Does he know? Have you told him?"

"More or less." Eve tried a courageous smile but it quivered and fell. "He didn't exactly jump for joy. I think he thinks I'm not right for him."

"Oh, baby," Giles cooed. He held Eve's hands. "You not right for him? You're exactly what Kayne needs! And I'll bet you all the drumsticks in Chicago he knows it."

"But —"

"But nothing. Can't you see what's goin' on, hon? The man's afraid he isn't right for *you*. He's carrying around some pretty unsavory baggage, even though it isn't his doing, and I'll guarantee you it's battered the hell out of his self-image. I'm sure his new occupation isn't helping much, either. That's one sensitive dude, Eve." Giles frowned and shrugged. "Oh, I'll grant he might be a little skittish, too. Women haven't exactly done him right."

Eve managed a weak smile that stayed in place this time. She felt a wash of gratitude, a renewal of hope. "How'd you get such a good handle on human nature?"

Giles snickered in guilty delight. "I'd *like* to say the streets were my university. Isn't that part of contemporary black folklore? But the fact is, sweetheart, my old man put in a lot of hours with bunions and fallen arches to get me a B.S. in psychology."

"Your father was a podiatrist?" Eve asked with a giggle.

Giles laughed more heartily, an infectious, rollicking basso that shook his chair. "Yeah," he gasped. "Harlan Pennoyer, witchdoctor of the Blackfeet."

\* \* \* \* \*

Jared was miffed with Eve for going to see Giles on her own — at least that's what he tried to make himself believe. In truth, anxieties were crowding in on him again. He was worried about his ambiguous response to Eve's declaration of love the night before. It might really have put her off. He was worried that whatever attachment she was feeling to him would disintegrate as more of his past came to light. He was worried that if he didn't change the way Eve certainly wanted and expected him to, she would lose interest in him.

However Jared cut it, he didn't think he'd be able to hold onto her. Even if one of the threats to their relationship didn't lead to a breakup, there were others in line behind it.

They had walked the mile-and-a-half to Giles' apartment and were almost there. Jared strode along with hands in pockets, eyes focused on some middle distance where there was nothing to see but future heartache. The setting sun painted long, dappled shadows on the tree-lined sidewalk.

"Kayne," Eve said finally, "you're driving me crazy."

"Sorry," he muttered, "but I have a tendency to do that to people."

Eve stopped and pulled Jared's arm, forcing him to face her. "I am not Maggie," she said, her voice quiet but firm. "I like you just the way you are. What's driving me crazy is this tightrope you've put yourself on, convinced you're going to fall. I know that's why you've been testy with me today. You're convinced that no matter what anybody says or does—you, me, Giles, anybody—it's only going to make things worse. That's bullshit, Jared."

"Ah, so you *don't* like me the way I am."

Eve threw up her hands in exasperation. "What's the use?" she cried, and marched into Giles' building. She buzzed his apartment and he buzzed back, admitting his visitors.

Jared followed Eve up three flights of carpeted stairs and stopped her just before she knocked on Giles' door. "You're probably right, as usual." He circled one arm around her waist. As he rapped on the door with his free hand, he drew Eve toward him and kissed her.

A latch clicked. The kiss ended. Giles stood in the doorway, at first looking somewhat awestruck and then delighted to the point of euphoria.

"Kayne," he whispered. "It's about damned time."

"Hey, Jam." Jared smiled warmly.

They embraced each other then, Giles slapping Jared on the back and saying, "My man, my man, how ya been?" They parted, hands still on each other's arms. "By *God*, you're still a handsome devil!" Giles crowed. "When the hell is the Pirate King going to go to seed like the rest of us rummies?"

Jared laughed. "You're not going to seed, buddy. And I'm not the Pirate King anymore."

"You're not and you are." Giles glanced at Eve, his eyes glimmering. "The king is dead; long live the king."

Eve smiled in affirmation and winked at him.

They moved into the living room, a homey jungle of music posters and magazines, overstuffed chairs and spindly plants. Giles explained that his drums were securely locked in a large basement utility closet, where the landlord allowed him to practice during certain daytime hours. In six months, he said, he'd be buying his own home.

Eve was content to sit back and listen to these old friends do their catching up and reminiscing. Occasionally, when they veered too close to one of Jared's sore spots, he became visibly uneasy and quickly changed the subject. But for the most part, the



rapport between the two men was remarkable. Their conversation was charged with love and humor and enthusiasm.

When the good old days were good, Eve realized, they were very, very good...and they still brought Jared a great deal of joy. She desperately wanted him to recapture that fulfillment, to make it real again by getting back on stage.

Giles brought out some wine coolers, lit several candles, and turned on the stereo. Jared settled comfortably into the couch, one arm slung across the back, his left ankle propped on his right knee. Eve lightly fondled his hand as it lay on the cushion beside her.

"You still got the album?" Giles asked, popping open a CD case.

"Yeah, somewhere," Jared said, then added with a wistful chuckle, "God knows why I kept it."

"God knows why as well as you do, my man," Giles replied. "Because it's damned good."

Music spiraled through the room. Lazy and lilting at first, it gradually mounted to a primitive, compelling intensity. The music struck Eve as both muscular and graceful. The rich, distinctive voice of a tenor saxophone growled and bleated, trilled and warbled and crooned over the other instruments, which seemed to be paying homage to it.

Stunned, Eve realized she was listening to Intaglio.

Giles began speaking, his tone respectful. "Carnal," he pronounced. "I don't know what you were thinking on this cut, man, but there's more of the flesh than the spirit in it. Heats *my* blood, I'll tell you."

Jared snickered softly. "Heathen hormones," he murmured.

Giles laughed, too, and Eve looked at each man in wonderment. She didn't know to whom Jared had been referring, himself or the whole group, but the music did have a kind of pagan sensuality. She shivered slightly, feeling a sudden tingle of desire as well as reverence for the horn player.

But the album proved as multifaceted as Kayne himself. There were lyrical songs to balance the driving ones. There were songs playful and melancholy and bewitchingly exotic. Eve was captivated.

"It's enchanting," she said to both men.

Giles nodded, smiling.

"Who wrote the pieces?" Eve asked.

"They were collaborative," Jared said.

Giles cleared his throat. "Excuse me, man, but there's no need for either modesty or P.R. among friends."

Jared slid him a look of mild chagrin but Giles had turned his attention to Eve. "Kayne did most of the composing and then insisted we all get part of the credit."

Jared fidgeted, recreasing the crease in his trousers.

"Kayne," Giles said, "you're wasting it, man. And you know it." His voice almost had an imploring quality and Eve well understood its source.

"That's not for you to decide," Jared replied tightly.

"Fool, it's for anyone who hears you to decide." Giles moved his chair closer to Jared and peered into his face. "I remembered something that might help you, Kayne."

Jared's head snapped up. Eve's wide eyes moved in anxious anticipation between the two men.

Giles put his hand up in a gesture of caution. "Now, hold on. I don't know how much bearing this has on anything. But I sat around all day thinking about...that time. The only noteworthy item I was able to recall—and I don't know if the cops ever dug this up or not—has to do with something Murph had cookin'."

Jared's eyes narrowed, as if the name were anathema to him.

"What was it?" Eve asked.

Giles rubbed the back of his neck. "I don't even like talking about it 'cause I, uh, almost got lured into it. Kayne," —Giles leaned forward, arms on knees—"remember Murph's proclivities in the area of recreation?"

"I remember," Jared said, his voice astringent.

"And remember when he dropped out of sight for a while in Stockholm, and then again in London and Marseilles?"

Jared's eyebrows drew together. "Yeah," he said with more curiosity. "What about it?"

Giles bent back his intertwined fingers. "Well, Murph was turning his hobby into a business."

"What?" Jared whispered in disbelief.

"Um, excuse me," Eve interjected, "but I'm not following this."

Jared looked at her. "Drugs, babe."

"When we got to Europe," Giles added, "Murph wasn't just playing with them anymore, he was working with them...or trying to put them to work for *him*."

## Chapter Ten

Jared shook his head in dismay. "I should've realized something was going on. I should've seen it coming."

"Don't blame yourself, man," Giles said. "I doubt you could've changed him."

"How did *you* find out about this 'business' of Logan's?" Jared asked. "And why didn't you tell me before now?" He fought down a rising anger. These events were far in the past. Giles, any previous mistakes aside, was and always had been a loyal friend and hardworking colleague.

Giles averted his eyes as he answered. He seemed ashamed. "I told you I almost got lured into it myself," he said. "Bills and back taxes and alimony payments were killing me. And Murph knew it. So about a month before Maggie died, he approached me with this proposition. He said he was working as an agent for some major dealer in Miami – setting up a European network by making contacts and such. He said it was the dealer's way of determining how trustworthy he was, how much of an asset he might be to their operation."

"Yeah?" Jared said impatiently. "So how did *you* figure into it?"

"Well, Murph wanted me to help him. He claimed there was good money in it, virtually no risk, and there could be a real big pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. So I considered it for maybe a week – I mean, dude, I was desperate – but then I came to my senses and thought, hell no. This is just plain wrong. It isn't for me. It shouldn't be for anyone." Giles rubbed his eyes, as if watching this mental film made them ache. "I was *going* to tell you, Kayne, so we could figure out what to do about it. But it took me a while to screw up my courage and to find the right words and the right time...especially the right time. We were on a damned hectic schedule – remember? – and you were pretty preoccupied with your own shit."

Jared nodded. "I know. That was right around the time Maggie and I hit the rocks."

"And you were hurtin', man." Giles lowered his voice. His compassion was obvious. "I could see it in your eyes and hear it in your music. Sure, you might've been resigned to Maggie's leaving because you'd known for some time it was in the cards."

"That it was," Jared interjected with an arid chuckle.

He saw Eve dart a glance at him, her eyes full of loving concern. She squeezed his hand.

"Yeah," Giles continued, "and despite that cool self-containment you're so good at slipping into, I knew you were wrung inside out. Because I knew how much hope and effort you'd poured into that marriage, even though Maggie might not have been worth it."

Jared propped his elbows on his knees and cradled his face in his hands. When he finally lifted his head, his “cool self containment” restored, he saw the anguish in Eve’s face.

“So I could hardly come to you,” Giles said very gently, “with another horror story—especially one involving Logan Murphy.”

“One-third of Intaglio and someone I considered a friend. I do understand now, Jam.” Jared settled back against the couch and again took Eve’s hand. He had to keep reminding her how important she was to him. “And shortly after that—” He stopped, his throat clogging.

“Maggie was murdered,” Giles supplied. “There was just too much goin’ on, Kayne. I *never* found the right time to tell you about Murph’s extracurricular activities. And after a point it just seemed...irrelevant.”

“Yup,” Jared said, and he and Giles slipped into a brooding silence.

“Did you ever find out more about this drug operation?” Eve asked Giles.

He seemed to resurface slowly from the dark, hidden well of his memories. “Yes, honey, I did. That’s what came back to me today, while I was dredging up this muck. I’d overheard a conversation between Murph and Maggie.”

Giles seemed disconcerted by the recollection. “You know my hotel room in Paris was adjacent to Murph’s,” he said to Jared, who nodded. “Well, a day or two after I turned down his offer, I was just about ready to crash one night when Murph and Maggie came into his room. He started telling her about this Stateside ‘business venture’ he needed some capital for. He said if he could come up with an initial investment—I didn’t quite catch the figure, but it had a ‘hundred thousand’ in it—he’d more than triple his outlay in six months.”

“The big Miami drug connection,” Eve murmured.

“That’s it,” Giles said. “From what I heard, that was Murph’s pot of gold. His bosses had apparently told him that if he got the nod as a useful operative, they’d let him buy into the business, become a partner. But Murph knew he needed one hefty chunk of cash to get that far.”

“So he hit Maggie up for it,” Jared muttered. He banged a fist on the couch arm and spat out, “Fucker. That’s what he was after all along—the goddamned Bridswell fortune. I can’t believe she bought into that shit!”

“I don’t know if she did or not,” Giles said quickly, maybe trying to placate his friend. “Murph did tell her that he didn’t want to be *given* the money. He said it would be a legitimate loan, repaid in full with considerable interest. Maggie said, ‘You’re damn right it would be a loan. I don’t *give* money to anyone, Logan, including—’” Giles balked visibly. He seemed to shrink in embarrassment.

“Go on, Jam,” Jared said. He tried to give his friend a reassuring smile, but he knew it was limp. “My calluses are getting thicker by the minute.”

Giles' return smile was even more sickly. "She said she didn't give money to anyone, including the illustrious fucking Pirate King."

Jared's face twitched as if the words had assaulted him with physical force. "*Especially* the illustrious fucking Pirate King," he said. "And the fucking Pirate King didn't give a fucking shit." He couldn't bring himself to look at Eve. "So you don't know if any money actually changed hands?"

"No, I don't. Maggie said she'd think about it but she didn't seem real keen on the idea. Then, a few days before her death, Murph told me he was pulling out of the whole scheme. He said the more he'd thought about it, the more he'd realized that drug dealing was a no-win situation. He didn't want to jeopardize his welfare or his career or his relationship with Maggie," —Giles looked down at his hands— "which I knew about by then."

"Which we all knew about by then," Jared added. He felt a twinge of pain for Giles. This certainly wasn't any easier on Jam than it was on him. Or on Eve.

Jared glanced at her. Bravely, she looked back at him as her thumb caressed his hand.

Giles was still studying his thick fingers. "Well," he sighed, "I assumed that was the end of it, so I just let the whole thing drop from my mind."

"And the man at the party?" Eve prodded. "The man who took Jared home?"

Giles shrugged. "I'm sorry, honey, but I don't know diddly about him. He was just some slick, wealthy dude who liked our music and fed me compliments in broken English. That's it."

Jared shook his head thoughtfully. "No, I don't think that's it. Just like I don't buy Murphy's sudden conversion to virtue." He looked at Eve with an intensity of purpose she hadn't, up to now, felt on this trip. "I've got to find Logan, babe. Will you come with me?"

She smiled, seemingly grateful for his determination. "I'm at your side for the duration. You know that."

Jared kissed her hand, then turned back to Giles. "Do you know where he is, Jam?"

Giles was slipping another CD into the deck. "Yeah," he said, his tone ironic. "I know where he is...or was." He ambled across the living room as a Pat Metheny album began to play. He stopped at what appeared to be a desk, its top awash with litter. After shuffling through papers and pushing aside curios and mementoes, he pulled out an envelope and came back to the couch.

"Here," Giles said, handing the envelope to Jared. "One of my last contacts with the infamous Logan Murphy."

Jared opened it and extracted a small sheet of lined paper. The note was brief. Jared glanced at Eve, noticed her curiosity, and began reading aloud.

*Jam – Well, I let my dumb ass get busted. No big deal, though. Got an excellent lawyer through some friends in ‘high’ places. Ha-ha. So how about dropping your old pal Murph a line? I get bored, man, and I get starved for news from the home front.*

Jared paused, pursing his lips, “P.S,” he mumbled. “How’s the King?” Sighing, he tossed the letter onto the coffee table and wearily rubbed his eyes. “Well, that was inevitable. But he’s probably been paroled since then.”

“Paroled?” Eve echoed.

“Yup. Looks like our ‘old pal Murph’ landed in the Big House. And you, babe,” – Jared patted Eve’s knee – “better overcome your fear of flying. Soon.”

She gaped at him. “Big House? Fear of flying? What in the world are you talking about, Kayne?”

“This letter,” he explained, “was mailed from a state prison...and I don’t mean Joliet.”

“He means Raiford,” Giles muttered around a fingernail he was chewing. “The Union Correctional Institution.”

“And that’s in Florida,” Jared added.

“A prison? In Florida?” Eve whimpered.

Finally, Jared was able to laugh.

They spent some time discussing their next course of action. Eve confessed the thought of a plane ride to Jacksonville made her want to throw up. But Giles and Jared kept making jokes about her phobia, and those, combined with Jared’s tender reassurances and the sedative effect of the wine, finally seemed to relax her. She even admitted to looking forward to this second trip. Each passing moment and each bit of progress in their investigation made Jared feel closer to her, despite his romantic caution. He sensed that even if they had to parachute into the mountains of Nepal, she was determined to stand by him—at least for the duration of this search. It was both a terrifying and heartwarming realization.

As evening painted itself into night, Giles and Jared talked more exclusively and excitedly about music. They occasionally sang a few bars of something, and Eve expressed her delighted amazement over Jared’s voice. Giles revealed to her that “Kayne wouldn’t sing lead because all he wanted to do was play that witchy horn. Actually, he has a better voice than Logan.”

“So do you, for that matter,” Jared laughed.

“Then why the hell,” Giles sputtered in response, “was Murph our lead vocalist?”

“Because he threatened to hold his breath until he turned blue if we didn’t give him *some* spotlight.”

For some reason they both thought this enormously funny. Howling with laughter, they railed on. Their offbeat humor and amusement must have been contagious, because soon Eve was laughing so hard she said her stomach ached.

Near midnight, she asked if she could again hear the Intaglio album. Giles gladly obliged and suggested she wear the headphones this time. Eve sat cross-legged on a large pillow before the stereo. She listened with eyes closed.

As Giles approached Jared he jerked a thumb over his shoulder, "She's stuck on you, man," he said quietly. "This isn't just some groupie crush, either."

Jared lifted his eyebrows and smiled with reservation. "I don't know if it's me so much as my former career as a horn player. We've both encountered it a thousand times, Jam—ladies who don't really see the man, the *whole* man, behind the image."

Scowling slightly, Giles leaned against a windowsill and drummed his fingers on its underside. "Come into the kitchen with me," he said, and began walking toward it.

Jared rose and followed. He knew a lecture was coming—some pearls of wisdom from Uncle Giles Pennoyer, B.S. in psychology, Northern Illinois University.

Giles was pacing slowly around the kitchen table, his sturdy arms crossed over his sturdy chest. "Do you have any conception," he asked, "of how that woman in there feels about you?"

Letting out a chuckling sigh, Jared parked his butt on the edge of the table. "Some," he said, trying to sound neutral. "And if you're working up a probe into my love life—"

Giles stopped and gave him a defiant, challenging look. "Yeah, that's exactly what I'm doing. I don't particularly care about your flings over the past four years but I do care about Eve. She's not just a fling, I hope."

Jared looked down and drew his upper lip between his teeth. One foot began to tap nervously. "No, she's not just a fling."

"Then why don't you let her know that, man?" Giles' voice was more strident. "She's gone on you, Kayne! She's absolutely devoted to you! Can't you see that?"

"Maybe I don't want to see it," Jared murmured. "Maybe she's just fooling herself."

Giles snorted and shook his head. "You've been on this Earth how many years—thirty-eight?—and you can't tell the difference between infatuation and heart-and-soul love?"

"Yeah, well, I haven't had much experience with heart-and-soul love...have I."

Giles softened. "Okay, man, I see what you mean. But this is your once-in-a-lifetime chance to make up for that. Eve's *in love* with you, Kayne. How can you stay cold?"

One corner of Jared's mouth jerked toward a bittersweet smile. "I'm not cold, Jam, believe me."

"Then how *do* you feel?"

Jared stood up and strolled over to the kitchen door. He gazed at Eve, still stationed before the stereo, her body swaying slightly to his music. "I'm beginning to think I can't live without her, buddy. And that's just too damned frightening to contemplate."

\* \* \* \* \*

Eve and Jared hadn't counted on getting back to Illinois within a week, because they hadn't counted on being thwarted so soon in their investigation. Logan's incarceration and possible parole presented a whole new set of obstacles which would take some time to overcome. Before tackling this project, Eve and Jared decided to make the most of their stay in Minnesota.

They spent four days in Minneapolis and, in that time, enjoyed more entertainment than Eve had seen in months—a play at the Guthrie, a tour of the Walker Art Center, several memorable meals and some excellent live music. Giles was an able and enthusiastic guide. When Eve and Jared ended their vacation, they did so regretfully.

After their first disappointing night in Minneapolis they resumed making love with their usual ardor. But neither Eve nor Jared brought up their feelings again.

Back on home turf, they hectically divided their time between work, the restoration of Eve's house, and the elusive Logan Murphy. A letter to the Florida State Prison at Raiford came back, after being forwarded, marked ADDRESSEE UNKNOWN. Logan had evidently been paroled, taken up residence in Dade County, then moved, perhaps without leaving a forwarding address. The only other clue to his whereabouts was a woman he'd mentioned in one of his letters to Giles—Janelle Harrison of Coral Gables. Jared called her one evening, right after his letter to Logan had been returned.

The phone ring sounded peculiar and foreign to him as he waited for Ms. Harrison's answer. It seemed to be just one more indication of his distance from Logan—in terms of years and miles, outlook and lifestyle. As Jared sat at his desk, the receiver trilling in his ear, he wondered for the millionth time how they could've grown so far apart.

Finally, an annoyed, "Hello!"

Jared felt a tic begin to accelerate at the outer corner of his left eye. The woman didn't sound sweet-tempered. "May I speak to Janelle, please?"

"Why? Who is this?"

*Thanks for making this easy on me*, he thought wryly. "My name is Jared Kayne. I live in the Chicago area. I'm an old friend of Logan Murphy."

The subsequent static-filled pause was maddening. Jared could almost hear the woman's mind whirring. "This is Janelle," she finally answered. An undercurrent of suspicion had replaced her belligerence. "I've heard of you. Logan's mentioned you," she said warily.

"Well, I need to see him." No sense detouring through polite formalities. Jared could feel his own aggression building—a determination not to let this woman demand complicated personal information while evading simple questions. "It's very important," he added.

"Too bad," she replied in the same brusque way. "You've called the wrong girl, Mister Kayne. I ain't heard from that bastard in eight months. A mutual acquaintance told me he latched on to some beautician from Gainesville who used to visit her brother at Raiford."



Jared muttered a curse. "Do you have *any* idea how I might track him down?"

There was a sour snicker. "Oh, I might have a few...but I doubt any of 'em would appeal to you."

"Try me."

"Hm, I guess you're pretty serious about this." Janelle sounded as impressed as she was likely capable of being. Then, more archly, "Some old scores left to settle, Mister Kayne?"

Her tone made him bristle. "Maybe. But that's *my* business."

"It should be but it probably ain't," Janelle said in a matter-of-fact way. "Logan's got a big mouth."

"How big?" Jared asked, his hackles still rising.

"Big enough to tell me and God knows how many other people that he stole your wife and then she, uh...died under mysterious circumstances."

Jared had been clenching and unclenching his jaw until the muscles began to ache. "Yeah, well, I intend to clear up that mystery once and for all."

"You didn't kill her, then?"

*The lady certainly doesn't beat around the bush*, Jared thought. "No, I didn't do it," he said, responding to her directness in kind. He realized with a start it was the first time he'd allowed himself to believe firmly in his own innocence.

"I didn't think so," Janelle said, shocking him further. "I always had the feeling Logan didn't think so, either. Sour grapes can make nasty things come out of a person's mouth, Mister Kayne...sour grapes and fear."

Jared frowned. "Fear?"

Janelle paused again. "Listen, I don't wanna get involved in this, so I'm not gonna lay any theories on you. Once I hang up this phone, both you and Logan 'Big Britches' Murphy can consider me history. If you wanna talk to someone about him, talk to Charlie Buckley."

"Who's —"

"His old cellmate. Charlie's got a big mouth, too. Makes Logan's look like the eye of a goddamn needle. Charlie's the one who wrote to me and told me about the hairdresser from Gainesville. Don't bother askin' me her name, though, 'cause I don't know and don't care to."

Jared had already grabbed a notepad and scribbled down *Charlie Buckley. UCI – Raiford*. "How the hell can I get in to see this guy? He doesn't know me from Adam."

Janelle chuckled. "I can tell you're not familiar with penal institutions."

Jared didn't respond. A Parisian jail was different from American penitentiaries. He tapped his pen, unconsciously creating a Pointillist rendition of Eve's initials. After the *K* he scrawled *ayne*.

"Here's what you do, Mister Kayne."

He jerked up his pen at the sound of Janelle's voice, then swiftly blacked out his doodling.

"Write a letter to Charlie," Janelle instructed. "I've got his ID number. Just introduce yourself and make your intentions clear. But don't go into detail or get too intense. You'll end up either making the censors suspicious or scaring Charlie. Then offer him something."

"I don't understand. Offer him what?" There was a knock at the study door. Jared cupped a hand over the phone's mouthpiece and called out, "Come on in, babe."

The door inched open. Smiling tentatively, Eve tiptoed into the room. Jared motioned her over to the desk.

"Mister Kayne," Janelle said like a schoolteacher, "an inmate won't often do something for nothing...especially for a stranger. He'll have to go through channels to petition to see you so you've got to make it worth his while. Tell him you'll put money in his prison account. The more the better, of course."

"I see."

"If he agrees to meet with you, he'll send you a visitation application, DC6111A, I think, unless they changed the number by now. You fill it out and return it to the Classification Department. If you don't have any kinda serious record, you should breeze right through. Then Charlie will write or call to let you know you've been approved. It'll take...oh, maybe two weeks to a month. Wait a sec and I'll get the address."

Jared heard the muffled clatter of the receiver being laid down. He smiled up at Eve—who still stood at a respectful distance—and patted his lap. She scooted over to him and sat down, wiggling provocatively.

"Making any progress?" Eve asked softly. She eased her fingers into Jared's hair, which was getting shaggy.

He shifted under Eve's weight, his body already responding to the cushiony press of her bottom. "I'm making progress, all right." Eve teased him with another wiggle, and his cock swelled obediently. "But if I keep making progress," he added, "I'm going to progress myself right into—"

"Got it!" came Janelle's voice through the receiver.

Jared snorted a laugh. "Not quite yet," he murmured.

Eve dipped her head and began nibbling and licking his neck. Jared squirmed again. His hand slid automatically up and down Eve's back. Another series of thunks came through the phone line. Jared cleared his throat, trying to ignore the lattice of desire spreading out from his hips.

"Here it is," Janelle said. She read off Charlie Buckley's rather unfashionable address, complete with a six-digit prisoner identification number.

More inclined to be cordial now, Jared thanked her sincerely and wished her luck. She said she was certainly due some and would probably get it now that Logan was out of her life. They hung up and Janelle Harrison became history.

"Looks like you've got another lead," Eve murmured into Jared's ear.

"Mm-hm." He turned his head and gave her a hungry kiss, his lips parting to invite the entry of her tongue. His fingers deftly undid the buttons of Eve's blouse, then eased beneath the cloth to fondle her breasts. "Do you think we'll ever get tired of this?"

Eve arched her back and sucked in her breath as Jared's thumbnail flicked one nipple into keen sensitivity. "Not as long as your fingers stay that nimble," she forced out. Jared's back muscles rippled exquisitely beneath her hands as he continued his skillful caress.

"Guess I'll just have to keep playing the sax, then."

The statement made Eve's mind switch tracks. She didn't take it in the context of their erotic banter but in the context of one of her fondest wishes. Slowly and somewhat reluctantly, she pulled away from Jared and used her eyes to convey her fantasy—that he should indeed keep playing but he should start doing so on stage again.

"I heard you and Giles talking about starting another group," Eve said, "when you thought I was asleep in the cab that night."

Jared began buttoning her blouse. "Giles did most of the talking."

"What he said made sense."

"To you, maybe." Jared finally looked into Eve's eyes. He seemed to be trying to drive his point home once and for all. "But you've never been there, babe. You don't know what that kind of life is like."

Dauntless, she held his gaze. "I do know, Jared, that *any* life is what a person makes it. And if you cross paths with people who aren't good for you, people whose values and goals are at odds with your own, then you just get those people out of your way and move on. There will always be others who *are* good and *can* help...and do care." Eve paused, then tenderly cradled his face. "I'll be there for you, if you want me to be."

Jared stared at her. Then he rose from the chair, guiding Eve to her feet. "Come with me," he said in a voice that sounded oddly mechanical.

She thought he might be leading her to the bedroom, as much to get her mind off this subject as to make love. But instead Jared went to the music room. He lit the lone white candle, pulled the bench away from the piano, and steered Eve over to it, gently forcing her to sit. Without a word he moved to the middle of the room and plucked his neckstrap from the floor. He put it on, lifted the saxophone from its stand, clipped the horn in place before his body. Pulling off the mouthpiece, he licked the reed a few times and began to play.

Eve's eyes were moist and unblinking as the music swirled around her, a distillation of some deep and dizzying emotion. It seemed to seek out her heart and

reverberate there. Gradually, the intricate embroidery of pure, clear notes revealed a melody – Ben E. King’s “Stand By Me”.

Eve’s breath seemed to stop. Jared appeared as aloof and untouchable as a god while he played, but his music was speaking to her, embracing her. The intimacy of the gesture seemed even more profound than lovemaking.

It wasn’t just communication, it was communion. And Eve suddenly knew what Giles had meant about music being like prayer to Jared.

The song ended as softly as a feather floating to the ground. Eve stared at her lover, touched and awed, while the room wavered through her tears. His face was suffused with a strange calm. He’d never looked so beautiful to her.

“I hope you remember the words,” Jared said quietly, “because they were part of the message.”

“I remember,” Eve whispered without air.

He watched her a few beats longer, the candlelight lavishing his features with liquid gold and onyx. “I love you, Eve.”

## Chapter Eleven

"I feel like an actor in a B movie," Eve said, grasping Jared's arm.

They both scanned the twelve-foot-high cyclone fence. Its top was lined with parallel strings of barbed wire around which twined large, vicious loops of razor ribbon. There were towers, sinister and imposing, at maybe one hundred and fifty-foot intervals, each manned by a pair of armed guards. Twenty feet inside the outer fence was another one equally intimidating. German shepherds patrolled the space in between. Jared said he vaguely recalled having heard something—years ago, while he was on the road—about one particularly ferocious dog with gold teeth. A legend, no doubt.

He glanced down at Eve with an ironic smile. "Welcome to Raiford, a great place to spend your Florida weekend."

Eve stopped just before they reached the guard shack stationed next to a bifurcated gate. "Kayne," she whispered, looking apprehensive, "they don't have that electric chair anymore, do they? 'Old Sparky'?"

Jared's forehead creased. "Who?" he asked, and then it hit him. He dissolved into snickers while Eve continued to stare at him, her consternation undiminished. "No," Jared whispered back. "Old Sparky was retired. Besides, I think it used to be at the East Unit, a half-mile away. Come on, Dutch, let's get this visit to the slammer over with."

Eve felt fractionally better, knowing she wouldn't be fenced in with one of the country's most historically notorious killing machines. Still, she anxiously asked Jared if he'd remembered not to put more than fifty dollars and a vehicle key in his pockets, in addition to the unopened pack of Marlboros for Charlie. He assured her he had. But her stomach was still a snake pit as she and Jared approached the bored-looking guard at the entry gate. A name tag above his shirt pocket read *Dinsmore, L.*

Assuming a businesslike attitude, Jared gave him their names along with Charlie Buckley's name and I.D. number. Saying nothing in response, the guard merely picked up a clipboard, turned, and reached for a phone. Eve stood so close to Jared she might have been welded to him. Her nerves were as taut as catgut on a violin.

Everything within the compound, she noted, was colored in dreary shades—from the bricks to the guard uniforms. Yet, from afar, the solid rectangular buildings had had an eerie pinkish tinge, as if bathed in some eternal sunset. The colors struck Eve as sadly symbolic.

The guard murmured something to Jared, who tersely thanked him. "Here's the scoop," he said to Eve. He led her to a sturdy gate on the left side of the sally port, which admitted them to a featureless hallway. "There's an antechamber at the end of this corridor. We'll both pass through metal detectors and then be pat-searched, you by

a female. Then we're on our own. Charlie's being paged over the P.A. system. He'll meet us in the visiting room. Are you still sure you want to go through with this?"

Eve's throat and stomach knotted simultaneously when Jared ran down the entry procedure, but she nodded in affirmation. "We've come this far together, Kayne, and I'm not going to let a little unpleasantness make me turn tail and run."

He stopped and swiveled Eve toward him, then tenderly cradled her face in his hands. "You're an exceptional woman, Astra, and I love you so much I could shout it through every cellblock."

Eve smiled blissfully as she hugged him. "That's enough to turn this place into Disney World, Mister Kayne. That's enough to make me wrestle alligators and think I'm at a petting zoo."

"Is it enough to get you on a plane again?" Jared chuckled, nestling his face in her hair. Eve had white-knuckled her way through the whole trip from O'Hare.

"Only if you sing to me the way you did on the way down here," she said. Eve adored his voice—a rich, expressive, slightly gruff baritone that never skidded off-key.

"I'll sing to you, kiss you, massage your neck, your thighs, your—"

"Let's leave for the airport right now," Eve murmured with a shiver. But of course they couldn't leave...not yet.

Arm in arm, they resumed their bizarre Sunday stroll toward the prison's visiting area. Smiling, reflective, Jared marveled at the scope and power of Eve's love. It made him lightheaded with wonder and gratitude and joy. Even in this dismal place, he felt like the recipient of a miracle—and it was one not even an army of guards could take away from him.

She seemed to adore everything about him, from his rusty singing voice to his skewed sense of humor to the slight bow of his legs. She even professed to like his sorry excuse for an omelet—what he called "scrambled eggs in drag". Impulsively, he lifted Eve's hand and pressed the palm to his lips.

"I'm mad about you, Kayne," she said almost inaudibly, as if to verify his thoughts.

Swaddled in a protective aura of love, they breezed through their respective searches without taking much notice. This "ordeal", Eve realized, wasn't that at all. It was a challenge they were facing together, fortified by determination and optimism. It was a stepping stone to...

*Our future.*

Eve glanced at Jared as they entered the visiting room. She wondered if he ever considered "their" future.

"Well now," Jared sighed, looking around, "this is like being back in high school."

"I don't know about *your* high school," Eve said through immobile lips, "but mine wasn't patrolled by uniformed guards with whistles on their shirts and Department of Correction patches on their shoulders."

The room *was* like a sizable cafeteria, filled with metal folding chairs grouped around long tables with laminated tops. Its evenly spaced windows were snugly covered with steel mesh. Vending machines hunkered against one wall. A smattering of inmates dressed in prison-issue shirts and pants sat far apart from one another with their guests. The room buzzed with voices.

Eve and Jared found an unoccupied table and sat down, close together. The guards, Eve noted with relief, seemed to carry no weapons, but their eyes relentlessly roamed the room. She linked her hands on the table.

"How's Charlie going to recognize us?" she asked Jared.

"I told him to look for a beautiful blond sitting beside a lanky nerd with a red handkerchief in his breast pocket."

Eve chuckled uneasily. "You're not a lanky nerd. You're prettier than I am, Kayne."

"A lot more modest, too. *Now don't you tickle me,*" he hissed.

Eve withdrew her fingers from the vicinity of his ribs.

"We don't want to draw attention to ourselves," Jared muttered. "It might make some zealous guard or restless inmate think I'm carrying a concealed fountain pen or something."

A door opened at the end of the room opposite the visitors' entrance. Jared quickly eyed the prisoner, who studied him more boldly. The man's sharp gaze then shifted to Eve. One side of his mouth hooked into a smile. He headed in their direction.

"There's our man," Jared whispered.

Charlie Buckley was short and thin and balding, more the picture of a comptroller than a convict. But there was a kind of devil-may-care bounce in his step that seemed to vibrate right up to his small, twinkling and undeniably crafty eyes. He pulled a chair away from the table across from his visitors. Whipping it around, he plopped down ungracefully, crossing his arms over the chair back.

"Hello, Mister Buckley," Jared said. "Glad you could make it." He slid the pack of cigarettes across the table.

Charlie shrugged indifferently as he slapped a hand over the Marlboros. "I had to juggle my multitudinous commitments but I finally managed to slip you into my social calendar. Anything for a friend of Murphy." He studied his fingernails, which, Eve noticed, were amazingly well manicured.

"Anything for a fatter bank account," Jared countered. "Murphy hated my guts and you probably know it."

Charlie ignored the observations. "May I call you Jared and Eve?" He didn't bother suggesting they call him Charlie.

"Go right ahead."

"So," Charlie said disinterestedly, "you're that hot-dog saxophone player I've heard so much about. Murphy said you were a grandstanding pretty-boy. A 'peacock', he called you...among other less flattering things. But then Murphy's outlook *was* a bit

jaundiced." Charlie's narrow lips crawled into a vulpine smile as he looked at Eve. "You, m'lady, I haven't heard anything about. My loss."

"I didn't know Logan," she said, "and I'm glad I didn't."

"Aw, he wasn't so bad," Charlie drawled. "A little self-aggrandizing, maybe, but many insecure people are. Murphy was too much a naïve, bumbling, posturing fool to be truly offensive." He paused and studied Jared. "My assessment doesn't seem to surprise you, Mister Kayne. Uh, Jared."

"Why should it? I knew the guy for over twenty-five years."

"But not well enough," Charlie said, "which is why you're here." He leaned forward, craning his neck. "Am I right?"

"You're right."

"And you think I just might know something that *will* surprise you."

Jared paused before saying, "Right again."

Apparently satisfied by his visitor's honesty, Charlie sat back. "I can tell that you and sweet Eve are no slouches, Jared. In fact, I inferred some time ago that Murphy felt threatened by people he felt were superior to him. He looked up to you, which is precisely *why* he hated your guts."

Jared raised one eyebrow but said nothing.

"Did he hate *you*, Mister Buckley?" Eve asked. She couldn't help but notice Charlie's obvious intelligence and somewhat eccentric snobbery.

Charlie inclined his head deferentially. "Thank you for the indirect compliment. But I'm a con, Eve, and to Murphy's way of thinking that hardly made me worthy of respect. So, no, he didn't hate me. He probably didn't have an opinion of me one way or the other." Charlie hunched over the chair back as his eyes moved tauntingly between Eve and Jared. "I'm sure that's why Murphy ran off at the mouth in front of me. And I must say," — he smirked, baiting them — "I'm an excellent listener."

Jared was quickly tiring of all this beating around the bush. Charlie Buckley seemed to enjoy having a captive audience as much as Logan ever did, but this wasn't the time to indulge him.

"Mister Buckley," Jared said evenly, "I'd appreciate it greatly if you could shed any light on the death of my wife."

Once spoken, it seemed an absurd request, a ridiculous long shot. Jared felt an impending headache and absently rubbed his brow.

Charlie nodded. "I suspected that was the reason for your interest in my financial wellbeing."

"Well what the hell else would it be?" Jared snapped. Several people turned to look at him.

Eve put a hand on his arm. "Take it easy," she whispered.



Charlie was regarding them with genuine interest now, all pretension set aside. "So you never did find out."

Jared's eyes shot up to Buckley's face. He faintly felt Eve's fingers grip his forearm. "Find out what?" he asked in a strained voice.

Charlie sighed and tapped his chair. "Do you know about the loan?"

"From Maggie?"

"I guess that's her name. Yes, Maggie."

"Start there," Jared said. "Start with the loan."

Buckley took a moment to collect his thoughts. "I don't know some of the details and have probably forgotten others," he began carefully. "Murphy used to brag about how he'd won over this super rich, super sophisticated woman," — Charlie nodded in Jared's direction — "who happened to be your wife, sir. And he took particular pride in the fact that he'd taken her away from you, whom he called by some fanciful name that escapes me."

Eve glanced at Jared, wondering if he would fill in the blank.

"That's not important," he murmured.

"No, I suppose it isn't," Buckley agreed. "Anyway, Murphy said he'd managed to charm, persuade, and otherwise manipulate his girlfriend into coughing up this enormous amount of money that would make him a kingpin in some Miami-based drug empire. Now, as soon as I heard that, I knew he was being scammed, taken for a ride. As is the case with all 'royal' families, kingpins in any organized crime operation are born, not made. You can't just buy your way into the inner circle."

Jared was listening intently, his arms folded on the table, his gaze glued to Buckley's face. "How did Logan meet these people?"

Charlie hitched up his shoulders. "I don't know. That's the one part of the story about which he was unusually discreet. Never gave me a who, when, how, or where. I assume he was still part of that network while he was here at Raiford, so he must've been shrewd enough to know how to protect his own interests...and his own skin."

"By keeping his mouth shut," Eve said.

"That's the only way," Charlie confirmed. "Tried, true, and time-honored. But whatever the circumstances of his involvement, I suspect those dealers had Murphy pegged as a chump — albeit a chump who had access to vast financial resources — so they played on his greed and megalomania by making promises they had no intention of keeping."

"But what about Maggie?" Jared interrupted. "What about the money? She *did* give it to him?"

Charlie raised a forefinger. "Not give, sir, lend. And she was adamant about getting it back, with substantial interest, in a specified amount of time."

Puzzled, Eve clutched Jared's arm. "But Giles told us Logan had dropped the whole scheme, that he'd pulled out."

Jared made a scoffing sound. "I said then that his sudden liaison with truth, justice, and the American way just didn't ring true."

Charlie smiled sardonically. "Murphy patted himself on the back for that, too. He thought he'd thrown everyone off the track. Off a couple tracks, actually."

"What do you mean?" Jared asked.

"I'm getting to that," Charlie said. "You see, your wife had threatened Murphy. She told him if he didn't honor the terms of the loan, she'd either blow the whistle on him or sic her daddy's goons on him. But Murphy didn't know just when he'd be able to repay her. I mean, we're talking big bucks here, and a rather unpredictable investment. And after the lady issued that distasteful ultimatum, Murphy wasn't much *inclined* to repay her." Charlie's face and voice dropped further. "Not in money, that is."

The room turned into a vacuum as Buckley's implication became clear. Jared felt all sensation drain from his body, leaving him numb and hollow. Through his peripheral vision he caught a hazy glimpse of Eve, her face a bone-white mask. Both she and Charlie Buckley were staring at him.

"Oh my God," Jared choked. "Logan...Logan did it." His voice, only a soft rasp, roared through his head like a buzz saw.

"Not himself," Charlie corrected.

His softened manner tempered the horror of his revelation, and Eve felt a surge of respect for Buckley. For all his jaded worldliness, there was more than a touch of real sensitivity in the man. She took Jared's hand in both of hers and hoped Charlie wouldn't lapse again into glib cynicism.

"It was that mysterious fan, wasn't it," Eve ventured.

Charlie nodded. "Murphy thought he'd staged a real coup by hiring the guy, and I suppose he had. Murphy called him the Shadow. A stranger among strangers in a strange land. A respectable but anonymous foreigner who makes a brief appearance, displays impeccable manners, and performs a simple favor...then conveniently but understandably moves on."

"And that favor," Jared said, "was taking a drunken musician back to the hotel where the drunken musician was staying." His voice was stronger now but chillingly flat and measured. Eve still held his hand. It felt at once lifeless and abnormally warm.

"That was indeed the favor," Charlie said. "He laced your drinks with Roofies to ensure your loss of consciousness and memory, then he dumped you in your wife's room instead of your own."

"Laced the drinks with what?" Eve asked, looking back and forth between him and Jared.

"Rohypnol," Kayne said bitterly. "One of the so-called 'date rape' drugs. I should've fucking guessed that. All the signs were there."

Charlie pulled a cigarette from his new pack and tapped it on the table. "As they say in the old gangster movies, Jared, you were slipped a mickey and then framed."

Sliding the cigarette between his lips, Charlie struck a wooden match. It flared with a spitting noise. He inhaled deeply, with relish, as if his smokes were few and far between. "From what I could tell, Murphy was immensely pleased with himself for having engineered the whole thing. He got his money, free and clear, and with the same stroke he got revenge on someone he virulently resented. How efficient," Charlie added with a wry sneer.

"And now the sonofabitch is on the streets again," Jared grated.

"Weeell...not exactly."

"What, did he skip the country?" Eve asked. "Is he being taken care of by his 'bosses'?"

Charlie snorted. "I told you, they had Murphy pegged for a chump. They got the money he'd wheedled out of Maggie Kayne and then they used him for a while in nickle-and-dime transactions, just to keep him occupied. But he obviously had no savvy—hell, I could tell that as soon as I met him—and he proved it by getting himself busted in no time flat."

"But," —Eve shook her head in confusion—"he said in a letter, a letter to a mutual friend, that he knew some influential people. He intimated they had lawyers who could help him. When you wrote back to us and confirmed that Logan had been paroled, we assumed it was because of these...these connections."

"True," Charlie said. "That's how he got out so soon. They *wanted* him out."

"Then they didn't abandon him," Eve suggested, trying to untangle this paradox.

"That depends on how you define the term."

Jared leaned across the table. "What the hell are you yammering about, Buckley?" he snapped. Then his voice lowered, becoming both ominous and imploring. "Don't play games with me, man, 'cause I've got some unfinished business with my old friend."

"I know you do, Mister Kayne." Again, Charlie seemed humble, sympathetic, as if his humanity had been jarred. He dropped his cigarette to the floor and mashed it with his shoe. Then, looking squarely at his visitors, he flattened his palms on the table and took a deep breath. "Dear people, why do you think I'm telling you all of this? Because Murphy was a snake in the grass?"

"Sounds like a good enough reason to me," Eve muttered.

"Wrong-o. Not in this place," Charlie said. "I'm acquainted with plenty of reptiles, Eve, but the fact that they're despicable doesn't fill me with a burning desire to disclose all their ugly secrets. Self-righteousness paired with loose lips tends to shorten an inmate's sentence, and life span, quite abruptly."

"How about because I made you three hundred dollars richer?" Jared said a bit snidely.

"All the money in the world couldn't persuade me to lay my life on the line, Jared." Charlie looked off to one side and grew pensive for a moment. "I've been thinking of

you ever since Murphy shot off his mouth about his dastardly deed. Believe it or not," —Charlie smiled wanly—"I hate seeing decent folks get shafted by people they trust. As far as I was concerned, Murphy never deserved the privilege of my silence. Now, that's what made me *want* to talk to you. What made it *safe* to talk to you is another story altogether. Without it, I wouldn't be here."

"I appreciate your compassion," Jared said, touched but still unsure of Buckley's point. "However, you haven't told me whether Logan's free or back in prison somewhere."

Buckley's lips twisted into a dour, ironic smirk. "Neither, either, or both." He turned up his hands. "It's a philosophical conundrum. After Murphy got out, the very hand that sprung him smote him; the mouth he'd been feeding bit him. Logan Murphy," —Buckley dropped his hands to the table with a soft, conclusive thud—"is dead."

\* \* \* \* \*

Jared was largely silent as he drove their rental car back to Jacksonville, and he and Eve slept away their plane ride to Chicago. When they got into his car, parked since the previous afternoon at O'Hare International, Eve was ready to talk.

"Kayne?" she began. "How are you feeling?"

He wasn't sure how he felt—sapped of both thought and emotion, perhaps, and yet tensely alert. "I'm on autopilot right now, babe. Just want to get home."

In the otherworldly glow of the dashboard lights, his face looked haggard, his expression detached. Eve hurt for him so much she could have wept, but she was glad for him, too. The riddle of Maggie's death had been solved at last. Jared was blameless, himself a victim.

"Is what we've learned going to change anything?" Eve asked.

Jared slid her a weary, puzzled glance. His mind wasn't up to guessing games. "That's a pretty broad question. Could you be a little more specific?"

Eve looked out the window at colonies of lights lining the expressway. They gradually thinned as the car sped west, away from the city. "I meant," she said, "are you going to go on living the same life?" Eve turned her eyes back to Jared and saw his jaw muscles flexing.

"I don't see why not." He kept staring straight ahead as his grip on the steering wheel tightened.

Eve searched his face a moment longer, then gazed at her intertwined fingers. Damn it, he was retreating again, already planning to seek refuge in that innocuous, routine profession of his. Everything Charlie Buckley said had only pushed Jared further into his protective shell. Eve had hoped those revelations would free him.

"Jared," she went on, "after your phone call to Janelle last month—the evening you first played for me—I got the feeling that you...that you were considering going back into music. And I got the same impression when you and Giles were talking."

He cut the steering wheel sharply to the right. Startled, Eve grabbed the armrest on her door. The car snarled onto the highway's gravel shoulder and lurched to a halt.

Breathing heavily, Jared glared at her. "That was before our enlightening little jaunt to Raiford."

Stupefied, Eve put a hand to her forehead and blinked at him. "But Charlie answered all the questions that have hung you up for four years. He laid everything to rest."

"He laid *nothing* to rest!" Jared shouted, pounding the dashboard, and Eve cringed. "He made all the ghosts start walking again. Not only that, he gave the worst ones faces. The killers have faces now, Eve, and one of them is Logan's." Jared paused, his volcanic gaze suddenly blurring behind a veil of tears. He abruptly looked away.

"I'm so sorry for you," Eve said in an anguished whisper.

Jared closed his eyes and rubbed them. He'd borne up this long, he couldn't fall apart now. There were some crucial points to be made. If he didn't make them firmly and rationally, the issue would drag on forever. And that would be intolerable. He turned toward Eve again.

"I do not want to relive that nightmare," Jared explained, struggling to keep his voice level. "Not any part of it, not to any degree. Not the drugs, the rivalries, the betrayals, not the selfishness that led to those things...and more. I don't want friends who aren't really friends and lovers who aren't really lovers. I don't want to see any more people deceived or destroyed." Jared leaned toward Eve, his fists clenched in front of him. "Do you have any idea," he rasped, "how all that *shit* has torn me apart?"

Eve inhaled as tears spilled down her cheeks. "Yes, I know," she said, her voice cracked and feeble. With trembling fingers she touched Jared's hair. "I know." She carelessly wiped her face.

"Then why in God's name do you keep trying to get me to change my life?"

"Because it's time to rebuild!" Eve said more stridently. "Things don't have to be the way they were back then. You still have your strength of character and your talent. You still have me and Giles and thousands of other people who respect and believe in you. Damn it, Kayne, don't deprive yourself and all the rest of us of the joy we take in your music. I really couldn't stand to see you relinquish fulfillment just to minimize the risks in your life. I couldn't stand sitting back and watching you merely *exist* because you let some vital part of yourself die!"

Eve continued pleading with her eyes, but Jared simply turned to face the road again. Motionless, he clutched the wheel for a minute. "I didn't think you could," he said tonelessly, then started the car.

Eve watched him in bewilderment as he steered back onto the highway. "What are you trying to tell me?"

"Just what we've both known all along, beneath our pretty delusions."

"Delusions?"

A semi rumbled by, passing them, and Jared used its wall of noise to conceal a snuffle. He stretched his eyes wide, blinked carefully, relaxed them. The moisture ebbed.

*It has to be this way.*

"You want me to get back on stage again, don't you," Jared said.

Stunned and mute, Eve gaped at him.

"Well, don't you?"

"I...yes, I'd love to see you —"

"And you'd hate like hell for me to keep working a desk job." Jared gave her a piercing glance. "Three-piece suits, short haircuts and even shorter breakfasts, goodbye and hello pecks on the cheek, boring evenings with the newspaper...unless I worked late, of course. You'd hate that, wouldn't you." When she didn't answer, Jared raised his voice. "Wouldn't you, Eve?"

"Yes!" she cried. "Because it isn't you!"

"Ah," Jared said softly, "but it is. And you knew that the first time we met." He switched on the radio, which was tuned to an FM jazz station. After a few bars of music came from the speakers, he abruptly switched it off again. "It's been...wonderful having you with me, Eve. But I think you should move out." Jared's mouth was suddenly dry. He licked his lips. "We, uh, need to pull back and reevaluate our relationship."

Eve felt a stampeding panic. She tried to rein it in as she looked at Jared, but she knew her face, still stricken, betrayed her feelings. "But I love you," was all she could think to say. Everything else seemed secondary.

Jared swallowed hard. "That isn't enough."

"Then what else?"

He put a hand on Eve's shoulder to silence her but quickly withdrew it. "You've told me what situations you'd find unbearable," Jared said. "Now let me tell you what *I'd* find unbearable. I couldn't stand the woman I loved being disappointed in me and then growing restless. I couldn't stand being constantly reminded of what might have been. I couldn't stand my own resentment at *being* reminded. Do you see what I mean?"

Eve closed her eyes in despair and nodded. She'd already said too much to retract or even alter it. "Maybe you'd better take me to Alex's."

## Chapter Twelve

Alex swept through the back door, admitting a sluggish, humid wave of late-summer air. Eve sat at the kitchen table, her face bracketed by her hands, her elbows resting on a stencil she'd been making for a new fabric design. She gave him a desultory look, then resumed staring at the far wall.

"Your place looks great," Alex said, drawing a handkerchief over his forehead. "I stopped there on my way back."

"Mm."

"It appears they're doing an authentic restoration."

"Mm-hm."

"Should be ready before the snow flies."

"Mm-hm."

Alex eyed his houseguest, who watched him as he circled the kitchen to the refrigerator. He pulled out a quart of lemonade. "Have you gotten any more bills? Since you shelled out your settlement, I mean."

Eve shook her head.

"That's odd." Alex plunked some ice cubes in a tall glass and poured himself a drink. "I wonder why—"

"Kayne's been forwarding my mail to my post office box," Eve said in a monotone. "Everything's been a bit delayed in reaching me. The bills will show up sooner or later...in spades, I'm sure."

Alex raised his arms and looked wonderstruck. "Hallelujah! She speaks!"

Eve slid him a disgruntled glance.

Alex sat down across the table from her and assumed an analytical expression. "There's been no progress, I take it."

"With what?"

"With *whom*," Alex corrected. "The world's stupidest or maybe stubbornest male, a.k.a. the love of your life, the once but not future Pirate King."

Eve compressed her lips and looked down. "No progress," she softly affirmed.

Alex shook his head. "Quite frankly, I don't know if I can take much more of your angst. I mean, for five solid weeks you've been trailing dark clouds around this house. You sigh more than a leaky balloon. You stare into space so much I'm beginning to think you're communing with invisible beings. Let me tell you, Eve, all this lovesickness gives me the goddamned creeps."

Eve drew a shuddering breath and slipped her forehead to her hands.

"See what I mean?" Alex cried.

Eve glimpsed him pointing at her. "I'm sorry," she mumbled. "But I can't seem to get over him." She felt Alex's long fingers curl gently around her forearm.

"Small wonder," he said with genuine sympathy. "Jared Razzle-Dazzle Kayne drops in here at least once a week and God knows how often the two of you manage to bump into each other elsewhere."

"I haven't seen him in twelve days," Eve muttered. She felt defensive, like a dieter unjustly accused of sneaking candy bars. But there was a forlorn undercurrent in her voice. She *missed* her Jared fix.

"Nevertheless," Alex went on, "what you've got to do, doll, is not see him at all, ever again. Give him his walking papers."

"I can't *do* that."

"Then get back together with him."

"That won't work, either."

Alex clamped a hand to his forehead. "Lordy, you must be a masochist." He leaned forward and peered into Eve's face. "Sweetheart, don't you see what an untenable situation this is? You and Kayne refuse to get together, yet you refuse to stay apart. So you have these absurdly frustrating, go-nowhere encounters that always end up ripping your heart out because you come away from them wanting more than what you got."

"I know," Eve conceded. "But I love seeing him. I feel *addicted* to him."

"Understandable. Kayne's an intoxicating person. But addictions can be overcome, cheri, given the proper approach—and I mean conscientious abstinence combined with a redirection of energy." Alex paused, absently picking at the brown crater of a cigarette burn on the table's vinyl cover. "I don't mean to make light of this, Eve. To tell you the truth, Kayne's really ticking me off. He's not playing fair. You're desperately in love with the guy. Every minute of this separation is agony for you. Yet he's so blasé about the whole thing—sophisticated creature that he is—that he keeps popping in and out of your life as the mood strikes him. That's damned insensitive, if you ask me."

Eve's smile was rueful but she was glad she had a chance to smile at all. "I'm *not* asking you. But thanks anyway for the moral outrage." She twined her fingers fondly through Alex's. "You might be one strange duck, Count, but you care."

"Will you please cut the 'Count' crap? That was your erstwhile boyfriend's idea of a witticism, and I, unlike you, am sick of being reminded of him."

"I'm sick of being reminded of him, too, Alex. It's wearing me out."

"Are you serious?"

Eve swallowed past a lump in her throat as she fidgeted with his fingers. "Yes, I'm serious. I'm *not* a masochist. As long as Jared believes we're wrong for each other and I still have feelings for him, I know it's not good for me to see him. It's just that,"—she sighed—"I'm still convinced he's the best thing that ever happened to me."



"I suppose he is...in a way," Alex chuckled. "It's like having the measles—you suffer for a while, but the payoff is a lifetime of immunity."

Eve gave him a reproachful swat but she was laughing, too.

Alex's custom-made doorbell rang—the first five notes from "The Ride of the Valkyrie." He unfolded himself from the table. "Don't languish into oblivion," he said, patting Eve on the head. "I'll be right back to give you more unsolicited advice."

She got up from the table and stretched. The air was so warm and sodden that any movement felt unpleasant. Even the sunlight seemed to fall heavily through the windows. It lay on the floor in fuzzy sections like great, trapezoidal sponges.

The house had no air-conditioning so there was no room that offered any relief. Hands on hips, Eve shuffled to the back door and gazed into the yard. The hammock—that was it. She'd doze away the day's hottest hours in the shade of two trees.

Eve walked outside.

Alex opened the front door to admit his visitor.

"Hello," Jared said. He'd been leaning on the door frame, and he straightened up, sliding his hands in his pants pockets.

Alex studied him for a few seconds, and Jared detected both curiosity and disapproval in his light brown eyes. "I assume you're here to see Eve."

Jared's eyebrows dipped. Something was up. Usually easygoing and congenial, Alex was barely being civil. "I'd like to see her, yes."

"Well, she's not here."

Alex seemed to be defying him to challenge this blatant lie. Jared did. "Her van's in the driveway."

Alex shifted from one foot to the other, his hand still resting indecisively on the doorknob. "Listen, Jared, I don't think you should come around here anymore."

"Oh?" Matching Alex's defiance, Jared pulled his hands from his pockets and crossed his arms over his chest. He moved his feet farther apart. "Is that what Eve wants or is that what *you* want?"

"Both."

Jared felt a small jolt of alarm. "I think we'd better discuss this," he said as coolly as possible.

Alex shrugged. "Suit yourself. But it won't change anything."

He walked out the door past his visitor and crossed the yard. Kayne followed because he was obviously expected to. It seemed Alex didn't want to talk to him in the house, where Eve could walk in on them.

Alex entered a large shed behind the barn, his sculpting studio. "Have a seat."

Jared looked around at the crowd of forms, few of which were even marginally recognizable. He finally eased down on what appeared to be a bronze figure's lap.

Alex paced slowly, his head lowered. "Jared," he began, "why do you keep seeing Eve?" He sounded like a lawyer cross-examining a defendant.

"Because I enjoy her company."

Alex snorted. "Don't you think that's rather self-serving and inconsiderate?"

Jared felt a pang of guilt. He looked down at his loosely interlinked hands. "I assume she enjoys my company, too." But he knew what Alex was getting at. It was something that had been plaguing him since he and Eve had gone their separate ways. *I've been having my cake and eating it, too.* Disconcerted, he began wrestling his thumbs.

"I can't believe you're such a fool, Kayne." Alex was practically sneering at him. "Of course Eve enjoys your company. That's part of the problem. She can't get enough of you because she's still,"—he threw up his arms in exasperation—"obsessed with you."

"She is?" Jared's pulse sprinted at the thought.

"Don't be coy," Alex chided.

"I'm not being coy."

"Bullshit. You know damned well Eve is practically blind with love for you."

Jared shook his head. "I haven't been able to read her feelings, Alex. She's been very cavalier around me."

Alex sighed loudly. He leaned against a window, looking out. "That's Eve. She's too proud to let on how she feels. After all, you virtually dumped her on my doorstep."

Jared sprang to his feet. "Goddammit, I did not 'dump' her on your doorstep!" The gentleman doth protest too much, an inner voice taunted. "She asked to be brought here," he added with brittle calm.

Alex casually pivoted to face Jared. "Sure, like she had a choice in the matter. She's in your car, it's the middle of the night, and you tell her she can't stay with you anymore." Alex was visibly building a head of steam. His face was reddening. He took a step toward Jared and punched his forefinger through the air. "You may not have dumped Eve out of your car but you dumped her just the same, mister...and you fucking well know it!"

His feelings in turmoil, Jared stared at Alex a moment then drew a hand over his face. "You don't understand," he murmured. He wasn't sure *he* understood, either. He missed Eve like crazy. Every day without her was torture. But that insidious, lingering fear of her disapproval kept him from cementing their bond.

"What the hell is there to understand?" Alex railed on. He stalked around, weaving between hunks of metal and stone, his arms flailing and slicing. "That you're a hypocrite and coward? That you have the gall to keep teasing Eve with these little visits and 'chance' meetings because you *enjoy her company*?"

The last three words came out as a jeer, and Jared winced at both the tone and truth of the indictments. He took a deep, quavering breath and dropped his head. "I've never meant to hurt Eve."

"No, just toy with her."

Jared shook his head very definitely. "Never." He faced his accuser. "I'm still in love with her, Alex. It's as simple as that...and as complicated. I can't seem to stay away from her."

Alex gaped at him. "Then why the hell aren't the two of you together?"

"Because it wouldn't work."

Alex was still staring at Jared in stark disbelief. "So you don't see this going anywhere?"

Jared opened his mouth to answer, but no answer came to mind except, *I'll just keep trying to have my cake and eat it, too*. Abashed, he turned away. "We, um...we have a lot to straighten out."

"But you don't foresee that happening, do you."

Jared's skin was beginning to feel tight. "I don't know." Feeling vexed, he rubbed the back of his neck.

Alex pressed on. "Being in love isn't good enough for you, huh."

"Two people can be in love without being right for each other," Jared snapped. He felt raw and twitchy, as if his nerves were exposed.

"Love *makes* them right for each other."

The remark hit Jared more forcefully than he cared to admit. "Then tell your damned housemate that!" he shouted. "*She's* the one for whom love isn't enough!" Jared wanted to punch something. Instead, he tried to dismiss the whole, knotted issue by muttering, "All that 'love is enough' shit is an idealistic fantasy, anyway."

Alex strode toward Jared, his hands clasped behind his back. "I'll tell you what's a fantasy, Mister Kayne—your belief that you can string Eve along indefinitely." His eyes narrowed. "She's fed up, dude. Do you understand? She's had it. Not an hour ago she told me she was sick of being reminded of you. And she knows it's not good for her to be around you."

"Eve said all that?" Jared whispered.

"You bet your sax she did." Alex whisked past him to the door. "Do you get the picture? Eve's through with you and your games. She's ready to move on. If you really care about her, you'll stay out of her way."

Jared swallowed dryly, his thoughts bleak and chaotic. Everything Alex said made sense. As long as he couldn't make a commitment to Eve or at least reach some sort of compromise with her, the only decent thing to do was bow out of her life completely.

Jared rose and approached Alex, who was watching him guardedly. "I get the picture," he said with grim resignation. "And if I weren't such a hypocrite and coward, I would've gotten it long before now."

As Jared moved out the door, Alex grabbed his arm. "Listen...I, uh, said some pretty strong things. I'm sorry."

"They were justified."

"Not all of them." Alex gave him a conciliatory smile. "You can't be all that bad, Kayne, if Eve fell for you."

Jared mirrored his smile, but more sadly. "Ditto, Orlovsky."

Alex snorted a clipped laugh. "Yeah, well, Eve was young and silly when she fell for me. It was more a stumble than a fall, actually." His smile faded as he fixed his gaze on Kayne's. "I've always admired you, Jared, and I still do. But now it's not just because of your talent. Any lapses in judgment aside, you've got heart. And I know what Eve meant about reading it in your eyes."

Jared lowered his eyelids. "Take care of her," he murmured. "Maybe she'll find some guy whose lifestyle is more to her liking."

"You really do love Eve, don't you?"

Jared nodded quickly and headed for his car, afraid that if he hung around any longer he'd dash into the house and look for her.

Alex ran after him. "I hate to bring up business," he said in a confidential tone. "Eve paid out her insurance settlement some time ago, but it's obvious the rebuilding costs are running maybe three times the amount of her claim. Are you holding any of her bills? I'd hate to see her get socked with eighteen at once. That house of hers with its new decor and all is sucking dollars like—"

"It's all taken care of," Jared said, climbing into his car.

Alex leaned on the door. "What?"

"Everything's covered. Eve won't be getting any more bills. So you can both stop worrying about it." The engine growled to life. "But please, don't tell her I said anything. I just hope she enjoys her new old house." Jared smiled wistfully, then put the car in gear.

Looking stupefied, Alex jerked upright as the vehicle began to move. "Shit, either you're more in love than I thought or you're out of your freakin' mind!"

Eve was in the upstairs bathroom getting ready to take a cool shower when she caught a glimpse of Jared in the yard below. Her breath snagged, and she wheeled toward the window. "Kayne," she whispered, her hands splayed on the glass.

He was dressed casually—white cotton pants, tight around the hips and loose around the legs, with a bright blue t-shirt that hugged the contours of his upper body. The clothes seemed to accentuate his height and musculature. As he stood talking to Alex, his copper-streaked hair glistened in the sun. It was almost as full, Eve noticed, as when the Summerfest picture was taken. She felt a strong billow of love and desire and frantically began to dress.

Nearly tripping down the stairs, Eve bounded to the front door and threw it open. Her face fell. Jared's car had just turned onto the highway. She shambled over to the porch railing and sagged onto it in dismay.

Alex waved to her.

Eve watched him with growing suspicion as he approached her. "Why was Jared here?" she asked before he'd even reached the porch.

With a few long strides Alex was up the steps and standing beside her. "Eve, come here and sit down." He guided her over to the porch swing.

"What's going on?" She felt a twist of anxiety. "What were you and Jared talking about?"

"You, of course."

Eve's heart started trip-hammering. "Well? What did he say?"

Alex put an arm around her shoulders. "I know it's been impossible for you to cut yourself off from that man—"

"Alex, what the hell are you getting at?"

"Take it easy. He and I had a good talk. We were very honest with one another. I told him exactly how you feel and what I think, and he reciprocated. The upshot of it was—" Alex paused. He wiped away a slick of perspiration that had suddenly appeared on his upper lip. "Kayne doesn't believe a relationship with you would be viable. He realizes it's not right for him to keep seeing you under those circumstances."

Eve's chin quivered. "So..."

"So..." — Alex took her hand — "you won't be seeing any more of Jared Kayne. He'll keep his distance, Eve, because he knows it's the decent thing to do. And the best thing for both of you."

Eve gulped a breath as her eyes flooded with tears. So there was no hope. There really was no hope after all. Jared's mind was made up about her and there was nothing she could do to change it.

"Sweetheart, this may not be what you want right now but it's what you need to get your life moving forward again. *And you know it.* There'll be other men."

Eve wiped her nose. "What an idiotic thing to say, Alex. There'll always be 'other men'...but there'll only be one Jared Kayne."

"And there'll only be one Rudolph Valentino." Alex gave her shoulders a squeeze. "But face it, doll — they're both history."

## Chapter Thirteen

An early evening mist began to gather as the air cooled, heralding autumn. Eve sat on her porch steps and watched the spectrum of sunset shrink to a single vivid band of orange. She balked at returning to Alex's because she was tired of living out of a suitcase, but her own house wasn't quite habitable yet.

*There's always the barn*, Eve thought with a wistful smile...and then Jared's face shimmered in her mind like a lovely, evanescent dream.

She knew it was time to leave.

Just as Eve rose a car came crawling up the driveway. Her heart leapt with hope—as it did at least twice a week—but immediately plummeted again. The car wasn't Jared's. She really had no reason to think it might be.

The driver's door opened and a dark figure emerged. Eve peered through the dimness, descended one stair, halted. She held onto the railing and tilted forward.

Her visitor waved both arms. "Help! Help! Save this city boy from a band of rampaging bullfrogs!" He grinned expansively.

"Giles?" Eve whispered.

"What's the matter?" he called out. "Can't you see me? Am I fading into the night?"

"Giles!" Eve pinwheeled down the steps and raced up to him.

Laughing, Giles caught her up in his thick arms and whirled her around. "I'll bet you're one surprised cookie."

"You win the bet," Eve gasped. "What in the world are you doing out here on the prairie?" Her smile dwindled as the answer came to her. "You've come to see Kayne."

Giles' ebullience waned for the briefest moment. Then he circled his arm around Eve's waist and steered her to the passenger side of his car. "I've come to see *you*, pretty lady."

"Why—?"

"I'm taking you out." He closed her into the car and went around to the driver's side. "You want to stop at your friend's house and change first?"

"Well, that depends on..." Eve shoved a hand into her tattered cloud of hair. "Giles, what are you up to?" she asked with a bemused giggle.

"Just doing a favor, honey. Just doing a favor."

\* \* \* \* \*

Eve hadn't been in this part of the city in years—near Washington Park and the University of Chicago. She was about to ask Giles, yet again, where they were going as he pulled into a parking ramp. But she remembered what his previous answer had been to that question—"Trust me"—so she decided to wait and see. Eve generally liked surprises. And since she trusted Giles implicitly, she at least knew he would try to show her a good time. She didn't want to speculate beyond that.

So it didn't much matter where they were bound. Eve was already having a fascinating evening. She and Giles had been engrossed in conversation since leaving Alex's house, most of it centering on Logan, Maggie and other aspects of Intaglio's colorful existence—subjects Eve never tired of. She noticed, though, that Giles mentioned Jared only fleetingly and occasionally and only in the context of past events. He must have known that she and Kayne had split up. He must have been trying to spare her undue pain.

But Eve didn't want to be coddled, she wanted to be informed. In the course of this "date", Eve promised herself, she'd get her escort to share whatever insights he had into Kayne's thoughts and activities and plans. She simply needed to know. She needed to know because she hadn't lost one iota of feeling for him.

Giles led Eve down two city blocks to a brick building with an art deco façade. Above its glossy double doors, a semicircle of neon letters proclaimed *Café Metropole*.

"I think I've heard of this place," Eve said.

"I know I have." Giles smiled cryptically as he ushered her inside. He murmured something to a nattily dressed host, who guided them down a lime-green-carpeted hallway to a large room lined with mirrors and packed with small round tables.

"This is a relatively new club," Giles explained, "but it's already gotten some great press. The house band is called Compass. They're supposed to be well worth the exorbitant drink costs," he added with a chuckle.

The host seated them near the stage, where Compass was already playing in a fairyland mist of pastel lights. They did sound good. The place was filled to capacity but the audience was remarkably quiet and attentive. *True aficionados*, Eve thought.

"Looks like we got the last table," she noted softly as Giles pulled out her chair.

"I had the foresight to make reservations."

Eve arched her eyebrows in surprise. "Reservations? This place *must* be popular."

Giles seated himself, glanced at the band, then at his watch. He seemed preoccupied. "Well, it *is* a weekend, and a special occasion, too. This is the Metropole's formal grand opening."

A waiter glided up to them bearing a tableside champagne bucket and silver tray with three glasses.

"Oh, Giles," Eve breathed, "you shouldn't have."

"No protests," he insisted with a smile. "I told you this was a special occasion."

"For the club, yes."

"And for us, too." He winked at her.

"But why *three* glasses?"

"I know one of the musicians."

"Oh?" Eve scanned the people on stage. There were two guitarists, a percussionist and a woman at the keyboard who doubled as vocalist. "Which one?"

"Shh." Giles put a finger to his lips. "Listen." He used his eyes to direct Eve's attention to the stage.

"Making a guest appearance," the singer was saying. She paused, grinning, as the crowd noise began to crescendo in excitement. "Formerly with Intaglio, this is his first public performance in four years." The woman was shouting now to make herself heard over the din. "Compass and the Café Metropole are thrilled and honored to present the Pirate King himself...Mister Jared Kayne!"

Eve's mouth fell open. Her wide-eyed gaze shifted to Giles. He was grinning and applauding like a lunatic. Dumbfounded, she looked at the stage again.

Jared strolled past the band, his head slightly lowered, his left arm tenderly cradling the tenor sax hanging from his neck. He wore grey flannel trousers and a plain white shirt, sleeves rolled up and collar open. Smiling modestly, he first bowed to the house band and then to the audience.

They responded with a volley of cheers. Giles, his exuberance overflowing, whooped and whistled and slapped the table top.

"Thank you for your kind welcome," Jared said into a nearby microphone.

The house lights dimmed. A spotlight bloomed. Jared stood in the middle of its hazy blue nimbus. His streaked auburn hair and white shirt and golden horn glistened in the soft effulgence.

Eve was choked with emotion. She could only stare at the beautiful man on stage, her love rolling toward him in wave after unstoppable wave.

Giles grabbed her hand. "Doesn't Kayne look great?" he whispered gleefully. "Isn't he just somethin' else? He's gonna make this place *explode*."

Eve nodded. She realized it was rude of her not to look at Giles but she couldn't take her eyes off Jared. He turned to say something to the lead guitarist.

Giles leaned toward her. "Kayne wanted you to be here, Eve."

That got her attention. "He did?"

"Yup. But he was afraid you'd tell him to go to hell. Besides, I think he's got a touch of opening-night jitters. So I just took matters into my own hands." Giles smiled, looking very pleased with himself.

"You angel," Eve said, clasping his face in her hands. She sat back, fluttery with anticipation. "Do you think he's seen me yet?"

"No. But he will."



Jared was back at center stage again. He inclined toward the microphone and said in a low voice, "Eve's Waltz." He lowered the mic until it was poised above the bell of his saxophone.

"Here's Kayne's love song to you, hon," Giles murmured. "He played it for me today. "It's a knockout."

The melody throbbed dreamily through the room. Jared, his eyes closed, seemed to be pouring some secret and precious part of himself into the music, infusing it with a spiritual and emotional essence. The audience was mesmerized into absolute silence. Awestruck, Eve stared at the incredible man on stage, the man who'd written this heavenly song just for her. She felt deprived of oxygen, lost in time and space...

The spotlight faded as the music ended. There was no audience reaction for a moment, as if everyone in the room were drifting out of a trance. Gradually the applause started, then an eruption of cheers and whistles.

"My God," Eve said. "I don't deserve anything that beautiful."

Giles reached over and squeezed her hand. "Kayne thinks you do, hon, or he wouldn't have written it." His expression grew solemn. "He's never been in love like this before, Eve."

She couldn't stand it any longer. Rising from the table, she took a few steps toward the low stage and stood before it, clapping. Jared's gaze glided over to her. At first he didn't seem to believe his eyes. Then his face lit up.

"Eve..." He unclipped his saxophone, laid it on top of the electric piano, and leapt from the stage.

Tears filled her eyes then, and she practically threw herself into Jared's outstretched arms. They held each other so closely his body was bowed over Eve's, enfolding her, and Eve's hands were crisscrossed in his hair. Jared kissed her neck fervidly.

"God, I've missed you," he breathed. "I've missed holding you, kissing you, eating and sleeping and laughing with you —"

"I adore you, you jerk," Eve sobbed.

Jared chuckled against her hair.

"I didn't bring you a rose, Kayne, and I'm not wearing a bra," Eve said brokenly, "but I *am* giving you my eternal love. I don't care if you never play another note. I don't care if your name is never on a poster or marquee. I don't care if you're an insurance adjuster or garbage collector or raconteur and roustabout. I just want to be with you, Kayne. I *want* you...however you choose to live and whatever you choose to be."

Jared gazed into Eve's eyes for a moment, then kissed her with consummate tenderness. "I've had plenty of time to think about it," he said earnestly, "and I choose to be a musician."

\* \* \* \* \*

Eve twirled into the foyer of Jared's house. "I didn't think I'd ever see the inside of this place again!" She fondly touched the brass coat tree, kissed a painting. "I'm in love, I'm in love, I'm in love, I'm in love," she sang, "with the world's most talented man."

Laughing, Jared set down his saxophone case and caught Eve in mid-spin. "And I'm in love with a madwoman."

"Mad about *you*, Kayne, you diabolically brilliant, gorgeous—" Overcome, Eve drew his face toward hers and kissed him. "God, what technique," she breathed.

"See how strong and limber my mouth gets after it's had a workout? And now that I'll be performing regularly..." Jared wiggled his brows.

Eve put the back of her hand to her forehead as if she were about to swoon. "I don't know if any mortal can withstand such an onslaught of pleasure...but I'll make a valiant effort."

"No doubt."

With their arms around each other's waist they walked into the living room.

"I hope Giles isn't put out by my staying here," Eve said, dropping to the couch. She pulled Jared down beside her.

"Put out? Are you kidding? He's *ecstatic*." Jared pried off his shoes. "Not only did he get us back together, but now he has an excuse to stay at a five-star hotel and live it up in the city. Let's face it, babe, I'm pretty far from the action."

"The 'action' is right next to you, Kayne." Eve ran her fingers along his thigh, provocatively skirting the treasure between his legs. Jared growled with pleasure and settled further into the couch.

Gradually, Eve's caress grew slower, more pensive. "Where do you go from here, Kayne? Have you made any plans?"

"Well, week after next I have a gig on Rush Street. I'll be quitting my job at BroadShield soon afterward. Beyond that, my plans are rather nebulous." His hand slid along Eve's arm. "I'll go solo for a while with Giles as my manager. We've already been in touch with our old agent. Then, once things get rolling again, we'll work on forming another group."

Eve sat up and looked at him with mild surprise. After all his stubborn balking at resuming his old profession, this was quite a turnaround. "You certainly have wide-ranging aspirations, Mister Kayne."

Jared grinned. "Just being realistic. Since the Metropole booked me I've already gotten calls from four other places, one of which is in Kansas City. Things are taking off faster than I ever imagined. I guess people remember me." His expression sobered. "I told you I've had plenty of time to think about this. I thought about everything you've said, especially about life being what we make of it. I thought about how good it felt to hang out with Jam again, which only confirmed your assertion. As much as I fought against it at first, I couldn't keep from realizing that the two of you helped me reconnect with a vital, essential part of myself...the part that needs to make music. Between all

this thinking I turned to that horn, just kept playing and playing it. And I realized I didn't just need to *make* music, I needed to *share* it."

Eve studied Jared, her satisfaction immeasurable. "You really feel good about this, don't you." She gently played with a soft wisp of hair that curled in front of his ear.

"I feel great," he said ardently. "Having the heat of the spotlight on my skin again, the coolness of that horn in my hands. Feeling the first trickle of sweat on my temples and inside my shirt, feeling my body loosen and move to the music. Hearing the sounds of audience approval as I work that reed into submission ..."

A tremor crawled through Eve's limbs. "You're exciting me, Kayne," she confessed with a faint blush.

His smoky gaze roamed her face. "It's an exciting experience—very much like sexual stimulation."

Eve thought she would melt into the dark ocean of his eyes. They hadn't made love in over two months. She shifted uncomfortably, finding restraint difficult...especially when she pictured those rivulets of sweat coursing down his chest.

Jared cleared his throat. "I, uh, I'll have to do some traveling again. But I'm going to try to restrict it. There's an excellent studio in Chicago, so I'll be getting more into composing and recording. And when I do go on the road, I'd definitely like you to come with me."

Thinking about all these new, unrolling vistas gave Eve another thrill. "Traveling, huh?"

Jared's face creased with worry. "Does that bother you? If it does I don't have to—"

Eve put two fingers on his lips and smiled. "It would bother me if you restricted your career for my sake. I'm just so *happy* for you, Kayne. This is a dream come true for you...and for me and Giles and thousands of other people who've missed your music. Besides, I told you I don't care what you do or where you do it. I'll love you and stay with you no matter what."

"You don't know how good that makes me feel," Jared said. He tenderly caressed Eve's cheek with the back of one finger. "But it does raise another issue. Where are we going to live?"

Eve frowned, realizing she hadn't considered the dilemma. "I guess that depends on how much we want to be together."

Jared was smiling like a conspirator. "Mm-hm."

"I want to be with you more than anything, Kayne."

"I want to be with you, too. So," — he shrugged carelessly — "I'll just have to sell this shack."

"What?" Eve cried, appalled. "I can't let you do that. This house is you."

He chuckled. "Nothing is 'me' but me, babe...with the possible exception of that horn." Growing reflective, he traced the gold threads on Eve's dress with his fingertips. "You know what I associate with this house? Loneliness and boredom. Nightmares."

Self-recrimination. No one cherishes memories like those. But *your* place makes me think of us, makes me think of beginnings." He gave her a cocky, sidelong glance. "I knew I'd be living there some day."

She raised her eyebrows. "Oh you did, did you?"

"Sure. Why do you think I paid three-quarters of your damned building costs?"

Eve jerked back in shock. "That's why so many bills haven't come!" She seamed her lips and glared at him. "Jared Kayne, I absolutely refuse —"

Laughing, he pinned Eve to the couch with his body and kissed her long and hard. "Don't waste your indignation," he murmured. He licked and nipped at the sensitive dish of her ear, then the fine flesh beneath her jaw. "It wasn't an act of charity, babe, it was an investment in my future." Smiling, Jared rose from the couch.

Eve continued to lie there, speechless with vexation and gratitude and, now, burgeoning desire as well. Without saying anything further Jared blew her a kiss and left the room. Eve hiked herself up on her elbows and continued staring at the space where he'd stood.

The man simply surpassed belief.

But she would be able to keep her beloved house — a solid and spiffy new version of it, at that — and Jared came with the package.

Eve's flimsy ire disintegrated as her elation swelled. A spontaneous yip of delight escaped her throat when she realized she would have it all. She bounced up from the couch and began building a fire.

Soon, Eve heard a thud followed by grunts of exertion and heavy, irregular footsteps. Still crouching before the fireplace, she swiveled on the balls of her feet and faced the doorway in curiosity.

Jared entered the room doubled over, his arms stretched around...

"A cradle?" Eve slowly stood up and walked over to him. "Kayne, what are you doing with that?"

He set it down. "Whew! Maple ain't light. No wonder God decided to make trees out of it."

Eve circled the cradle, gliding her hand over its satiny surfaces and beveled edges. "It's beautiful," she breathed. "It looks just like the one..." Her eyes inched up to Jared's face in disbelief.

"I've been working on it in the basement since the first day I was at your farm. Never thought high school woodshop would come in handy," he added with a shy smile.

"You *made* this?"

Jared shoved his hands in his pockets. "Well...I used a stencil for the decoration. Art isn't my forte."

Crying, Eve threw her arms around his neck. "You incredible, incomparable man!"

"You forgot multiskilled."

"Forgive me," Eve laughed. "Oh, Kayne, how could I *not* love you?"

"If I'd turned out to be a bad carpenter, maybe."

Eve choked out another laugh. "I don't think I could take one more ounce of happiness," she said. "I feel gluttoned with it. In fact, I don't think there's another thing left in the world that could *make* me happy."

Jared frowned, as if she'd said something that contradicted his thinking. "Hm. Not even real live babies to put *in* the cradle?"

Eve pulled back and gaped at him, her eyes still filmed with moisture. "Don't tell me you're pregnant."

Jared rolled his head back and laughed. "Damn, Astra, you just ruined my timing!"

"Why? How? I thought that was rather clever. I mean, you all of a sudden start yammering about babies—"

"Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't make that proposition clear enough. I'm afraid I put the cart before the horse." Jared brushed the remaining tears from Eve's face.

"What cart? What horse?"

"Aren't you hip to folksy metaphors? I should've mentioned marriage first, *then* the babies."

Eve felt a touch of vertigo. "Maybe...maybe I'd better sit down."

"I'll hold you up," Jared said, his tone becoming tender. "I want to look into your eyes when I ask you to marry me." He paused and smiled. "Will you? I don't *think* you'll regret it."

"Yes, I will, and no, I won't." There was no perplexity and no coy hesitation on Eve's part. It was as if the answer had been laying in wait just behind her lips from the first time Jared had kissed her. She did feel giddy...but also very, very sure of herself.

It was Jared who acted as if he might fly apart. He held Eve tightly, as if she were both anchoring him and keeping him in one piece. "Hot damn, I lived through it," he said with some astonishment.

"Don't tell me the Pirate King actually had a crisis in self-confidence." Eve had tried to sound arch, but her tone was laced with impending tears and irrepressible affection.

"If he did have a crisis," Jared said, "it was his last."

They swayed in each other's arms to some romantic, internal music as the fire crackled and glowed in the hearth.

"The king is alive," Eve murmured lovingly. "Long live the king."

"And his queen," Jared added, kissing her forehead as if bestowing a diadem. "And all their little princes and princesses..."

## About the Author

K.Z. Snow (formerly writing as Kate Snow) is the daughter of Milwaukee tavernkeepers and learned her first words off a Wurlitzer jukebox. Nine years of higher education, resulting in 2 1/2 English degrees and a stint as a teacher, did not dampen her enthusiasm for beer, Green Bay Packers football, classic R&B, and various forms of political incorrectness.

She's been many things in her life, including a varsity debater, a Catholic, a hippie, a Girl Scout, a junker, a fag hag, a gardener, an editor, a saxophone/bassoon/tambourine player (not all at once), a damned good dancer, and a companion to most species of domesticated animals, including men.

One thing she has never been is a Republican. One thing she will always be is a writer.

She now lives in rural Wisconsin, not far from the birthplace of surrealism, a.k.a. "The Dells". Her imagination and her hips continue to grow unchecked.

K.Z. welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at [www.cerridwenpress.com](http://www.cerridwenpress.com).

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