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Beyond Paradise

Kathleen Mix

Even the deepest love needs an air supply...

Dive shop manager Marina Hernandez is carrying a heavy load as she tries to save the family business. On one shoulder rides a bucket of red ink. On the other, her father's age-old cultural belief that women belong in the kitchen.

Now that a cutthroat competitor has pushed her to the brink of bankruptcy, any chance she'll ever win her father's respect is fading fast. The last thing she can afford right now is the complication of a tempting man.

After years of building his practice, pediatrician Brett Sutherland has changed his focus. He seeks a more well-rounded life, including a woman who'll devote herself to caring for a family. Workaholics need not apply. Then he signs up for SCUBA lessons, and Marina's luminous eyes and spirited personality turn his neat, logical plan upside down.

Brett's dazzling looks heat her blood, and his compassionate nature makes her yearn to build her own life—but not if it means letting the business collapse. A little harmless flirtation couldn't hurt, though.

Yet with every kiss, she's stretched thinner between the promise of Brett's love and her father's expectations. Until a critical decision pushes them both to the breaking point...

Warning: Contains a hunk in a swimsuit. May lead to spending your entire summer at a beach or pool ogling the male scenery.

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Samhain Publishing, Ltd.
577 Mulberry Street, Suite 1520
Macon GA 31201

Beyond Paradise
Copyright © 2010 by Kathleen Mix
ISBN: 978-1-60504-989-2
Edited by Lindsey Faber
Cover by Angela Waters

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First Samhain Publishing, Ltd. electronic publication: April 2010
www.samhainpublishing.com

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Dedication

To Dave, my favorite instructor and dive buddy.

Chapter One

The little bell over the dive shop door jingled.

Marina locked the cash drawer and turned toward the tall man pushing open the door and coming inside.

Ay caramba. Why now?

"I'm sorry, we're closed." She huffed out her breath, hating the idea of sending away a customer. But she had no choice. She was already running late.

The man ignored her warning and let the door swing shut behind him. "I'm here to sign up for tonight's introductory SCUBA session. Has it started yet?"

She glanced at the clock: two minutes after seven. "No. And it can't start until I get to the pool area. I'm the instructor."

Worried someone else would come in and delay her schedule more, Marina rushed to the front door and slid the deadbolt across. When she turned back toward the man, her gaze met a pair of mesmerizing blue eyes.

He flashed a smile. "Does the fact that you're locking me in mean I can stay?"

Without any time to stare at his gorgeous eyes, she blinked and considered his question. To remain in business, she needed every student she could get. "Yes, you can stay."

"Great. What do I need to do?"

She scanned his chestnut brown hair, the laugh lines at the corners of his eyes and the thick eyelashes that were too perfect to belong to any man. She had no idea what he needed to do, other than sweep her into his arms and whisk her away to the Caribbean.

"Ah...a liability waiver, you need to sign a liability waiver."

After a long silence, his expression turned puzzled. "May I have one, please?"

He slipped a well-manicured hand inside his suit jacket and removed a gold-trimmed pen from his pocket. Meanwhile, she stole another look at his face.

Earth to Marina, the logical half of her brain yelled. *Escúcheme. Listen to me. A liability waiver, get one!*

Her cheeks heated. She rushed behind the checkout counter and grabbed a registration packet. She wondered why he made her feel short of breath like she'd just finished swimming a marathon and why she wanted to stare at him as if she'd never seen a man before. But her brain failed to supply a reason.

Get your mind back on business, she scolded herself. *There's no time in the schedule for you to act like a giddy teenager. You have people waiting to start a class.*

She turned back toward him, and her mouth went slightly dry. She drew in a huge breath, straightened her shoulders, placed the registration packet on the counter and removed the top form.

“Please read and sign this liability waiver, then you can participate in the introductory session. If you decide to continue with lessons, you can fill out the rest of the registration packet later. Right now, I’m short on time, and I’d like to get started.”

He bent his head over the paper, was silent for half a minute, then scrawled a signature.

She squinted at the bold, but completely illegible, signature at the bottom of the page and searched for letters in the dips and spikes. Unable to decipher the hieroglyphics, she asked, “Would you print your name under your signature please?”

His printing was slightly more legible. Marina watched him spell out *Brett* before she glanced up. The overhead lights reflected off his hair, and her fingers tingled with the desire to find out if the strands felt as silky as they looked. She interlocked her fingers behind her back to keep them under control.

“Thank you, Brett. Did you bring a swimsuit?”

He held up a blue gym bag. “Right here.”

“Good.” She pointed toward a doorway at the far corner of the showroom. “The locker rooms are through there. If you’ll change, then go out to the pool area and join the others, we’ll begin.”

He nodded and strode away.

For a few seconds, Marina watched, imagining him undressing and wondering what it would feel like to help him remove his shirt. If he looked so fabulous fully clothed, he’d probably look phenomenal in a swimsuit.

Mortified at her unprofessional thoughts, she knocked her fist twice against her forehead to make her brain behave and hurried out to the pool.

At the edge of the pool, the participants in the night’s introductory program clustered around her. She felt a giddy sense of elation seeing the anticipation on their faces.

“Welcome to Paradise Dive Center and our free Introductory SCUBA Session,” she said. “I’m Marina Hernandez. Tonight I’ll be showing you a little of what SCUBA diving is about. Afterward you’ll have the opportunity to join my next Open Water diving class. We’re going to get into the pool so you can experience the thrill of breathing while underwater. You’ll need to wear wetsuits and buoyancy compensating devices, which I’ll refer to as BCDs. So to begin, let’s move over to the gear area and suit up.”

She asked each participant their height and weight and found them an appropriate wetsuit. They started to don the suits, but before Marina had a chance to assign BCDs, one woman brought her wetsuit back.

Brett strolled out of the men's locker room wearing his swimsuit. Marina's thoughts veered to his sturdy shoulders, corded bare arms and broad chest, and she lost track of what she'd been doing.

"Miss Hernandez? Miss Hernandez?" a female voice prodded.

Marina tilted her chin and gave herself a mental shake. This was ridiculous. The business had too many problems for her to let her mind wander. She had to concentrate on her financial survival and ignore all distractions. Brett was a fantastic-looking distraction, but he was here to learn SCUBA diving, and she had work to do. She needed to sign up all of tonight's participants for regular classes. Lessons brought in a few dollars, but more important, they certified new divers. New divers usually decided to purchase equipment, and equipment had a better profit margin. Making a profit on gear was her only prayer of keeping the shop out of bankruptcy.

Stick to teaching and forget his abs. There's no time in your life for any man but Papa.

Marina turned toward the woman. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Evans. What were you asking?"

"He certainly is an attractive man. If I was thirty years younger..."

"I'm just glad he's finished changing so we can get on with the class."

The woman lowered her voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "You can admit it. You were looking. But that's okay, you're young and pretty. And I think he's looking at you too."

Marina felt another blush creeping up her cheeks. "Really, Mrs. Evans, could we concentrate on the class?"

The older woman sighed. "I need a larger wetsuit. The one you gave me must be marked wrong, it's way too tight."

Brett watched Marina shuffle through the wetsuits on the rack. She pulled one out and held it in front of a middle-aged woman with gray-streaked hair and a pear-shaped torso.

Taking full advantage of the opportunity to study Marina, he crossed his arms loosely over his chest, leaned against the wall and admired what he saw. She was about five-four, he guessed. She had a slender build, perfectly proportioned breasts and well-toned muscles, probably from exercising in the water. Her thick, ebony hair was cut in an appealing layered style, and the ends swayed and brushed her honey-skinned shoulders.

She turned, and his gaze followed a smooth back downward to curvaceous hips accentuated by her French-cut, hot pink swimsuit.

A grin tugged at the corners of his mouth. Her body, her face and her mellow, intriguing voice all cried out *sexy*. She was like an oasis, a lush place where a desert-weary man could be refreshed by beauty.

He wondered what bit of good fate had made him choose this shop to take SCUBA lessons and brought him here tonight.

Watching her kindled a desire to break his long stint of celibacy and decisively complete the re-invention of his life. She was distinctly different from the women he usually dated. But his previous strict criteria had gotten him nowhere. Now that he'd decided to expand his interests and stick with fun, casual relationships, she'd be the perfect partner.

The pear-shaped woman took the wetsuit Marina handed her, and Marina turned his way. A dazzling smile curved her full lips.

He fantasized about tasting those lips, slipping the swimsuit straps off her shoulders, slowly kissing his way down the graceful column of her neck, and then lingering around the swell of her breasts. Blood rushed to his extremities. He jolted himself out of the wanton fantasy, stepped to the rack, grabbed a size large wetsuit and held it in front of him, hoping his lustful thoughts weren't physically obvious.

"This one will do fine."

Her dark, luminous eyes opened wide. Embers of mutual attraction glowed in their exotic depths. Embers he'd like to ignite into flames.

"Well, a man who makes quick decisions," she said. Her tongue slipped out and moistened her bottom lip.

His heart pounded. "No point in wasting time."

"Yes, you're right." Her gaze skittered away.

She turned toward the rest of the class. "Go ahead and suit up, and we'll start the fun part of the class."

Brett made another slow scan of her body. "I thought we already did."

They were all breathing. That was a good sign.

Marina glided past seven pairs of wide eyes framed by thick dive masks. She paused in front of each person and felt confident everyone was stable. The bursts of silvery bubbles rising over their heads and toward the water's surface told her each person was inhaling and exhaling properly through their regulator. For now, they were all safe.

She backed away, knelt beside a tripod-mounted camera on the bottom of the pool, and evaluated each potential diver. One woman's body language hinted she was apprehensive, but everyone else seemed thrilled. Their reactions buoyed Marina's hopes of signing up all of them for an open-water class.

Seeing the wonder brightening their eyes, she shared their excitement and her skin tingled. She smiled around her regulator, experiencing one of those rare moments of satisfaction that made the stress of dive-shop ownership worthwhile. But, despite her light heart, her nerves were taut. She scrutinized each participant, watching for signs of panic.

Memories of the night a man had gulped water and fought her help so furiously both of them had almost drowned hovered at the edge of her mind. She clenched her hands at her sides, recalling how the inaccurate newspaper report had damaged the shop's reputation. With her finances in their current dismal state, another incident could destroy everything she was working for.

And even if it wasn't my fault, Papa would consider bankruptcy indisputable proof men are meant to conduct business and women are meant to do dishes.

A muscle in her jaw flinched. She wasn't going to let that happen.

Squaring her shoulders, she nodded encouragement to the men and women kneeling in front of her. Then she signaled an enthusiastic *okay* to each diver in turn.

She pushed the camera remote button on her wrist and a strobe flashed. A group photograph would allow her students to share their first underwater moments with their family and friends.

After letting them savor the experience a minute longer, Marina gestured with closed fists and upward-pointing thumbs. Everyone moved to a standing position, and the chlorine-scented pool water churned and splashed. Regulators dropped from mouths, and smiles crinkled seven faces.

One girl tripped over her own fins. "I feel like a huge frog," she joked as she regained her balance.

Marina stood with warm wavelets lapping her shoulders as she pulled her mask downward and nestled it beneath her chin. Tendrils of hair dangled on her forehead and dripped water into her eyes. She flicked the hair aside.

"You all did great. Every one of you will be a terrific diver."

The middle-aged woman on the left side turned toward the others and giggled. "It *really* was easy. I just had to keep reminding myself to breathe."

Marina nodded. "That's the secret, continue breathing. After a couple pool sessions, it will feel more natural. All your life you've been told to hold your breath underwater. So when you're first learning to dive, you need to consciously think about exhaling and inhaling."

She paused and scanned the faces. "Does anyone have other comments or questions?"

Her gaze lingered on Brett. He looked perfectly at ease and exuded a strong aura of masculine self-assurance. His blue eyes twinkled as they met hers. The blood quickened in her veins as, once again, his lips curved slowly upward into a devastating smile. She nonchalantly tugged the neck of her wetsuit and allowed some cool pool water to flood against her skin.

A fluorescent light bulb over the pool flickered and went out, but she barely noticed. For a few brief seconds she wrestled with an irrational urge to dismiss the rest of the class. When a truck rumbled past on

the busy Florida Coastal Highway only eighty feet away, she snapped out of her trance and broke eye contact.

Warmth spread up the back of her neck and over her cheeks, and she reprimanded herself for gaping at him like an awe-struck teenager. Realizing everyone was staring expectantly in her direction, she cleared her throat.

“Let’s continue. Now we’re going to split up into smaller groups. The main group will sit on the poolside here while I take two people at a time to the deep end. There, we’ll submerge again in ten feet of water.

“This time, as you descend, you may feel a slight pressure differential in your ears similar to what you might have felt in an airplane. That’s normal, and most people experience this when diving deeper than six feet. So, I want to go over how you can avoid any discomfort by simply clear—”

A series of shrill bleeps radiated from the locker area and echoed between the tiled floors and walls.

She jerked her head around to the direction of the sound.

She heard a muffled oath and turned back.

“I think that’s my pager,” Brett said. He frowned, quickly bent and removed his swim fins, then scrambled up the rungs of the pool ladder and trotted toward the locker room.

Marina gritted her teeth and fought down a wave of irritation. Any considerate person would have turned the darned thing off.

Lifting her chin, she turned her attention back to the group. “As I was saying, one of the most important diving skills you’ll learn is the procedure for equalizing the pressure in your ears. We’ll go over the complete explanation of why this pressure build-up occurs in your classes. For tonight, all you need to understand is that, as you descend, you’ll want to pause every few feet to eliminate that pressure differential.

“You can close off your nasal passage by pinching your nose right through your mask. And then, without letting the air come out of your mouth, gently exhale. That will push air into your ears, equalizing the pressure of the water.”

The woman on the left looked skeptical.

Marina grinned, doing her best to build a fun atmosphere. “It really does work. You just pretend you’re trying to make a little puff of air go out through your ears.”

Four people chuckled.

“Excuse me, Marina,” Brett called from the poolside. His serious tone shattered the festive mood. “I have to leave.”

All her potential students turned and watched Brett as he shrugged off his tank assembly, set it on the tile floor and stripped off his wetsuit. He shed his gear like a sea god on a barren stage undergoing a strange metamorphosis, and the divers in the water were spellbound by his performance.

Marina realized she'd lost everyone's attention. Her hands balled into fists and tapped her thighs.

"I'll stop by tomorrow to take care of the registration paperwork," he said.

Her breath huffed out sharply. If he considered the introductory class so trivial, why had he bothered coming at all?

She struggled to remain cool. Not everyone took diving as seriously as she did. A harsh comment might offend him, and she needed every student desperately. She had to keep her emotions in check. The muscles in the back of her neck tightened, causing an all too familiar ache.

"Tomorrow will be fine." She managed a polite smile. "Please fill out everything in the registration packet I gave you. You'll need to have a doctor complete the medical form before our next pool session."

With a snap, he peeled the last few inches of soggy neoprene off his left leg. "No problem, I'll see you in the morning."

She wondered if he was sincere. More than one prospective student had promised to return but never been seen again. "I hope so." Immediately, she wished she'd chosen a slightly different phrase. She sounded like she was flirting, and that was the last impression she wanted to convey. "I'm eager to have you join us."

Great, now I sound desperate!

"I mean, I'm sure you'll enjoy taking classes," she added, feeling her pulse spike. "SCUBA diving is a wonderful sport."

"I'm sure it is."

His eyes met hers for a split second, then he turned and walked away. Marina watched him go, her heart beating double time.

Ignoring the noise of his locker door squeaking open and his gear clanking and banging, she looked toward the six remaining participants and raised her voice to be heard. "Okay. Who wants to go to the other end of the pool in the first pair?"

While two people separated from the group and stepped toward her, she wondered if it would be best if Brett never came back. Then she could avoid the distraction of her stupid, chaotic hormones. She shook her head at her own foolishness. She needed to sign up new students and wishing for the loss of his business would be ridiculous. If he came back, she'd just have to keep her libido under control.

Thirty minutes later, staggering under the load of bulky gear designed for wearing in an underwater, weightless environment, the six potential students climbed from the pool. One by one they shed their gear, dressed and left the shop.

After the last man waved goodnight, and his car's taillights joined the traffic on the highway, Marina slid the deadbolt across the doorjamb and rotated the little sign hanging in the window to *Closed*.

She sighed in relief. The tension in her neck muscles relaxed, but her shoulders were unusually sore. She massaged her nape with the fingers of both hands. At least tonight's efforts resulted in five people signing up for classes. Seven would have been better, but even five was encouraging. And if Brett came back, she'd have a perfect class size of six.

Tallying up her new students helped her think positively. She smiled and ran the numbers through her head. If each new student spent even a thousand dollars on equipment, the free session would generate good future profits. And with profits hovering around zero, every source of income was important.

She combed her fingers through the tangles in her wet hair. Would enough income materialize to keep the shop from bankruptcy? Her mouth went dry, and a cold ache settled in her chest. Regardless of the difficulty, she would keep the shop running. She could tolerate being tired and stressed out and worried about the source of her next dollar. But if she lost the shop, Papa would be devastated, and she couldn't tolerate the thought of letting him down.

Glancing at the bronze ship's clock he'd salvaged from a sunken wreck, she saw it was five minutes before ten and realized she'd worked fourteen hours straight. Despite her bone-deep weariness, she forced a brave smile and told herself she'd won another small battle in the war: the Paradise Dive Center had survived for one more day. All she had to do between now and falling asleep was worry about making it through tomorrow.

Brett's promise to return drifted into her mind, and a small sigh escaped her lips. Would it be good or bad if he really came back?

Chapter Two

The clock struck nine and, stifling a yawn, Marina unbolted the shop door. She rotated the little window sign to *Open*, musing that her commute to work was certainly shorter since moving into her office.

She flexed her shoulders, trying to relieve her muscle kinks, then closed her eyes and pictured the plovers on Atlantic Beach racing with the waves and darting in and out of semi-circles of foam. She sighed, recalling how invigorated she'd felt each morning after jogging on the cool sand and then watching the birds from the balcony of the apartment that, until last week, had been home. She'd lived in that apartment with Papa and Ricki as long as she could remember. A smile tugged at the corners of her mouth. The furnishings in those rooms had been modest, but after sleeping on the rock hard couch in her office for the last five nights, her sore back and stiff neck could attest to the fact that her bargain-basement mattress had, in fact, been luxurious.

She shook her hair back from her face. Living in her office was only temporary. She had to conserve the meager savings she had left, and a little discomfort was a minor concern. Her top priority had to be saving Papa's shop.

The thought clicked her brain into business mode. She'd better get to work if she was going to keep her head above water. She groaned. The trite euphemism for avoiding bankruptcy wasn't even funny.

Walking through the deserted shop, Marina considered potential morning activities. First choice would be to teach a class, but none were scheduled today. Last choice would be ordering new equipment or balancing the books. She shivered with dread; attacking columns of numbers was tantamount to volunteering for torture. She wandered into the stockroom and spotted a disassembled mannequin and the cartons of stock that had arrived yesterday. Reminded of her long-ago dreams of studying fashion design and exercising her talent for decorating, her mood lightened. Redesigning the front window display was a good excuse to postpone the loathsome paperwork.

She chose a few stunning outfits of lime green and indigo swimsuits, surfer shorts, T-shirts, swim fins and snorkels. Then she tuned the radio to *El Día del Latino* and climbed into the window to create the new display. She paused occasionally to rock her shoulders and shake her hips to the rhythm of the music's infectious salsa beat. Two hours flew by. She stepped back, analyzed the arrangement and, satisfied with the result, sang a few bars of "Escondite Inglés" along with Shakira while dancing across the shop.

Just after noontime, with the last empty box plopped in the back room, Marina was taking the shipping papers to her office when the bell over the shop door jingled.

Maybe it's Brett.

She snapped her head toward the entrance, but the man in the doorway was a stranger.

Disappointment slumped her shoulders. She twisted her mouth into a wry grin: every customer was important. Why should it matter if it was Brett or not?

"May I help you find something in particular?" she asked.

"I just want to browse."

"Please feel free to ask if you need any help. I'm running some excellent sales right now on my inventory of swim fins and masks."

He nodded and wandered away.

She wanted to stick with him and prod him to buy, but resisted resorting to the kind of high-pressure sales techniques she'd always hated. She clenched her teeth and tidied the T-shirt display. Then while waiting for him to request help, make a purchase, or leave, she organized plastic bags at the checkout counter.

He came toward the counter a couple minutes later holding a pair of fins.

Marina smiled quickly. "Have you found something?"

"No. Just my luck. I need extra-large, but the biggest pair on the rack is a large."

Her smile faded. Hoping the sale wasn't lost, she keyed the fins' stock number into her computer.

"The inventory shows one pair of extra-large, so they must be here somewhere. Give me a minute. I'll find them."

She searched under the shelves. No fins. Determined not to lose the sale, she dragged a ladder out from the back room and checked the boxes piled near the ceiling. Nada. Hope of finding the extra larges dimmed.

Several minutes into her hunt, the little bell over the door jingled. Brett strolled through the front doorway.

The room seemed to instantly brighten. She told herself her sense of excitement was motivated by financial concerns; after all, if he took lessons he'd probably buy gear. Still, she admired his strong jaw and full lips for a long moment before she could tear her eyes from his face. She finally managed to zoom out her gaze and noticed his impeccably tailored, gray, pinstriped suit. Spotting his outrageous, cherry-red tie with a Mickey and Minnie Mouse pattern, she pressed her lips together to keep from laughing aloud.

Her composure regained, she told him, "I'll be right with you as soon as I finish with this customer. Feel free to browse."

"My lunch hour's almost over. I'll stop back some other time," the customer said. He headed for the door and left.

She tamped down her disappointment at the lost sale, climbed down the ladder and bumped the snorkel display. She kneeled and pushed the cardboard support backwards. It wouldn't move into place. When she pulled the support sideways to investigate, two swim fins fell from behind it. Extra larges.

Her breath huffed out and she muttered, "*Maravilloso!* Just marvelous!"

With a couple unladylike oaths zinging through her head, she turned to Brett and went still. Instead of browsing, he stood near the counter watching her. Their eyes met. He raised one hand to the knot in his tie and adjusted it slightly.

He wants to look attractive to me.

Her stomach flip-flopped with happiness, and she caught her breath at an unexpected rush of desire. Her hand went up to feather her hair, but she sidetracked the motion, and instead rubbed her neck. For a few heartbeats, the entire world went away.

An emergency vehicle with the siren wailing sped by out on the street. She chided herself for her schoolgirl reaction to Brett, stood and flashed him a professional smile.

"Sorry to keep you waiting. You're here to register for classes, I hope." She realized her voice sounded too anxious.

"Yes, I am." He removed a packet of papers from his jacket pocket. "All the forms are filled out. I'm sorry about rushing out of the class last night. I had a baby being born."

"A baby? Oh, how wonderful."

It must be a beautiful child with you as its father.

She opened her mouth to voice her thought, but then her mind made the connection that a baby meant he was married. Feeling a rush of disappointment and mortification, she bit back the flirtatious compliment.

For a few fleeting seconds, she wished fate had brought them together before someone else had found him, before it was too late. Her mind conjured up an image of him in another woman's arms, and jealousy pricked her heart. She clenched her teeth and forced the silly feelings away. He probably only looked perfect on the surface. If she knew him, she'd probably discover his marital status was for the best.

Releasing a quiet sigh, she lifted her chin, and reinforced her smile. There was no point in dwelling on what might have been. Even if she'd met him when he was single, she had to run the shop alone six days a week and was too busy for a social life. She had zero time to spend with a man, no matter how good looking. All she had time to do was dream.

But he was only two feet away. So close, she detected the faint scent of herbal soap. His eyes were the same mysterious blue as the mile-deep waters of the Gulf Stream, and looking into them, she had the surreal feeling she was tumbling. She grasped the edge of the counter to prevent herself from being pulled into their hypnotic depths.

He would have been easy to dream about.

"I was enjoying your lesson," he said.

She snapped out of her reverie.

“But when a baby decides to make an appearance, it’s time to drop everything and run.”

She searched for something intelligent to say and finally asked, “Is it a boy or a girl?”

“A boy, four pounds, three and a half ounces, with a very healthy pair of lungs.”

As he spoke, the rich, baritone timbre of his voice was barely audible over the heartbeat drumming in her ears. Hoping to get her mind off the tightness in her throat, she fidgeted with the stack of forms. “Well, congratulations. Is this your first?”

“My first? Oh no, he’s my six hundred and seventy-ninth.”

Her jaw dropped. “What?”

“The Dillon baby is my newest patient. He’s a month premature, so I wanted to check him over personally. But he’s healthy, fully developed and quite vigorous.” She must have looked confused because he paused then added, “I’m a pediatrician.”

“He’s a patient?” Marina realized her jumble of emotions had confused her thoughts and she’d jumped to the illogical conclusion he could have fathered six hundred and seventy-nine children. She knocked the heel of her hand against her forehead and burst out laughing. “Wow, for a second there, I thought you were the busiest man in town.”

“Even I would find it difficult to father that many babies,” he said, with a chuckle.

She ignored the heat spreading up her cheeks and dropped her gaze to the stack of forms he’d given her.

“Well, Mister—I mean, *Doctor* Sutherland, everything seems to be in order here. The first class is tomorrow night. All I need is the tuition, and I’ll add you to the roster.”

“Please, call me Brett.” He paused. “How much do you need?”

Need? Her eyes shifted to the stack of bills that had arrived in the morning mail, and she estimated twenty-five thousand would be sufficient.

But she said, “The open-water class is ninety-nine dollars. The boat charges for the four ocean dives are paid to the captain the day we go out.”

He pulled out a checkbook, flipped to a blank check, wrote *Paradise Dive Center*, then looked up with his pen poised over the space for the amount.

“Did you say ninety-nine? I’d swear you quoted me a hundred and twenty-five or thirty when I called last week.”

She squared her shoulders. “I have a special running right now. In order to be fair to my students, I’m matching the price of a new competitor that opened a couple months ago.”

“A special. Well, yet another pleasant surprise.” He finished writing the check and handed it across the counter to her. “Sounds like the new shop might be cutting into your business.”

Slashing, stabbing and strangling would be more accurate.

“A little,” she admitted. “But Paradise has always been a family-run shop where we care about our customers and treat them like friends. At some places, a student is just a number. Here, you’re a fellow diver who shares our love of the sport. I think, eventually, our customers will miss the camaraderie and personal attention we give them, and they’ll come back.”

“Am I all set then?” he asked.

“I’m sorry, I forgot. You need a textbook.” Why were her thoughts suddenly so muddled? Was it the hard couch and lack of sleep? Or was it the revelation that the newborn boy wasn’t Brett’s baby? “It’s twenty-two fifty plus tax. Your tuition includes use of the rest of the gear you’ll need. The snorkel and mask you used last night were very good, so there’s nothing else to buy just now.”

“Actually, I have all my own gear. I bought a complete outfit a couple years ago. I’ve just been too busy to sign up for classes until now.”

If he owned equipment already, he didn’t need to purchase more. She felt a twinge of frustration but kept a smile on her face.

“Oh. Well, you can use the shop equipment or your own, it’s your choice. If you use your own tank, I’ll supply the air fills.”

He took a twenty and a five from his wallet and handed her the bills. “Aren’t you going to sell me videos and study guides and CD lessons?”

He must have spoken to Ripley’s.

Her new, chain-store competitor had a reputation for pushing all the extras the minute they had a prospect. She wondered how he’d resisted their hard sell and why he decided to take lessons at her shop instead of theirs. But right now, his choice gave her a pleasing sense of victory, and she released a tiny celebratory chuckle as she palmed his money and passed him a textbook.

“As old fashioned as this may sound, I’m not going to load you up with expensive extras. I’m just going to teach you how to dive safely. We’ll discuss some of those tools in our first class. You can decide then if you think they might be helpful.”

She scooped a dollar, a dime and a nickel from the cash drawer.

He rested his left hand on the counter while he extended his right hand for the change, and she noticed his empty ring finger. Half of her brain warned her to avoid the subject of his marital status, but the other half plodded right along.

“Would your wife like to take lessons too?” she asked, her words slipping out as if prompted by a devil on her shoulder. Her throat went suddenly dry, and she swallowed so hard she was sure the sound would echo through the shop.

Don’t let him answer yes.

To disguise her personal intent, she blurted, “SCUBA diving is safest and the most fun when you dive with a buddy.”

His eyes sparkled.

“I may be responsible for lots of children, but I don’t have a wife.”

The breath she’d been unconsciously holding whooshed out. He would have to be deaf not to hear it. Mortified, she wished she could crawl under the counter and hide.

“Good. I mean...not good... I mean, having your wife as a student would be nice. But if you’re happy being single...” Her face felt like she’d been hit by a blowtorch, and she wondered if she looked like a ripe tomato. “Please try to read section one in your book before tomorrow night’s class, so you’ll feel comfortable with the terminology.”

He nodded and said with a suggestive smile, “I’ll be ready, willing and able.” He turned and moved with fluid grace toward the door.

A flurry of goose bumps erupted on her arms. She felt almost hypnotized.

After he strolled out through the doorway, the shop and her world were suddenly empty. She filled the emptiness with a daydream about cuddling close to him. Then she let out a long sigh. Why was she acting so ridiculous? Were all the dateless months since Papa’s stroke making her thoughts go loco? Magnificent-looking man or not, she had a business to run and no time for distractions.

Marina slumped over the desk in her office and added the figures on the purchase order. Tapping a pen on the desktop, she stared at the total. Her nerves went taut with worry and fear. Would her supplier extend more credit? If not, how would she replenish her wetsuit stock?

She stared into space and raked her fingers through her hair. Even without more credit, she already owed five times what Papa had owed when he managed the shop. Not that she had a choice. Business had been slow ever since those nationally reported shark attacks off the coast, and now she was fighting the new competition. But she wouldn’t dare tell Papa how far behind she’d fallen. If he knew, his blood pressure would probably spike off the charts, and he’d have another stroke.

She forced away the depressing thoughts and signed the order form. If operating on additional credit would help save the business, then that’s what she’d do.

The bell above the front door jingled.

Relieved to be rescued from her despicable task, she jumped up and dashed into the shop. The petite, blonde-headed girl who walked up to her reminded Marina of a pixie.

“Hi. I’m here about your ad for a clerk.”

Marina’s hope for a sale fluttered away. She would have preferred being interrupted by a customer, but lately those were scarce.

“I’m Marina Hernandez, the owner of Paradise.”

“I’m Trish Flaherty.” The girl wet her lips and looked around the shop. “This would be my first job. I think I know what clerks do in stores, you know, from being a customer. But is there hard stuff I’d have to do too?”

The question caused a sick feeling in Marina’s stomach. Last week, two divemasters accepted jobs with her new competitor and quit. The pressure of teaching classes without their assistance was immense. But even worse, they’d left her with only one part-time employee to wait on customers while she taught classes. Meaning her financial situation was now in a tightening death spiral.

To continue selling lessons and giving classes, she needed additional help in the shop. She’d be hard pressed to pay even minimum wage, but unless she was free to give lessons, there’d be no new divers. Without new divers, there’d be less new gear sales. With any less new gear sales, the business would fail.

So she’d posted an ad at the high school for a clerk. All she expected was a warm body, someone who would prevent her from being shoplifted out of business while she taught lessons. Hiring an inexperienced clerk was an act of desperation, but it was her only option.

“The job isn’t difficult,” she said, hiding her tension. “I just need someone to wait on customers. Selling the sportswear is easy. You’ll only need to learn where the different sizes and styles are stocked.”

Trish turned toward the display area for the snorkels, air tanks, swim fins, regulators and BCDs. “What about all that other stuff? I don’t even know what those things are, let alone what somebody would do with them.”

“For a couple weeks, I’ll have someone experienced in equipment sales help you. You’ll learn the terminology and usages quickly.”

Marina evaluated the girl. Trish was friendly and healthy looking. Her clothes were neat and clean and typical of current teen fashion. She sounded self-assured, reasonably intelligent and honest. She ought to fill the clerk’s position nicely.

“The job only pays minimum wage,” Marina said. Then, feeling embarrassed, she added an incentive. “Free SCUBA lessons come with the job, if you work here at least six months. Familiarity with the sport will give you more selling expertise.”

“Free lessons! You mean it?”

Marina was warmed by the girl’s unbridled enthusiasm and a smile tugged at her lips. “Yes, free.”

“Wow, that is so awesome.”

“Do you know how to work a cash register?”

“I cashiered for our class bake sale last year.” Trish glanced toward the checkout counter. “Your register looks like the one we borrowed from the cafeteria.”

“Good. Then you’re one step ahead. Are you sure it’s all right with your parents if you work nights? Sometimes my classes run until almost ten, and the shop has to stay open until everyone leaves.”

“They said it’s okay as long as I keep my grades up.”

Marina nodded, formulating her hiring decision in the back of her mind. “Any other questions?”

“Could I get a discount if I buy things?”

“You’ll get twenty percent off on beachwear and swimsuits, and fifteen percent on equipment. The discount can help compensate for the low starting wage, and if you sell a lot of merchandise, I’ll try to give you raises in the future.”

Trish shrugged and flipped her hair in a gesture meant to appear mature. Instead, it emphasized her naïveté. “I’ll probably sell lots of merchandise to myself. And minimum wage is okay. My dad bought me a maroon Mustang for my sixteenth birthday. And he’s footing the bill for college. I just want to have some of my own money besides my allowance. You know?”

“And meeting some of the guys who come in here to buy surfing gear would be nice too, I presume,” Marina said with a conspiratorial grin. An image of Brett Sutherland smiling at her drifted through her mind’s eye. Her pulse danced for a few seconds. She blinked the image away.

Trish laughed and a mischievous look spread over her face. “I could suffer through a surfer or two. Is that okay? I mean I’ll flirt a little, but I’ll work hard.”

Marina liked the girl’s forthright attitude and extended her hand to shake. “It’s a deal. Sounds like I’ve got a new salesclerk.”

Trish shook Marina’s hand awkwardly. But her chest puffed out a little, and she seemed thrilled to be treated as an adult.

A twinge of guilt rippled through Marina. Trish was young and inexperienced; she’d probably never had to face life’s hard lessons and disappointments. It would be cruel to promise her lessons then never have them materialize. She decided to make an exception and waive the six-month waiting period for free lessons. Six months from now, Trish could be unemployed and the shop boarded up and out of business.

Chapter Three

Wednesday night, Marina finished her explanation of the buddy system, glanced at the clock and was surprised. Nine-thirty. Ever since the class started two hours ago, her gaze had been pulled magnetically toward Brett Sutherland, and she'd been resisting the urge to stare. But now, he'd go, the threat of stumbling over her words while she gawked would be over, and she could relax.

"That's all for tonight's class," she announced. "We'll have a pool session next time. We'll be assembling equipment, learning how to clear masks and regulators, and becoming familiar with buoyancy control. So you'll be prepared, please read the Confined Water, Class One, Training Preview in your book. I'll see you all Monday. Goodnight, everyone."

Several voices echoed her *goodnight*. Notebooks thunked closed, and chair legs scraped against the tile floor. Students stood and began leaving.

Marina ejected the lesson DVD and systematically gathered her other teaching aids. With her energy level sinking fast, she imagined how wonderful it was going to feel to lie down tonight, even on her hard couch.

"Marina?" inquired a familiar baritone voice.

She spun toward the sound. Brett Sutherland stood less than three feet away. A light feeling came over her, and she felt a sudden surge of energy. A smile tugged up her lips. "Yes?"

"I have a question I was hoping you could answer."

"I'll try." She indulged her desire to focus on his face, studying the charming laugh lines next to his eyes.

"In the last chapter of the book, the authors mention lessons for students with special needs. I was wondering about lessons for someone confined to a wheelchair. Is there anywhere in town equipped to do that, and are the students usually successful?"

She blinked in surprise. He'd read the entire book when she'd only assigned one chapter? Was he for real?

Trying to maintain an air of professionalism, she answered, "I can teach disabled students here. Some people who have lost the use of their arms or legs become excellent divers because of the weightless environment. Their success depends on the individual and their physical condition."

He nodded. A satisfied grin brightened his face.

The last of the departing students waved and called, "Goodnight."

She returned the wave then glanced at her watch.

“Would you excuse me for just a minute? I’d like to let my new salesclerk go home. It’s her first night, and I don’t want to keep her too late.”

“Sure. I’ll wait right here.”

Marina rushed to the showroom, told Trish she could leave, and returned.

“Okay, now we can talk.” A prolonged growl came from her midsection. She laughed to cover her embarrassment. “I’m sorry. My stomach must be anxious for dinner.”

“Do you always eat this late?”

Thinking about last night’s microwaved mac and cheese, she shrugged. “Yes, I’m usually too busy until after classes are over. An irregular meal schedule is one of the occupational hazards of small business owners.”

“Well, then, could I buy you dinner while we continue our conversation?”

Marina hesitated. Her last meal had been orange juice and a bagel for breakfast. She was as hungry as a migrating whale, and eating with him would be more enjoyable than another quick microwave meal alone. But a voice inside screamed *No! It would be dangerous to spend time with a man who makes you feel so disoriented and giddy.*

“Thank you, but...”

“You’ll be doing me a favor. You’re probably anxious to be heading home, but if I buy you dinner, we can finish discussing our business. Then I only have to feel guilty about keeping you out late. I can avoid the extra guilt of keeping you from eating.”

She laughed and shook off her reluctance. This would be no different than a business dinner with an equipment vendor.

“Well, when you put it that way, of course I’ll join you.”

Marina followed Brett out the shop door and into the charm of a soft southern night. The temperature was still in the seventies, and the air smelled of the salty tang of the sea. She set the alarm, pulled the door shut behind them and locked it.

Brett motioned toward a shiny, midnight blue Mercedes with the license plate *BABY-DOC* parked two spaces away from her ancient Toyota.

He slipped a key fob from his pocket and asked, “Where would you like to eat?”

She considered their options. An uncomplicated dinner would be best. “One of my favorite places is right down the street. They serve until midnight, and it’s close enough to walk.”

He nodded. “Sounds good to me. Lead the way.”

She stepped onto the sidewalk. His hand gently touched the small of her back, and incredible sensations shimmered through her. Even after he'd removed his hand, a warm tingle lingered.

While they strolled down the sidewalk he said, "I love the Florida weather, especially on clear, starlit nights like this."

"It is nice to be outside on a balmy winter night. I'm usually so busy I don't get to enjoy them."

She led him across a deserted street, and their shoes scrunched on the sandy pavement. A warm breeze lifted her hair and stirred the trees. The distinctive rustle of palm fronds mingled with the muted pounding of distant surf.

Marina pointed toward a small, red and white sign about fifty yards away. "That's the restaurant over there, Rosa's."

"Interesting, I've driven by here a million times and never noticed a restaurant. I thought that was an empty building overgrown with saw palmetto and coconut palms."

"Most people do drive right by. But the place is usually jammed anyway. The building may be tiny, but the food is so good people search until they find it."

He leaned his head down close to her ear and said with an intimate note in his voice, "Good things often come in small packages."

His breath on her ear was unnerving, and the implication he'd noticed her body caused a flutter in her heart and infused her with a gentle yen.

Brett swung open the restaurant's stained-glass door, and Marina stepped inside. She breathed deeply, savoring the aroma of chilies and tomatoes and tortillas. Her mouth watered, and her taste buds prepared for the thrill of fresh salsa made to Rosa's own recipe.

She followed the hostess through the packed restaurant and to a tiny corner table dimly lit by a single candle.

Brett held her chair then sat opposite her. His trousers brushed her knee.

Her senses churned with pleasure.

Drawing in a breath and regaining her composure, Marina handed the menu to the hostess. "I won't need this. I ate here every Friday night until a month ago, and I have the entire menu memorized."

"*Sí. Lo entiendo.* Then are you ready to order now, *señorita*?"

"Yes, I'll have Rosa's Special, with the house dressing on the greens, *por favor.*"

Brett said, "*Tráigame a mí lo mismo.* And a bottle of the house red wine and two glasses, *por favor.*"

Marina smiled. Did he really know what he'd just ordered? Or did he simply know a few Spanish words and was trying to impress her? Either way, she admired his effort.

"They have a complete menu and steaks so tender they practically melt in your mouth," she said. "Please don't feel obligated to order the same thing as me."

"I'm assuming you know what's good here."

“I ordered masa-crust chicken with piquillo peppers, avocado butter and a grapefruit-honey vinaigrette on the greens. The peppers and the masa coating are usually pretty hot.”

“I know. It was all spelled out on the menu.” His gaze locked with hers. “And I’m okay with hot and spicy.”

Was he talking about peppers?

Marina averted her eyes. Tension reverberated through her frame. She must be reading too much into his words. She struggled to control her imagination. Trying to relax and be nonchalant, she spread her napkin across her lap.

“Where did you learn Spanish?” she asked.

“I took classes as electives in college, figuring it would come in handy.”

“Has it? I mean for anything other than ordering dinner in Mexican restaurants.”

He grinned. “It turned out to be a good move, especially during my residency. When I did a rotation in the emergency room, I had to ask about symptoms and diagnose a lot of Spanish-speaking patients quickly. Even now in my own practice, my patients are more comfortable being able to speak to me without an interpreter.”

The waitress brought a bowl of salsa and a basket heaped with chips. Brett held the basket toward Marina.

She took a chip and dipped into the salsa. “So tell me, who is this person in the wheelchair?”

“My nephew, Greg. He has extensive nerve damage to his right leg as the result of a motorcycle accident two years ago.”

“What happened?”

“The motorcycle he was a passenger on swerved to avoid a dog and fell onto him. He was dragged fifty feet before smashing into a parked car.”

A scene of panic and devastation flashed in her mind. “Oh my God! He’s lucky he’s alive.”

“Yes, he is. My brother-in-law was driving without wearing a helmet. He died the next day from massive head trauma.”

“I’m sorry. I know how terrible you must feel. A few years ago, I lost my brother.”

She pictured Ricki in his dive gear jumping from the stern of a boat. She could hear his laughter as if he’d made that jump only yesterday. Even after four years, it was still hard to believe he was gone.

Marina shook off the sorrowful feelings weighing on her shoulders and filed away the memories. “Were you close to your brother-in-law and sister?”

“Not at the time of the accident. Claudia is almost five years older, and we were inseparable growing up. She’s a born nurturer and took care of me, was almost a surrogate mother. But about the time she got married, I started college. Then there was med school and my internship and residency in Boston. We drifted apart. Steve and I never got to know each other the way we should.”

She nodded. "It's easy to get caught up in day-to-day pressures."

"We might have reconnected after I came back and started my practice. But then he changed jobs, and they moved to North Carolina. We'd occasionally see each other on holidays. But he and Claudia were busy, and so was I. Our lives diverged."

Brett scooped up a mound of salsa.

She watched his hands. His skin looked smooth and scrubbed. His nails were trimmed flush with the ends of his fingers, and there were white half-moons at each nail base. She swallowed hard and told herself she was crazy to be so entranced by his hands. They were hands for heaven's sake, just slim-fingered, gorgeous, masculine hands.

"Are your sister and nephew still living in North Carolina?"

"No. I convinced them to move back here so I could help with Greg."

"How old is he?"

"He'll be eighteen in a few weeks. I was thinking about diving lessons as a birthday present."

"Seventeen is a difficult age." Marina said. "Missing out on playing team sports and being restricted from a lot of the other activities teenagers enjoy must be hard on him."

Brett nodded. "That's part of why I'm interested in SCUBA lessons for him. He's becoming introverted and spends too much time alone in his room. I'd like to see him get away from his computer and out of the house more. Diving would give him a place to go and something interesting to do."

He took another chip. "Greg's been hospitalized for several surgeries since the accident. His left hip was broken and took a long time to heal. Then he needed skin grafts on his arm. It's been a long, slow road to get to where he is today."

"Does he go to school?"

"All the hospitalization and therapy made a conventional school impossible. He's enrolled in a home-tutoring program for gifted students, but I think the public school system would be better for him. Mixing with other teenagers would help him learn to deal with the societal challenges he'll face when he starts college in the fall."

"Well, learning to dive would give him an opportunity to meet people. Can he swim?" Marina watched a lock of Brett's hair fall onto his forehead, and she recalled the image of water dripping from his hair and shimmering on his body as he stripped off his wetsuit. She blinked and dragged her mind back to the conversation.

"They lived on the Outer Banks with easy access to the ocean," he was saying. "Greg swam quite well. And his arms are still strong. I've insisted on physical therapy and a full exercise routine designed to maintain muscle tone. My sister and I are determined to get him walking with a brace and a crutch soon."

“If he can use his arms to swim, he can probably learn to dive. And, if the muscles in his good leg are strong, he should be able to get good propulsion from one swim fin. Why not bring him into the shop? We can get him into the pool, and I’ll evaluate his swimming ability.”

The waitress served their wine and entrée and left.

Marina picked up her fork.

Brett said, “I’ll pay for private lessons, if that’s what he needs.”

Her fork paused in mid-air. Private lessons were lucrative. And tuitions for private lessons were pure profit. Plus, Greg would probably need to buy equipment. Three hundred fifty, times two, plus gear profit, could put over a thousand sorely needed dollars in the hands of her creditors. Counting her anticipated profit brought a ripple of pleasure, followed quickly by a twinge of guilt. She chided herself for being so mercenary then focused on the logistics.

“Can he get in and out of his wheelchair by himself?” she asked.

“Yes.”

Her conscience wouldn’t let her take advantage of Brett. “Then he should be okay in a regular class. I may want to have a divemaster’s assistance when we do the open-water dives, because I’ll have five or more other students who’ll require attention and I’ll want to keep Greg closely supervised. But other than that, if he’s interested, I’ll start him with my next class.”

She slipped a pepper slice into her mouth and chewed slowly, savoring the delectable taste. But the pepper’s flavor faded as she worried about the extra workload of teaching a disabled student. If her last divemaster quit, she’d have no one to help.

Questioning her own sanity, she swallowed and drew in a deep breath. Then she smiled, thinking she’d be helping someone discover the thrill of diving who’d probably assumed he was incapable of participating in the sport. Accomplishing that would be a reward for the extra effort.

Brett asked, “Can you shift me into your next class too? That way I can help Greg if he needs it.”

“Sure, that sounds good.”

“When should we come by the shop?”

She bit back a remark that business was so slow any time would be fine and said, “The nights without a scheduled class, I’m the only salesperson. But I have a part-timer who can cover the shop for a couple hours during the day.”

“I have appointments booked solid until at least five on weekdays.”

“Is early Saturday morning good for you?”

“I have office hours until one o’clock. Could we make it two?”

Marina hesitated. Saturday afternoons had always been her busiest time before her new competitor opened. If the shop got busy this weekend, would Trish be able to handle a crowd? She was about to say

no, but then she recalled the echo of her footsteps breaking the silence last Saturday afternoon. Without a miracle, three days from now Paradise might be deserted again.

“Two would be fine.”

“So, tell me,” he said, sipping his wine then leaning back in his chair, “how long have you been teaching SCUBA diving?”

She chuckled. “Forever. I was one of the youngest instructors ever certified. I logged the necessary hours and completed my instructor training course before I reached the minimum age. I took the exam on my birthday.”

“What kind of a test do you take?”

“A killer that includes all the skills you’ll teach plus speed swimming, rescue diving, and CPR. The standards for instructors are rigorous.”

“It doesn’t sound like much fun.”

“Passing the test isn’t easy, but it’s worth the effort. The fun comes in after you start to teach. Some instructors work on cruise ships, others travel constantly taking dive groups to exotic sites all over the world. I’ve led trips to some fantastic reefs. Which reminds me, my shop is affiliated with a worldwide network of leading dive resorts. And hundreds of dive centers will accept your certification as proof of competency.” Realizing she must sound like a boring sales brochure, she pressed her lips together and felt her cheeks warm.

“You seem to enjoy instructing. How did you get started?”

The shadows and candlelight danced on his face, and she had the absurd desire to reach out and touch his cheek. She dragged her mind back to his question.

“My father opened Paradise before I was born. I could swim before I could walk, so becoming an instructor and working in the business came naturally.”

“Does your dad still run the place?”

She sighed. “No, but I’ve never let him know that. He’s in a nursing home because he’s had two strokes. His doctors ordered no more diving and no more stress.”

“So you’re running it now?”

“Yes.” She thought about the mountain of hateful paperwork that took up too much of her time. “I’m doing my best.”

“Alone? Or do you have other family to help?”

“Alone. I guess calling it a family business is a little inaccurate now.”

She dropped her gaze to her plate and pushed at a chunk of chicken with her fork. “Papa was grooming my brother, Ricki, to be his partner and take over the business when he was ready to retire. But Ricki drowned in a dive accident in Mexico four years ago.”

"I'm sorry. I remember you mentioned losing a brother earlier." In a lowered tone, he asked, "Can you talk about how it happened?"

"Ricki was always a daredevil." She pulled in a deep breath. "I guess he thought he was invincible. He and a couple of his friends were on spring break during their senior year of college. They went to visit our second cousin who runs a dive resort in Cozumel. On a day when they should have known the seas were way too rough, they went wreck diving."

The remains on her plate suddenly looked bland and unappealing. She put down her fork, picked up her wine, then stared at the tranquil surface of the liquid in the glass.

"The currents around Cozumel are notoriously treacherous. Ricki got separated from his buddy. He must have been swept away from the wreck and surfaced too far away to be seen from the dive boat."

She swirled the wine in her glass, and the liquid formed a whirlpool. A dull ache spread across her chest.

"My cousin radioed for my uncle's boat to come help him search. Both boats circled the area for hours. But the waves had built to over eight feet and made finding him impossible. The boats were getting tossed around violently, then it got dark, and their fuel ran low. They had no choice but to head to shore. The next day, four boats combed the area from dawn to dusk. A fisherman eventually found Ricki's body."

She swallowed to clear the tightness in her throat.

"My father took Ricki's death hard. He has very traditional values, and his son was his right hand in the business and the center of his life. As far back as I can remember, Papa was always making big plans for after Ricki graduated from college. When my uncle called from Cozumel and told him the news, Papa was devastated. He seemed to lose his reason for living. A week later, he had his first stroke."

"That must have been tough on you."

She jerked her eyes up at the perceived challenge. "I've managed. I may not have been a son, but I'm quite capable."

A muscle flexed in his jaw. "I believe you are. What I meant was, losing your brother and then almost immediately having to cope with your father's illness must have been emotionally devastating."

"I'm not a fragile flower, Doctor," she shot back. "I can handle anything life deals out. And I'm quite capable of shouldering the responsibility."

With one eyebrow arched, Brett eyed her over the edge of his glass as he took a sip of his wine. He blotted his lips with his napkin for half a minute then replaced it on his lap. "Sorry. I guess I broached a touchy subject there."

Marina forced a smile and a flustered laugh. Why had she been so overly defensive? And why had she revealed so much of herself to a stranger? "I'm the one who should apologize. I've been on edge about the business, and I guess I just vented some of my frustrations on you. Forgiven?"

He flashed a brief smile and nodded slightly, but the eyebrow stayed arched. “Forgiven. Shall we talk about something else? How about some dessert?” he asked, glancing at her almost empty plate.

She decided she’d made quite enough of a fool of herself for one evening. “Thank you, no. I think it’s time I went home.” He looked delicious in the flickering candlelight, and she wished she could snatch those words out of the air before he heard them.

“You still have some wine to finish,” he said with disappointment in his voice.

Marina picked up her glass. He was well-mannered, quite handsome and interesting company. Being here felt strange, but it felt good. She tilted her head and made her tone light. “I’ll stay and finish my wine if you promise not to ask anything else about me. Let’s talk about you.”

His eyebrow relaxed, and he raised his glass in a toast. His eyes twinkled as he laughed a warm, hearty laugh that caressed her like an evening breeze. “It’s a deal. But I warn you, I’ve spent most of my time either in med school or establishing my practice. It’s all been pretty boring.”

“Is that why you decided to do something exciting and learn to dive?”

“That’s a large part of it. I’ve been too strict with myself, and I need to add a little spark to my life. I’ve been thinking about traveling to some of the Caribbean islands, and I thought I’d enjoy the trip more if I could explore underwater as well as above.”

She pictured the tropical islands on the travel-package brochures at the shop and wished she could go with him. The fantasy faded and she sighed. With the shop closed only one day a week, it would be a very brief trip.

The business needs your full attention. Concentrate on the business. Stop gawking at his fabulous blue eyes. It’s a business dinner, talk business.

“There are hundreds of wonderful places to dive in the islands. When you get ready to go, I can book you into some fantastic resorts, and I have friends working on some of the dive charter boats. I’ll ask them to get you to the best sites.”

“Will do.” Brett paused. “Besides making the time for diving and traveling, I’ve decided I also need to restructure my social life.”

He raised his glass and took another sip of wine before saying, “I’m also going to actively pursue unique women.” He paused again and captured her eyes with a piercing look. “Women like you.”

Her breath caught in her throat. She could count the number of dates she’d had in the last couple years on one hand. Her skills at reading between the lines were a little rusty, but she’d have to have been brought up in a nunnery to misunderstand his message. For several seconds, her desire to know him better warred with her reluctance to become involved. She shifted in her seat.

Stay focused on Papa and the business.

“A social life is a luxury I can’t afford,” she managed at last.

Her inner voice gathered momentum, whispering Brett knew enough about women to guess she dreamed of someday meeting her Prince Charming, falling in love, having a baby and living happily ever after. He probably had plenty of women with dreams sit across from him at dinner and fall for his *actively pursue unique women* line. She lifted her chin and gathered her defenses. She wasn't going to be another one of his conquests. "I have a full schedule running the shop," she informed him, "and I'm comfortable with my life the way it is."

A tiny wave of pride made her square her shoulders. She was strong enough to resist Brett. She'd defeated temptation.

"Wouldn't a little more fun interest you?" he asked.

She laughed, feeling silly for letting herself build their conversation into The Battle of the Sexes. "It's only human nature to want a little more fun."

A mischievous smile brightened his face. "What kind of fun interests you?"

"You promised no more questions about me."

"True. But I have to ask anyway. To me, diving seems like it's going to be a lot of fun. I'm curious about what a dive instructor does for a change of pace."

She traced the edge of the wineglass with her fingertips, but her gaze stayed on his face. He looked as if he genuinely wanted to know. She thought about how wonderful it might be to forget her problems, simply kick back in some obscure place and indulge romantic fantasies.

"I'd like to do uncomplicated things, easy activities with no schedules and no worries. I'd like to bask in the sun on a beach or wander through Mayan ruins. The escapist things other people seem to have the time for."

"Do you want to do those things alone?"

Marina perceived the subtle suggestion in his words and told herself she'd be wise to lay her cards on the table. "Sometimes being alone is for the best. Relationships take time. Running the shop is a constant challenge, and right now, I don't have time for anything but work."

He nodded and a wry smile touched his lips. Then he slowly raised his glass and offered another toast. "Here's to a woman's prerogative to change her mind. If you find any spare time, consider spending it with me. Maybe we can share some uncomplicated fun."

She searched his eyes for any hint to his emotions but saw nothing she understood in their deep blue depths.

Her instincts told her if she indulged her desires and spent any time with this tempting man, she'd risk losing her heart. Relationships never worked. They always led to bickering about her work taking up too many hours. Then came the break-up, and the hole of emptiness and sadness. Brett would probably leave a huge hole. She was better off not to see him at all.

And I won't.

Logic told her that last thought was ridiculous. She had to see him professionally for at least six weeks while he took diving lessons.

She realized being with him was undermining her ability to think straight and abruptly set down her glass. “I really should go now.”

He nodded. “After you close Saturday, would you care to join me back here for dinner?”

She stood and pushed her chair under the table. “I’m sorry. I have other things I need to do,” she said, even as she wished her things to do included Brett.

Chapter Four

After an hour of depressing paperwork, Marina's skull was pounding and her brain felt about ready to explode. She pushed the pile of invoices toward the side of her desk, crossed her arms on the newly cleared spot and dropped her forehead onto them.

The small bell above the shop door jingled, announcing the arrival of a customer. The sound evoked warm, childhood memories, and she managed a smile. Even as a little girl giving tea parties for her dolls in the stock room, she'd known that jingle meant sales, and sales meant Papa was happy.

Right now, a few sales would make her happy too. She sighed, and her smile died. How much longer would she be able to keep Paradise in business if that bell didn't jingle more often?

Voices drifted through her office doorway. The male voice sounded disgruntled and the female voice apologetic and soothing. Marina guessed the man wanted some expensive equipment, and the woman was reminding him about kids' shoes and car payments.

Trish was on her break and would be gone for another ten minutes, so ignoring her headache, Marina pushed out of her chair and went to help the customers. Maybe offering the man a less expensive alternative would keep peace in the family and result in a sale.

The mature male voice was a mismatch with its owner. Near the front door, a pouty teen-aged boy slouched in a wheelchair, and an attractive, but harried-looking, brunette stood next to him.

The woman's voice echoed in the empty showroom. "You'll enjoy learning to dive, honey. Uncle Brett says it's fun. Will you please give it a chance?"

"I won't be any good at it, and it'll be a big waste of time. I've got to answer a bunch of e-mails. Let's just go home and forget this whole thing."

Walking up to the pair, Marina instantly saw a resemblance to Brett in the woman's beautiful eyes and chiseled features. The boy's Sutherland genes showed in his chestnut brown hair.

"Hi. You must be Greg. I'm Marina." She extended her hand. "Your uncle has told me a lot about you."

The boy politely shook her hand, but his voice held a hint of animosity. "Hello."

"Hello, I'm Claudia Erikson, Greg's mother," the woman volunteered as she grasped Marina's hand and sandwiched it between her own. "We're both so excited about him learning to dive."

"Mom. You're excited. Not both of us."

Mrs. Erikson smiled with an apology in her eyes. She looked relatively young, but tiny worry lines were etched into her forehead. “He’s a little nervous, but he really is excited. This will be so wonderful.”

Greg sighed and rolled his eyes. “Right.”

“I have to get back to work,” Claudia said. She leaned over and placed a kiss on her son’s forehead. “Have fun.”

She turned to Marina. “Thank you.”

Marina watched her leave. After the door swung shut, she said, “SCUBA diving is a fascinating sport, Greg. It’s a lot more than just good exercise. Are you interested in science and nature, or the ecology?” It was a leading question most young people answered affirmatively.

He shrugged like a typical teenager. But ingrained politeness forced an answer. “Yeah, I guess so.”

“One of the wonderful things about diving is the ever-changing underwater environment. One day, a barracuda’s on the prowl. The next day at the same site, there might be sea turtles or dolphins. There’s a whole different world underwater.

“Diving gives you opportunities to see the corals and tropical fishes living in a reef system. Or you can explore sunken wrecks or search underwater limestone caves for fossils. Once you know how to dive, you can swim with manatees in Florida’s freshwater springs, take underwater photographs in old flooded stone quarries up north, or specialize in night diving when all kinds of exotic fishes come out.” She decided to pull out all the stops. “You can take all this information and make a computer program to map fish migrations and populations, or save images and create an identification dictionary that’s a frameable masterpiece.” Or at least that’s what she’d been told.

She noticed a spark of interest in his eyes. “Once you become proficient, SCUBA diving really is easy. How about giving it a chance?”

His eyes darted around the shop like a cornered mouse looking for an escape route. “Will I have to get in and out of a boat and things?” Fear and skepticism rang in his words.

Marina suddenly understood his reluctance was a defensive mechanism, and her heart twisted in sympathy. “Yes, but there are ways of managing the physical requirements, if you want to. What do you think? Want to give it a try?”

He stared toward the hundred-gallon saltwater aquarium where wide-eyed angelfish meandered through a meticulously recreated seascape. “Do you ever see sharks?”

She waved one hand in a dismissive gesture. “Once in a while, usually they sleep on the sandy bottom near the reefs. We stay away from them, and mostly they ignore us. Contrary to what TV and the movies would have you believe, divers are not a shark’s favorite food group.”

He smiled for a few seconds, then the smile dissolved into a frown. “Do I have to go into the water today?”

“You don’t *have to* do anything, but if you *want to*, the pool is ready. We can get started as soon as your uncle arrives.” Marina checked her watch. “He said two o’clock, so he should be here any minute.”

“Why do I have to go in the water just to sign up?”

“Before we can start lessons, I have to evaluate your swimming ability. I need to know you can float and tread water and swim a few laps of the pool. Some people need to build up their strength before they dive in the open ocean.”

The bell over the door jingled, and Brett walked in.

“Hey, Uncle Brett, we’re over here talking about diving.” Greg’s whole mood changed as he looked up at Brett with undisguised admiration.

Brett greeted both of them. “Ready to get wet?” he asked Greg.

“If you think I can do it.”

Brett slapped him on the shoulder and laughed heartily. “I don’t just *think* you can, I *know* you can.” He stepped behind Greg’s wheelchair and pushed him toward the locker room. “Come on, let’s change into our suits and go swimming.”

Passing Marina, he smiled at her.

Her pulsing headache was reduced to a melodious humming, but the pulsing drifted lower, much lower. She felt her blood flowing faster and a pleasant warmth curling in her middle.

After a long morning treating screaming toddlers suffering from high fevers and ear infections, Brett’s muscles were knotted and stiff. He walked to the side of the pool, sucked in a deep breath, twisted his torso from side to side and rotated his arms to limber his shoulders. Then he watched anxiously as Greg rolled up beside him.

He squeezed Greg’s shoulder and gave him a thumbs-up.

“Everyone ready?” Marina asked as she came through the doorway.

Brett turned and skimmed his eyes over her bright, lime green swimsuit with sexy, high-cut legs and a plunging neckline. “Very ready.” If he had known dive instructors were this beautiful, he would have taken lessons years ago.

She walked to a rope tied to a chest-high cleat on the wall. The rope ran to the ceiling over the edge of the pool, through a pulley, and back to a sling hanging on the next cleat.

“I had a hoist arrangement installed when I started running the shop by myself,” she said. “I figured if a heavy person became incapacitated, I could use this sling and pulley system to help me lift them out of the water. I teach rescue diving, and I can drag even a big man up the steps, but I wanted to have an easier alternative.”

He watched her lips. Her soft voice caressed his nerve endings, and his mind wandered to activities more intimate than pulling big people up steps. Trying to ignore his fantasies, Brett focused on her explanation of the lifting contraption.

“I think the sling arrangement will work to lower Greg into the water.”

Greg looked up toward the hoist’s pulley on the ceiling, and excitement brightened his eyes.

“I’ve always wanted to swing from the trees, you know like Tarzan. That would be neat, wouldn’t it, Uncle Brett?”

Marina winced.

He answered quickly to encourage Greg’s enthusiasm and move on before she could object. “Why not?”

“Well,” she said slowly, “it would probably be okay if you’re sure your arms are strong enough.”

“All right!” Greg let out a whoop.

She secured the sling to the wall and brought the rope’s tail to Greg.

Greg grasped the rope and pulled hand over hand, lifting himself off the chair.

Brett held on to him until he was clear of the wheelchair’s armrests. “Anytime you’re ready.”

Greg nodded, grinning ear to ear, “Pull me back a ways, then let go.”

Brett took four steps toward the wall, then released Greg, adding a slight push.

Greg swung out over the water like a kid at the neighborhood swimming hole on a sweltering summer day. Over the center of the pool, he hooked his healthy foot around the lower part of his paralyzed leg, released the rope, and dropped into the water.

Brett jumped back to avoid the splash, but Marina hovered by the pool’s edge with a worried expression on her face and a muscle twitching in her jaw. She looked ready to catch Greg if he swung back or, if he landed wrong, plunge into the pool in a nanosecond. He admired her dedication to Greg’s safety.

Greg popped back up to the surface with a broad smile on his face and appeared to be doing just fine. “Hey, that was neat. Try it, Uncle Brett.”

“You bet. You’re not having all the fun.”

Brett caught the still-swinging rope, backed toward the wall, gave his best Tarzan yodel, jumped into the air, then swung in an arc over the pool. He dropped into the tepid water a safe distance from Greg. When he surfaced, he shook his head to flick the wet hair from his eyes.

He looked up at Marina and flashed her his most playful smile. “Me Tarzan, now your turn, Jane.”

She laughed. “Not today. Today Tarzan and boy work, Jane stay dry and watch. Now, let me see the two of you swim.”

Shrugging off a wave of disappointment that she wouldn’t come into the water and play, he stared up at her. He devoured her seductive curves, her tanned legs, her flat stomach and her wonderfully

proportioned hips and breasts. By the time his gaze reached her smooth shoulders, he was stirring with desire.

Self-conscious, he rolled onto his stomach and swam with Greg toward the end of the pool. He kept his strokes slow and easy so Greg could keep up. But the boy's arms were strong, and a few feet from the wall, Greg grabbed his leg.

"Hey, Uncle Brett, let's race."

The race ended in a tie. Then Greg swam two laps of the pool with ease.

Marina waved a black swim fin. "Greg, come over here and hold on to the side of the pool so you can try this on for size."

Greg slipped the fin onto the foot of his healthy leg and wiggled the fin from side to side. "It's pretty loose."

"Take it off, and I'll fix it." She adjusted the ankle strap then handed the fin back.

Each time she bent over the side of the pool, the low-cut top of her swimsuit gaped just enough to provide Brett with a direct view into the neckline. He admired the round delicate curves and honey-colored skin of her perfect breasts. Hot blood surged to his lower half as the images etched into his mind. He forced his eyes away, went to the shallow end of the pool, and stood, making sure his enthusiasm was submerged. Yes, learning to dive was going to be even more pleasant than he'd imagined.

With the fin on again, Greg wiggled his foot and nodded.

"Try another lap using the fin," Marina said. "It should let you transfer more power to the water. You can either go faster or swim slowly using less energy."

Greg glided through the water, turned smoothly, and kicked with strong thrusts. Brett's heart warmed, and he flashed Marina a proud smile.

She smiled back then nodded to Greg as he rested at the end of his last lap. "I think you can easily handle diving."

A wide grin spread across Greg's face, and he looked like a child with a new toy.

Brett gave Greg a thumbs-up. "Good for you. Looks like all your exercises have really paid off. You're getting stronger every day."

"My leg is less awkward in the water. This is okay after all."

Brett glanced at Marina. Her thick, curved lashes swept over her exotic dark eyes. Suddenly, he felt overwhelmingly drawn to her.

Be careful. Remember: temporary romance. Don't get sucked in for the long term. She's a workaholic and the wrong woman.

She shook back her ebony hair.

Desire danced through his veins. He wanted to add spice to his life, and she was certainly spice. The smoldering passion in her dark, luminous eyes suggested she'd be a generous and sensual lover. She'd be

alluring company for a night, a week, or even a few months—max. So why not yield to her magnetic attraction, enjoy her company for however long it lasted?

With thoughts of Marina sizzling in the corners of his mind, Brett joined Greg at the far end of the pool, and they sculled their arms for five minutes to demonstrate their proficiency at treading water.

“Time’s up.” Marina swung the end of the rope out to Greg.

Brett climbed from the pool and helped raise Greg into his wheelchair.

“This worked almost like it was supposed to,” Marina said as she fastened the rope to the cleat. She raised one eyebrow, and gave Greg a wry grin. “Even if the Tarzan routine was an unexpected twist. Anyhow, we’re done. You two can go get changed.”

Greg grasped the chair wheels, spun around, and rolled toward the locker room.

Brett slapped him on the back. “You’re going to be a great diver, kid.” Remembering the race Greg suggested and deciding a little playful competition couldn’t hurt, he added, “Maybe not as great as me, but great nonetheless.”

Greg beamed up at him, silently accepting the challenge. Then he glanced toward Marina. “When do we get to go out into the ocean?”

“The four open-water dives come last,” she answered. “You’ll have six classroom sessions and six pool sessions to prepare you first.”

Greg spun his chair back toward her. “So when do we start?”

“That’s a good question,” Brett said. “What’s the schedule, teach?”

“You’re one class ahead of Greg, so I’ll give him a private class and catch him up to you. We’ll go from there.” She looked toward Greg. “I’m going to keep your class small so I can adequately supervise your pool sessions alone. After all, I can’t have seven people all swinging through the jungle at the same time, can I?” She winked at Greg. “How does Tuesday and Thursday nights sound?”

Greg twisted his head and looked up. “Can we do that, Uncle Brett?”

“Sounds good to me. I have a colleague who owes me a favor because I covered for him while he took a cruise. He’s going to take my calls so I won’t have to rush out of class like I did the other night. I just have to let him know when.”

Greg nodded enthusiastically. “Yeah, let’s do it. Tuesday and Thursday nights.”

A weight lifted from Brett’s heart. He’d been worried about Greg’s attitude, but now, he was confident the boy would overcome his misfortune. Determination bordering on stubbornness clearly ran in the Sutherland family. Once Greg’s mother made up her mind to quit college and get married, no one could dissuade her. Once Greg’s grandfather decided to open his own textile business, he had worked doggedly until it succeeded. Brett pursed his lips and nodded. He was the same. Once he decided to become a doctor, he studied endlessly and pushed himself to graduate at the top of his class.

Now Greg was stepping up to the plate. He'd accepted the challenge of diving, and without a doubt, he'd overcome his disability and become a successful diver. Hopefully, that success would breed more successes and the boy would never settle for less than a full life. Brett chuckled. Sutherlands were mulish and obstinate, but those same characteristics were also the root of their strength.

Greg's father would have been proud. But reflecting on all his brother-in-law was missing, Brett felt a tinge of sadness and pulled in a deep breath. At least Greg and his parents had enjoyed several years as a happy family.

He set his jaw, pressed his lips together, and wondered why thoughts about Claudia's family kept popping into his mind. He remembered the moment at his brother-in-law's funeral when he'd realized he'd always envied the family happiness Claudia enjoyed. Although he'd excelled professionally and achieved financial security, he was still unable to find that same kind of joy. He sighed. Finding the right woman was the key. Claudia's selfless dedication to her husband and child built that happy family. She left school to devote all her time to her marriage and was a homemaker even before Greg was born. Nothing was more important to her than spending time with her husband and raising her son.

Watching Greg roll his chair into the locker room, he wondered how Claudia had ever become a nurturer. She certainly hadn't learned the skills from their parents.

However it happened, she seems to be one of a kind. No matter how many women I put to the test, I can't find any other cut from the same mold.

As he dressed, he shrugged off thoughts of what he didn't have and focused on what he had. He had success, shiny cars, the ability to travel, and just about everything the TV ads promised would bring happiness. Why should he feel disappointed by life when he had the world by the tail?

On Tuesday, Greg rolled into the showroom half an hour early for his first pool session. Marina watched him navigate between racks, tables and displays, marveling at his ability to maneuver the awkward wheelchair in such tight quarters.

She waved and called, "*Hola*, Greg,"

The words were still in the air when Trish burst out of the fitting room modeling a pale yellow bathing suit. "What about this one, Marina? Does it make me look too fat?"

Greg wheeled out from behind a wetsuit rack, rotated to face Trish, and stopped.

Trish glanced furtively toward him.

Only the relentless tick of Papa's ship's clock broke the silence as, for a few seconds, they were face to face.

"It's super," he said finally.

Her face turned pink. "You really think so?"

His cheeks turned as pink as hers, and Marina watched, amused.

“Yeah, it’s great.” He sat up straighter and squared his shoulders. “Hi. I’m Greg.”

Trish smiled. “I’m Trish, and I’m taking my first in-the-water SCUBA lesson tonight. I want to get a new suit to celebrate.”

“Are you in my class?” Greg asked.

Trish glanced at Marina, then back at Greg. “Are you having a pool session tonight too?”

He nodded.

Trish smiled and flipped her hair. “Well, then I guess we’re classmates.” She hesitated, looking toward the wheelchair with a puzzled expression. “How do you get in and out of the pool?”

Greg turned toward Marina and grinned. “Wait, you’ll see.”

Clothed in wetsuits, the class of three sat at the poolside, and Marina demonstrated and explained the functions of each piece of their dive equipment. Then they donned their gear, turned on their air, checked their regulators, and lined up to enter the water. She snapped pictures as Greg, Brett, and Trish took turns using the rope to swing out over the pool and splashed in.

Marina’s fingers itched to grasp the rope, but Papa’s instructions were branded onto her mind. Act professionally when you’re with a class, he’d always said. If you want people to believe you know what you’re doing, you have to do things the proper way. She sighed, then demonstrated a giant stride entry at the deep end of the pool.

When she surfaced, she checked everyone was calm and safe, then started the practice portion of the class. “It’s very important for your safety that you always dive using the buddy system, even when you think a dive is shallow, easy or quick. Never, ever dive alone. So Greg, buddy-up with Brett, and Trish, you’ll buddy-up with me.”

Memories of how Ricki had died after he became separated from his buddy swirled in the corner of her mind. Buddies could share air and assist an injured partner. Even two people waving their arms while bobbing together on the surface had a better chance of being seen. Some of her students might think she was overly cautious, but she felt compelled to stress buddy diving to every class, hoping someday her harping could save a life. She sighed and wished Ricki had learned the lesson better.

Continuing with the class, she had Brett, Greg and Trish practice breathing underwater and clearing their masks. Then she took them to the deep end of the pool and taught them to equalize the pressure in their ears. They proved to be quick learners, and by nine o’clock they’d mastered all the skills scheduled for the night’s session.

After class, Greg’s mother picked him up, and Trish left for home.

Marina was alone with Brett, and her heartbeat raced. The teacher-student relationship she'd worked hard to maintain all evening had left her yearning for a few minutes at a more intimate level. He'd be leaving soon, and crazy as she knew it was, she was reluctant to see him go.

"Greg seemed to really enjoy himself," he said.

"Yes, he did." She smiled, remembering Greg's hoots of laughter after an impromptu race during the class. "He's got spunk."

"You're very good with him—and everyone else for that matter."

"I enjoy teaching," she said, especially warmed by his praise.

"I can tell." A worried look furrowed his brow. "I was wondering, though. How are we going to get him on and off the dive boat when we do the open-water dives?"

"Captain Kurt has already solved that problem. He has a hoist to load air tanks onto the boat. He'll use it to get Greg out of the water."

"But what about getting onto the boat in the first place? Does he have a ramp?"

"Kurt is about six foot six and bench presses two hundred and fifty pounds just for fun. I've seen him lift divers, equipment and all, and toss them over the side like rag dolls. He can put the wheelchair on his back and jump aboard."

Brett frowned and looked skeptical.

She smiled. "Don't worry. Kurt and I go back a long way, and I know he's professional. He's a bear, but also can be very gentle. He'll probably carry Greg aboard then come back for the chair."

Brett's eyebrow arched. "Well, if you know this guy personally, and you're sure about him..."

"Trust me, Kurt's great. He'll find a way."

"I guess he sounds capable."

"He's capable and strong. Besides diving, he competes in weightlifting events when he can work them into his boat's schedule."

Brett smiled, and his eyes twinkled. "What do you do besides diving?"

Her stomach fluttered. "Me? Nothing. I'm too busy for anything else."

"There's a carnival in town. Would you like to go with me on Sunday?"

Joy swept over her. Chills of anticipation skittered up her spine.

She remembered she had to visit Papa on Sunday, and a cloud seemed to darken the room.

"I can't," she said. A tiny dagger pierced her heart. "I have other plans."

Disappointment subdued his voice. "Oh. Well, that's twice I've struck out."

The tiny dagger twisted. "Thank you for inviting me, anyway."

"Right. Maybe some other time." His words were polite but seemed filled with hurt and irritation.

Kathleen Mix

She hoped he wouldn't think she disliked him. But at the same time, she was aware she'd never even remotely encouraged his attention. In a sudden burst of concern she blurted, "Yes, I'd like that, another time."

He started toward the door then shot her a quick look. "*Adiós*, Marina."

Chapter Five

Sunday morning, Marina slipped on a tank top and cut-offs. Like it or not, someone had to tackle the cleaning jobs. She could no longer afford a maintenance service, so unless she got a surprise visit from a fairy godmother or a glass-slipper-toting prince with an army of maids, she was the only candidate.

She unclogged the sink in the men's restroom, spent two hours on her hands and knees scrubbing the tiles around the pool, and then pushed a soggy mop over the locker room floors.

Papa's ship's clock chimed eleven. Knowing he was waiting, she decided to postpone washing the shop floor until later when she returned. At her current energy level, lifting and dumping the gray water in the bucket seemed like a monumental task. Hoping a break would recharge her batteries, she left the mop and bucket sitting in the aisle and dragged herself to the locker room to dress.

Showered and wearing clean-smelling clothes, Marina felt somewhat refreshed. She locked the shop door and walked around the corner to St. Peter's Church. A high mass was in progress, and the priest was chanting over the noise of fidgeting children. She crept inside and knelt in the first empty pew, then blessed herself, steepled her hands and bowed her head.

"Please forgive me, God, for not making a donation to help support the priests and the poor," she whispered. "I promise to make up for it as soon as I can. Thank you for letting me stay in business for another week. Thank you especially for sending the couple who bought the deluxe dive computers. Please take care of Papa and keep him happy and well. Amen."

She pulled her rosary from her pocket and worked the glass beads between her fingers as she prayed for Mama and Ricki to find everlasting peace. Then she slid out of the pew, genuflected, blessed herself with holy water at the doorway and left.

The sun was shining brightly in a stunning blue sky, and a brisk breeze blew off the ocean. She bounced down the church steps, breathed deeply of the tangy salt air, and felt the wild caress of the wind in her hair. For a minute, she forgot her problems and enjoyed the simple pleasure of those sensations. The serenity of nature always restored her spirit and bolstered her courage better than any bottled vitamin or tonic. And today, for some inexplicable reason, she felt the need for extra courage to face Papa.

The warm air had a slick of sweat on her forehead and upper lip by the time she reached the shop parking lot. She climbed into her faded green Toyota, buckled her seatbelt, switched the fan to high and turned the ignition key. Nothing happened. She pumped the gas pedal, bit on her lower lip and turned the key again. Silence.

She blew out a heavy breath and slapped her hands against the steering wheel. “Why now, when I have a pile of bills to pay and nada for income? Why couldn’t you keep running a little while longer, you vindictive monster?”

She realized she was shouting and also realized the car could care less. The monster was stone dead.

Marina yanked the hood release then stomped to the front of the car and raised it. She raked her fingers through her hair and scratched her head as she pondered the conglomeration of parts. Wires and hoses curved and disappeared behind other wires and hoses. Black boxes and grimy, dirt-encrusted components sat motionless in mocking defiance.

She jiggled the battery cables, opened the radiator and peered at the level of yellowish-brown liquid, then carefully searched for anything disconnected or frayed. She clenched her jaw and tried to remember the signs that a battery was dead.

Walking to the driver’s side window, she reached in and turned the key again. Still only silence. Worry built and twisted her stomach in knots. Car problems always cost a fortune to fix, and she needed the money elsewhere.

She slammed down the hood and kicked the front tire. Her toes bounced off the hard rubber, and pain shot up her leg. Chiding herself for doing something so stupid in sandals, she rubbed her toes and wondered what to do now. Fatigue from her morning’s work overwhelmed her. Her arms felt limp. The muscles in her back ached and she hurt just to stand upright. All her remaining energy drained away. On the verge of despair, she closed her eyes and gritted her teeth to fight back hot tears.

The sound of an automobile engine forced its way into her gloom. She opened one eye. A blue Mercedes with the license plate *BABY-DOC* turned into the parking lot and pulled up beside her.

Brett got out of his car and walked around the shiny front end.

“Hi. How amazing, you really are here every day of the week. I thought you were giving me the old brush off.” He stepped to her side and his face lit up with a devastating smile. “I had to be out this way to check on a patient at the hospital, so I figured I’d stop and try the carnival pitch again. I’m on my way there now if you’d like to reconsider and join me.”

Her despondency vanished with the soothing notes of his voice. She twisted her mouth in a lopsided grin and waved dismissively at the Toyota. “My car won’t start.”

“No problem. We’ll take mine.”

“You don’t understand. Mine won’t start, and every Sunday I go to visit Papa. He waits for me. He expects me to be there.”

He strode to the front of her car. “Hit the hood release.”

She leaned in and yanked the lever, then walked up beside him.

He raised the hood and surveyed the array of machinery. Then his forehead creased in a frown. The sunshine created highlights in his hair as he juggled the battery cables. “Does it make any noise, like a grinding or anything, when you turn the key?”

“No, not a sound.”

“Has your battery been low?”

“No.”

He shook his head and told her what she already knew. “There’s nothing obvious.”

“I think the problem is somewhere in the electrical system. Last time I took it to the mechanic, he told me I needed new wiring.” She glanced at the beat-up old car and decided to admit the embarrassing truth. “I put off having the work done because I couldn’t afford it.”

“Well, most mechanics take Sundays off, so you may as well postpone the work for one more day. Tomorrow would be a better time to arrange a tow.” His gaze dipped to her feet then back up to her face. “You’re already dressed to go. Can I give you a ride?”

She moistened her bottom lip. The hem of her cotton sundress fell several inches above her knees. Were her knees puffy and red from her hours as a scrubwoman? If they were, he was being polite or hadn’t noticed. But if she got in his car, he’d see the proof of her morning labor and know she didn’t belong in his expensive-car world.

“The nursing home is several miles outside of town. It would be too much of an imposition for you to drive that far. I’ll just call and tell him I have car trouble. He’ll understand.”

A ton of apprehension pressed on her chest. Every Sunday Papa’s roommate went to his daughter’s house for a family dinner. Papa was alone, and that deepened his sense of abandonment. He really *wouldn’t* understand. She did need to go. But no buses ran in that part of town and paying for a cab was out of the question.

“It’s not an imposition.” Genuine warmth shone in his eyes. “I’d be happy to take you.”

She felt a throat-tightening rush of fear and attraction. “But you were going to the carnival.”

“I was, but it was going to be dull there by myself. I’d much rather spend the time with you.”

Marina’s pulse accelerated. Her heart pumped a frenzied rhythm while her mind reeled. Should she let herself spend more time with Brett? She could control this attraction. Couldn’t she? Would time with him interfere with the shop? How else would she get to see Papa?

I’m worrying needlessly, she finally decided. Simply spending a couple hours with him on a Sunday isn’t going to be a problem.

Marina slid into Brett’s car and gave him directions to the nursing home. She tugged her skirt down over the top of her knees and sank into the buttery-soft, leather seats. The soothing notes of a jazz piano

floated from the stereo. His air-conditioner even worked. Heading toward the outskirts of town, she basked in the luxury of having someone else drive and pushed her dead car and money troubles into the back of her mind.

She breathed in his wonderful masculine scent and sighed. Suddenly, she realized being with him was intoxicating. Her brain got fuzzy, her inhibitions faded, and euphoria settled in. She squirmed in her seat. She'd have to be careful or her intoxication could cause her to do or say something stupid.

He drove a little too fast, occasionally going over the speed limit, and she wondered if accepting a ride to the nursing home could actually provide some useful information. If she got to know him better, she might discover a million other faults beneath his perfect exterior. Then she could feel good about not dating him.

Picking a direction to steer her inquiries, she asked, "Why did you choose to specialize in pediatrics?"

"I'm a sucker for little kids and babies. And the satisfaction of curing a young patient is light-years ahead of anything I've ever felt working with adults."

"But it must be frustrating when a child is so young they can't tell you what's wrong or where it hurts?"

"A little, but at any age, when someone hurts, they react. It also helps that I have a full range of sophisticated diagnostic tools at my disposal."

She nodded. "It must be satisfying to cure sick children."

"It's not always good," he said in a subdued tone. "Sometimes I'm faced with treating a child with an incurable illness. Occasionally, the sad reality is, if the parents had given the child proper care or paid more attention, the problems could have been prevented."

"What kind of problems?"

"A minor cut on a finger that festers and becomes a systemic infection. A rash or fever that's ignored until an illness becomes life-threatening. The days I treat those children, I hate the world and my job. My office staff knows to stay far, far out of my way." He pulled in a breath and brightness came back into his voice. "But the good days get me through. When a three-year-old girl throws hers arms around your neck and gives you a hug or a six-year-old boy wants you to be the first to sign his cast, believe me, the work is very rewarding."

She shifted in her seat. He had black moods. That could be a fault. "I never knew a pediatrician before, except years ago as a patient of course."

He glanced toward her. "That's one of the job's major drawbacks. The women I meet are usually married with children." He flashed a playful smile.

This guy is smart, handsome and successful, and he exudes so much masculinity women should be lining up for dates with him. He must have some faults. Big ones. Maybe they relate to his playboy attitudes about women.

“I would think single mothers would be bringing their children to see you all the time.” Realizing the remark could be construed as flirtatious, she added a little chuckle.

He laughed heartily. “Sometimes they do drag in a perfectly healthy child. But kids are great ones for telling the truth about their symptoms. Usually, Mom leaves red-faced, and it never happens again. Especially since I bill her for my time.”

Ah ha! He had a mean streak. She made a small check in the *faults* column of her mental scoreboard.

“Ooh, that’s nasty.”

“Not really. It gets across the idea that I could have spent the time treating a child who was really sick or in pain, plus it lets them know I take their kids’ health seriously.”

She erased the check mark, decided to drop her inquisition, and idly watched the roadside slide past. Tall cattails with cylindrical, chocolate-brown seed heads grew in clumps in a drainage ditch paralleling the highway. She recognized a six-foot high, chain-link fence and turned to Brett.

“Do you mind if I shut off the air conditioner and let in some outside air, so we don’t die from the shock of the heat when we get out of the car?”

“No, go ahead.”

She turned off the frigid blast of air and lowered her window.

“Turn left at the intersection by the school,” she said, pointing ahead.

He clicked on his turn signal and stopped for a red light.

A group of boys in the schoolyard were shouting, laughing and playing a game of basketball. A young girl with curly, blonde hair stood on the sidelines and called out, “I want to play too.”

A skinny boy, with similar blond hair, stuck out his tongue and waved her away. “Go home to your dolls and leave us alone. You’re just a stupid girl. We don’t play with no sissies.”

Marina’s breath caught in her throat, and a hollowed-out feeling settled in her gut. The boy’s rebuff sent her mind speeding back nineteen years to when she was seven. The memory of another afternoon basketball game flooded back like a moon tide gushing into a bay.

She’d desperately wanted to play with Ricki and his friends and be accepted as one of the boys. But they laughed and bombarded her with taunts about being a stupid girl. Ricki sneered and said he and his friends would never lower themselves by playing with *una muchacha* in public. When she ran after their ball, they pushed her roughly aside. She fell and scraped her knee. Bright red blood ran down her leg, but the real hurt was inside. She cried so hard her throat grew raw and tears stained the front of her dress.

“Go home, sissy,” Ricki had shouted.

“Go home, sissy. Go home, sissy,” the boys in the playground chanted.

Marina bit down on her bottom lip and wrapped her arms around her middle. She felt the young girl’s hurt and humiliation and wondered if another child had just suffered a rejection she’d remember for the rest of her life.

A rumbling diesel truck pulled up beside the Mercedes and drowned out the boys' voices. Brett steered the car around the corner.

Losing sight of the girl, Marina turned and strained to look behind her. A heavy weight hung around her heart.

"Is something wrong?" Brett asked.

She swallowed the knot of emotion in her throat and fell back against the leather headrest. "No, I was just watching the children."

"Are you a basketball fan?"

She twisted her mouth into a wry smile. "I don't know. I've never played."

The nursing home was set in the midst of meticulously trimmed lawns and geometrically arranged gardens, but she always found the landscape strangely depressing. Like she did every Sunday, she searched for a footprint on the grass, or someone picking flowers, or any other little thing that would make the complex look lived in. But today, it looked exactly the same as every other day: artificial, perfect, empty and sterile. A place where Papa, and other people like him with broken hearts and dreams, shuffled through the motions of life and waited for their physical bodies to die.

Winding down the driveway to the parking lot, Marina pointed. "The long-term resident wing is on the left. My father's room is on the first floor."

Brett parked the car and got out.

Marina fumbled with her seatbelt release and then reached for the door handle, but Brett pulled the door open first.

She looked up at him in mild shock. "Do men still do that? Open doors for women?"

"I do."

"Chivalry must still be alive." She debated whether chivalry warranted a check mark in his *virtues* column. Some women considered door-opening a condescending custom, but she kind of liked being treated as if she were special.

She started toward the building through the sweltering heat, and he fell in step alongside. She tilted her head and glanced up at his face. "Sorry. You caught me off guard, and I forgot my manners. Thank you for opening my door."

Brett nodded. "You're welcome."

"The reception area has some comfortable chairs, a TV, and usually, a Sunday newspaper. I'll just stay for a few minutes then be right back out."

"I'd like to go in with you, if that's okay."

“Okay? Well, sure. I mean, of course it is.” A slight sense of panic quickened her pulse. “I just thought—I mean, since you’ve never met my father—and since this is your day off, maybe you’d rather wait out here.”

“I’d be interested to meet him. And the other patients need to see new faces once in a while to break up the monotony. Today they’ll have mine.”

Kind to the elderly. The *virtues* column scored another check mark.

She forced a smile, trying to shake off the prickles of dread. Would Papa be rude? She touched the tiny crucifix at her neck. *Please let Papa be having a good day.*

“It’s up to you. But I have to warn you, he can be grumpy at times.”

“I deal with stubborn two-year-olds and cranky babies all day, every day. You’re not going to scare me off with threats of a grumpy senior citizen.”

The automatic doors swung open and a flood of cool air permeated with the odors of antiseptic, stale food, and illness washed out.

Marina led the way down the long, main corridor. She wove around frail men and women wearing bedroom slippers and shuffling behind walkers. Other residents were slumped over asleep in wheelchairs parked near doorways.

“Good morning,” Brett said to someone.

A bald, shrunken man looked toward Brett then shouted in his companion’s ear. “Hey Mort, do you remember the days when we had thick hair like that?”

At the end of the corridor, the door to Papa’s room was closed. Marina stopped, pulled in a worried breath and knocked.

“Papa. It’s me, Marina. Is it okay to come in?”

Chapter Six

Marina waited outside the door to hear Papa's voice. She felt a prickle of the same anxiety she'd had as a child waiting for him to return from a dive trip. She'd often played in the storeroom and listened for him to come through the front door. When she heard his voice, she dashed out to see him but was always sure to slow to a cautious walk before he caught her running in the shop. Then she lowered her eyes and greeted him like the dutiful little girl he expected.

She'd longed to throw her arms around his neck, hug him tightly, feel him nuzzle her cheek and hear him ask, "How's my little princess?" like her classmates' fathers did with them. She'd ached for him to notice her but knew she was only his daughter, and daughters were unimportant. His attention was reserved for his son. He always ignored her and scanned the shop for Ricki.

She knocked again. "Papa?"

"Come in." His voice was weaker now, but as uninviting as ever.

Breathing in deeply to steel herself, she opened the door and stepped inside. She hit a wall of heat. The temperature in the room had to be almost ninety, but Papa wore beige corduroy trousers and a heavy green sweatshirt zipped up tight at his neck as he sat in his usual place by the window.

Brett stepped inside behind her and the door clicked shut.

She walked to Papa's side and kissed his cheek. "Hello, Papa. How are you today?"

"Miserable. These people are sadists. All of them."

She closed her eyes for a second and suppressed a sigh. Visits never went smoothly when he was in one of his disgruntled moods. "Why? What happened now?"

"They want me to change rooms again. They want to put me in with Charlie the Moaner."

He looked toward Brett and arched an eyebrow.

"This is Brett Sutherland, Papa. Brett, my father, Juan Hernandez."

Brett stepped forward and proffered his hand. "Very pleased to meet you, sir."

Papa stared at Brett's hand for several seconds then slowly reached out and shook it.

Marina released a huge breath. "I had trouble with my car again. It wouldn't start. Brett was kind enough to give me a ride out to see you today."

Papa rolled his eyes and then, with a look of camaraderie, glanced at Brett. "She's clueless about cars. I *told* her to buy a new one, but she has some screwy attachment to that old wreck. A girl needs a dependable car. It's not like she's a man and can figure out what's wrong."

Marina listened, contrasting his heavy Hispanic accent with Brett's slight southern drawl. Did the speech patterns she'd assimilated growing up in a bilingual home sound odd to Brett's all-American ears?

Brett smiled politely. "With some things, gender makes no difference. I'm not very good with mechanical things myself. At the first sign of trouble, I pack my car off to the shop."

Papa frowned and narrowed his eyes at Brett. "What do you do?"

"I'm a pediatrician."

Papa waved one thin hand in the air. "Oh, well, a doctor. You can't be expected to know about things like fixing cars, then. Got too many important things on your mind, I suppose." He paused for a few seconds. "Too bad my son isn't here. Ricki would have had that old junker running in no time. He tore down complete engines and had them back together and purring by the end of the day."

Marina pressed her lips into a thin line and mentally counted to ten. Every time Papa talked about Ricki's prowess at fixing engines, the repair was finished quicker. The last time, the project took a weekend.

"Papa, the only time I ever remember Ricki working on an engine he had two of his friends helping. And they had it apart for three weeks."

He scowled at her. "Those other boys were idiots. They kept making mistakes Ricki had to go back and fix." He narrowed his eyes to angry slits. "How's the business?"

She squared her shoulders and tried to sound cheerful. "Not too bad. Sales were down a little for the week, though. The new chain store in town is advertising equipment at prices that are practically our cost. They've used the same strategy to force almost every independent shop from Jacksonville to Key West out of business."

"Well, tell everybody that comes in we're a family shop. We care about our customers. Tell them that. No big chain store can match that."

"We have to compete on price as well as service," she countered. "But the chain stores buy a lot of equipment, and they get better discounts from the manufacturers. They know we're too small to compete on price."

"Well then, do something else. Teach more classes. Work more hours. Give people the personal attention the big chains can't."

She turned away. The bed was made, but half a glass of milk, a discarded straw, and several balled tissues littered the bedside table. She busied her hands tidying.

"I know our strength is service and a friendly atmosphere. And I'm sure most of our customers will eventually return. But right now, they're curious. They want to see what the competition has to offer."

"Dammit, if *I* was there, those mangy barracudas would find out real fast they're not dealing with a little girl. And if Ricki was there, he'd know what to do. He'd give them a run for their money."

Each word sliced into her like a dagger. She winced, spun toward him, and planted her fists on her hips. “Papa, I’m *not* a little girl anymore. I’m quite capable.”

He raised both eyebrows and froze her with his piercing, dark eyes. “What about the travel deal with that organization up north? Did you tie that up yet?”

She blew out a breath, wrapped her arms over her chest and looked at the floor. “No. I sent them all the information and everything looked very encouraging. But then they called and said they were putting the whole program on hold for a while to—”

“I told you before. You’ve got to be more aggressive.” Temper sharpened his voice. “You’ve got to keep after them. Ricki’d be jumping all over them! That deal’s a great piece of business. It would let me thumb my nose at all the competition, including that new place.”

“I did keep after them. But the whole idea seems to have gone cold.”

Her cheeks were on fire. Papa’s belief that she would let the deal die without a fight made a slow burn ignite in her stomach. She hated that he treated her like an incompetent child, but hated it more that Brett had to witness her humiliation. She looked at Brett and saw compassion in his eyes. To prevent Papa from continuing his tirade, she wet her lips and launched into an explanation of the deal.

“A representative for a group of five dive shops in New York and New Jersey contacted me and proposed a travel and dive instruction partnership. They would offer their students the option of coming to Florida to do their open-water dives. The instructors up there would teach the classroom and pool sessions. I would handle the travel and dive boat arrangements on this end and do the actual certification.”

Brett smiled. “That would probably be a popular option for people who live where the water’s always cold.”

She took comfort from his support. “I thought so. But something happened on their end. They seem to have dropped the idea.”

She sighed. If the deal had proceeded, she’d probably be financially secure right now. Handling all the additional dive trips would have required a crushing load of extra work, but the commissions on travel bookings would have made the arrangement very lucrative.

Papa exhaled in a huff and tried to get up out of his chair. “They probably just don’t want to bother with a girl. Women are flighty. Give me the phone. I’ll call them.”

“No, Papa.” She rushed toward him and pushed down on his shoulders. “You know what the doctors said. You’re not supposed to get involved in the business or get excited.”

“Those doctors are still wet behind the ears.” He plopped back down and looked at Brett. “Nothing against you personally, Doctor.”

Marina tried to sound confident. “I’m taking care of everything.”

“Those doctors don’t care that my shop’s going to ruin while I’m stuck in here. Your brother would have sewn that deal up a long time ago.”

Pulling in a deep breath, she forced herself to meet his eyes. “Everything on our end was all set. Please, Papa, calm down.”

“Women have no business sense. You’re too concerned about your hair, and your dates, and your clothes. When you let all that nonsense sidetrack you, the shop suffers.” He shot a glance at Brett, then looked back and said, “And that’s *just* what I think is happening.”

Brett stepped closer and opened his mouth, but Marina caught his eye and shook her head. “I’m concentrating on the shop. Brett is a friend.”

He flashed another sideways glance toward Brett and muttered, “I’m a man myself. Where a girl is concerned, no man is just a friend.”

Marina’s pulse throbbed in her temples. “Would you like to go out into the garden for a while, Papa?”

“No. Channel six has a special starting in a few minutes that I want to see. You should watch it too. It’s going to tell about those tourists who got slaughtered in Costa Rica.”

“I’ve heard about them. I stopped booking customers into Costa Rican resorts months ago.”

He frowned. “They’ve got some pretty good walls and drop-offs in the Puerto Ismelda area. If those *idiotas* would just stop their stupid guerilla war, they could build a decent tourist industry. As it is, a few hotheads are scaring everybody away.”

“Can you blame people for being afraid? Maybe someday when things calm down I’ll organize a group tour and go dive their reef myself. But for now, I feel better sending people to safer, more stable countries.”

“You still sending people down to Cozumel?” he asked.

Her heart missed a beat, but she walked over, plumped the pillow on his bed, and kept a casual tone. “Yes, I am.”

“*No esté loca!*” he growled and pounded his fist against his thigh. “That place is a death trap! Those people can’t run a descent operation. If they had, my Ricki would still be alive today.”

They both knew who *those people* were. But he had refused to speak his relatives’ names ever since the accident.

She remembered her uncle slumped in a pew at the memorial service with huge tears rolling down his cheeks. “It wasn’t their fault.”

“Wasn’t their fault! Where’s your loyalty? Ricki was too good a diver to drown. Those incompetents worried about their own hide and deserted him, that’s what they did.”

Marina noticed veins bulging at his temples and his face growing purple. “I think we’re going to leave now so you can calm down and rest.”

“Fine. Go. On your way out, tell those useless nurses I’m not changing rooms. And tell them to bring me some hot soup for lunch. This darn air conditioning is set so cold it could freeze a body to death.”

She rose and brushed her lips across his leathery cheek. "I'll tell them. And I'll be back to see you next Sunday."

"Try to focus on the business a little more between now and then."

She felt the blood drain from her face.

Brett offered his hand again. "Nice to have met you, sir."

Papa shook it in a half-hearted manner. "Do you dive?"

"I'm taking lessons from Marina."

"Are you paying full price?"

"Papa!"

Brett seemed unfazed by the rudeness. "Yes. And I've even brought along another student."

"Have you bought equipment from her?"

Marina opened her mouth but caught a quick wink from Brett and closed it again.

"I have most of what I need," he said.

She wished she could crawl under the bed. But she admired Brett's ability to remain polite through her father's interrogation.

"Well, see to it that you buy the rest from her, understand?" He shot a look of resignation her way. "Girls don't know how to be aggressive and ask for the sale. They think they can run a business on their looks. Now, go on both of you, get out of here before I miss my special."

Walking to the car, Marina chewed on her bottom lip while Papa's words echoed in her head. Brett held her door, and she slid in.

When he was seated behind the steering wheel, she squeezed her hands together in her lap, pulled in a deep breath, and looked over at him. "I'm sorry. I guess that was pretty unpleasant for you."

"Not any worse than for you."

She lifted her shoulders then dropped them back to a slump. "I've gotten used to his moods. He acts like he'll run the shop again and this is a temporary situation. But deep down, I think he knows the truth. Being so dependent on others is eating him up inside."

"That's a common problem with the elderly."

"It's worse for him. He always took great pride in being the *compadre*, a kind of godfather, to the local Latinos. He was a successful businessman, so all his friends, and neighbors, and relatives came to him for financial advice. Even complete strangers would come to the shop looking for answers to their problems. They looked up to him, and he basked in their admiration."

"And now that's gone?"

“Completely. Since he’s been here, everyone’s assumed he’s senile. Not one person has come to ask his advice about anything or even say hello. Papa even drove Father Guevara away by saying he wanted nothing more to do with any God who would take away Ricki.”

“He’s lucky to still have you looking out for his welfare.”

“Some days are worse than others. But he’s my father. Family is everything. I have a duty to care for him.”

She watched him think for a few seconds, then his somber expression relaxed into a smile. “Ready to go?”

“Yes. You can just drop me at Paradise.”

He started the car and drove out of the parking lot. “It’s no trouble to take you home. How will you get there later without a car?”

Marina shifted in her seat, trying to think of a way to avoid telling him she’d given up her apartment and the shop *was* home. “I need to finish some cleaning and check some inventory.” She cringed at the almost-lie. She did have to check some inventory, but it was frozen solid in the tiny fridge and called dinner. “You’ve been kind enough already. I’ll manage.”

“If you’d like, we could take a detour. The carnival is open until eight.”

The trees and fence posts beside the road rushed by, and she felt a twinge of regret that her life seemed to be rushing by just as quickly. Lately, her days were passing in a blur of work. She sighed, dreading the idea of spending the rest of the afternoon alone at the shop but resigned to the necessity of finishing her chores. “Visiting my father always gets me down. I usually just go home.”

“Then maybe a diversion is just what you need. A little old-fashioned fun will cheer you up. Take today off and postpone your work.”

She pursed her lips. His suggestion was tempting. What would she gain by cleaning the display cases with Papa’s criticisms running like an endless tape in her head? Why not listen to Brett’s sexy voice a little longer? One more hour away from the shop couldn’t do too much harm. The grime wasn’t going to disappear. She turned and looked at Brett.

Their eyes collided and an electrical current seemed to zap down the center of the seat. Her reluctance vanished. “You’re right. Maybe I should take some time off.”

He flashed her a triumphant grin.

Her mouth twitched. She put another checkmark in the *virtues* column but couldn’t decide which label to use so she just used both: persuasive and persistent. Or should those be classified as *faults*? At what point did persuasive become pushy and persistent become stubborn?

He clicked on his right-turn signal and steered the car onto the exit ramp for the fairgrounds. In the distance, gaily striped carnival tents and a gaggle of gargantuan machinery clustered around the base of a

slowly spinning Ferris wheel. She pictured a couple stopped at the top swinging gently. The man looked like Brett, and he stole a kiss.

Her pulse beat wildly at the base of her throat.

At the first carnival booth, Marina hurled baseballs at buzzers mounted on a psychedelically patterned wall. With each wild pitch that ricocheted off the ceiling and floor, she howled with laughter and shoved Papa's criticisms farther from her mind.

Brett took a turn and missed, and she giggled. "Your ball got closer than mine. You were only about a yard from the target."

"Come on, let's go to the next booth. They have darts. That's more my game. You should have seen the back of my dorm room door." He took her hand and tugged gently.

His warm hand felt wonderful wrapped around hers, and the sensation did funny things to her pulse. When they reached the dart booth, he let go to take the fistful of darts the attendant handed him. She disliked the attendant immediately.

Brett seemed determined to stay at the dart booth until he succeeded in winning a prize. When he finally won, he chose a black and white stuffed whale from the display and turned to her.

"This is for you. I might not excel at pitching baseballs or fixing cars," he said with a chuckle, "but I do have some redeeming qualities."

She thought of the growing number of checks in his *virtues* columns and looked around. At another booth a man was aiming a rifle at a bull's-eye target. Farther on, blindfolded bowlers were rolling balls toward wooden ducks. "Nothing here is going to make *me* look talented," she said, her self-esteem still slightly bruised from seeing Papa. "Diving is my only skill."

They ambled down the dusty midway to a huge machine whirling people in circles and blaring out rock music. A food vendor's cart was parked under the whirling people.

"How about some food?" Brett shouted. "I know you're good at eating."

She nodded, pointed to the cart, and shouted back, "That looks interesting."

He winced. "Look out pancreas. Here comes a massive jolt of sugar."

Laughing, she slipped her arm through his and led him toward the cart. He was close to her side. And he felt good there. Her stomach fluttered, and she knew it had nothing to do with the anticipation of food.

After Brett paid the vendor, they strolled through the carnival, nipping at curls of strawberry-flavored cotton candy piled high on a paper cone. She licked the sticky residue from her fingers. Then they found a wagon steeped in irresistible aromas, and she ordered a foot-long hotdog smothered with chili. Brett grimaced and skipped the chili.

A half-hour later, the roller coaster car they were in turned upside-down, whipped around a loop, then bounced and jerked in a sudden downward plunge. Marina squeezed the safety bar tighter and screamed in delight.

Brett leaned toward her and yelled into her ear. "What do you think? Are you sick or should we do one more circuit?"

"I never get motion sickness, even after carnival food."

On the second circuit, she buried her face against his chest in mock terror.

He wrapped his hand around her head and gently held her close. "Lean the other way if you're nauseous," he shouted, his warm breath tickling her ear. Then he lowered his voice and stroked her hair. "But you're welcome to turn to me anytime if you're afraid."

The caress of his strong hand and the tenderness of his softly spoken words gave her a strange spell of vertigo.

Afterward, they climbed aboard a whirling ride. The world seemed to keep spinning after they got off.

"More?" Brett motioned to another machine.

"No. I'm too dizzy. Let's find someplace to sit."

He slipped an arm around her waist. Her skin tingled beneath her dress, and she found herself wanting to press closer to him. Laughing and half supporting each other, they staggered to a bench and sat.

Marina felt lightheaded and breathless. She questioned whether any carnival ride was the cause. His steady arm looped behind her was inviting, and she rested her head on his shoulder. She closed her eyes, savored his unique scent, listened to his heartbeat thump in her ear, and wished this moment would go on forever.

Half a minute later, she sat bolt upright. What was she doing melting into a man she hardly knew? How could she have let herself get so intimate? "It's time to go."

"If you're ready."

The sun's rays were slanting under low clouds in the west, and they'd ridden nearly every ride. She knew the day had to end, but disappointment weighed down her legs as they trudged to the parking lot.

She collapsed into Brett's comfortable car, and he started toward the highway. Only the music of an acoustic guitar and a velvety voice from the stereo broke the silence and drifted through the car. Her thoughts drifted too. Content as a cream-fed cat, she closed her eyes and smiled.

After a few minutes, Brett asked, "Which exit should I take?"

"Palm Beach Boulevard. You'll have to drop me at the shop."

"It's too late to work now. Why not let me take you home?"

She drew in a breath. There was no way to avoid telling him. "The shop *is* my home, Brett. I gave up my apartment at the end of last month to save money. I've been sleeping in my office. Temporarily, of course, until business improves."

“Oh.” He paused, then said softly. “Is there anything I can do to help?”

She fidgeted. “No, thank you. It’s just going to take some time for our customers to come back.” Finding a graceful way to change the subject, she said, “That reminds me, I’ve been curious. Why did you choose Paradise for your lessons instead of the Ripley chain store?”

He glanced at her and smiled. “When I called to inquire about your class schedule and heard your voice on the phone, I wanted to meet you.”

“I’m flattered. But I have to believe there was some more compelling reason.”

“Why? Your voice sparked my imagination. I conjured up an image of an exotic mermaid, and I wanted to see what you really looked like.”

“Suppose your mermaid turned out to be sixty-five years old, had scales and smelled like dead fish?”

He leaned toward her and made an obvious show of sniffing the air. “She didn’t. Even if she had, I probably would have stayed for the introductory class out of curiosity.” He chuckled, then his tone turned serious. “But I would have signed up for classes anyway. Your place does have a family kind of atmosphere. I like that, and I feel comfortable there. And I’m sure your right and your former customers will come back because of it soon.”

He slowed in traffic then pulled into the parking lot at Paradise. “Anyway, here we are.”

Marina hesitated, wanting to prolong the day. But her office was too cramped and sparsely furnished to invite him in for coffee. “Thank you for everything. I’ve really enjoyed today.”

His eyes met hers, and he leaned toward her. His hand slipped around the back of her neck, gently pulling her closer.

She closed her eyes and parted her lips. Her heart thumped wildly in anticipation.

With a tantalizing motion, he brushed his mouth softly over hers.

She waited, holding her breath, wishing for more, but at the same time, afraid he would do it again. Half of her wanted to be swept into his arms. The other half wanted to jump from the car and escape.

After a few heartbeats, she opened her eyes. “Yes, well, I guess I’ll see you Tuesday...in class.”

He walked around the car and opened her door. She stood cradling the stuffed whale. He traced his finger down the side of her cheek, and a delicious shiver rushed to her toes.

“I’d better go in,” she whispered, feeling all molten inside.

“Are you sure you want to rush away?”

“No.” She pulled in a deep, fortifying breath. “But I’m going in anyway.”

She watched from the stoop until his car disappeared in traffic. Then she unlocked the door and strolled inside. With her chest filled with happy bubbles, she floated through the showroom. Until her foot slammed into the bucket of scrub water she’d left in the aisle. The mop clattered to the floor, and dirty water flew into the air.

She jerked back, slammed her elbow into something metal, and screamed in pain.

Tears rushed to her eyes. She blinked and, through the teary blur, saw a display rack filled with expensive designer sunglasses. The glasses were speckled with grime and oozing gray water. She gasped. If those glasses were ruined, she'd be out a fortune. She dashed for a supply of clear water and soft clothes.

Guilt flooded her chest. One little kiss and her relationship with Brett was already wreaking havoc. She was letting herself get sidetracked, and the shop was going to suffer. She was proving Papa right.

Chapter Seven

Marina's efforts to focus on work and forget about Brett were moderately successful. Then Tuesday night, he walked through the door. Images of Sunday at the carnival flashed through her mind. The images screeched to a halt at the goodnight kiss, her pulse rate doubled, and all of her hard-won progress was erased.

She closed her eyes and looked for inner strength, silently repeating her new mantra: *I will ignore my attraction to him. I will think of him only as a student.*

Running on sheer determination, she started the pool class. Brett said nothing about their day together, but several times their eyes met. Each time, she suppressed the urge to be near him and touch him.

Grow up, you're a professional with work to do.

With a monumental effort, she concentrated on teaching Brett, Greg and Trish the skills every student had to master in confined water before they could safely progress into the open ocean. Eventually the torturous night ended.

On Thursday night, Brett entered the shop, and she tingled with sensibility to his presence. Even before he spoke, she felt as though they were communicating at some basic level.

After the long class filled with distraction ended, Trish and Greg went home.

In a silken voice that made her pulse dance, Brett asked, "Have you been able to get your car fixed?"

The repair estimate totaled six hundred eighty-four dollars, and she'd worried all week about where she would get that much money. But she kept her tone matter-of-fact. "I'm afraid not. It's going to require some major work, so I'm going to wait for a while."

"How are you going to see your father on Sunday?"

She shrugged. "I'll have to figure something out."

"Would you like a ride?"

Her heart screamed *Yes! Every day, anywhere you want to go.*

Her brain screamed *No! Papa would see Brett again and get upset.*

"No," she said. "You've done enough. But thank you. I'll have to skip this week."

"He was awfully hard on you. I'm surprised you keep going."

"I've grown a pretty tough hide."

He lifted her arm to his eye level. Squinting at the bare skin and rubbing his thumb slowly back and forth, he said, "Pretty, yes. But tough? No. Doesn't feel tough at all."

Incredible sensations, like being caressed by a cloud of butterflies, shimmered through her. Her legs turned to jelly. Her mind struggled to find words that remotely fit the conversation.

“Papa has grown a little more testy lately. The more dependent he becomes, the more he lashes out. I’ve got to show him he’s not alone and I care.”

He gently lowered her arm then met her eyes. “That means he needs the reassurance of your visits. I have an idea that might help.”

With her arm still tingling from his touch, a thousand ideas sparked in her brain. None of them involved Papa. “Oh, what’s that?”

“When I bought my new car last year, I kept my old one. I thought it might come in handy someday if the new one needed to go in for repairs. It’s still in good running condition. You could use it until you get yours fixed.”

She bit on the inside of her cheek, suppressing a grin. She was conjuring up erotic images, and he was talking cars. He obviously had no clue to the affect he had on her. She nudged her brain, and it finally made the switch to cars. Borrowing his car would be a tremendous help. She felt a wave of relief.

Then she realized she’d be imposing on his generosity, and the thought damped her enthusiasm. Papa had taught her not to be selfish, to always consider other people before herself. She blew out a breath. “I appreciate the offer, but really, that would be too much.”

“Actually, you’d be doing me a favor. I forget about it for weeks at a time. And by the time I remember to start it, the battery has usually gone dead. It really should be driven regularly.”

“But you hardly know me.” She moistened her bottom lip with the tip of her tongue. He certainly was persistent and persuasive. “Maybe...I could rent it from you?”

He nodded his head, and his eyes lit up. “All right, I’ll let you rent it for a dollar a week with unlimited mileage and, just to be fair, you pay for the gas. Since I really appreciate all you’re doing for Greg, this would help me repay you. Please, just drive it until yours is working again. I insist.”

She smiled at his gracious manner. It somehow made her feel she’d be rude if she declined. She thought of the term *southern gentleman* and how it fit him to a tee. “You’re paying for the lessons. That’s all I expect. But thank you. I’ll accept your offer. I’ll only use the car when it’s important. I *would* like to visit Papa.”

“Good. What time would you like me to pick you up for dinner tomorrow night?”

She laughed at his audacity. “Dinner? How did that get into this?”

The corners of his mouth curved up in a Cheshire cat grin. “You can drive the car home afterward. I thought I worked that in pretty smoothly. So, what time?”

A little tingle of anticipation shot from her head to her feet. Or was that feeling her resolve flooding out through her toes? Without pausing to decide which, she said, “The shop will be open late tomorrow

night with Trish standing watch, but I need to give her another hour of orientation and sales training. Can you wait until after six-thirty to eat?”

“I can try. By the way...” he cupped one hand beside his mouth and away from the aquarium and motioned with the other toward the wide-eyed angelfish and tiny seahorses weaving through the water, “...do you eat fish, or are you only allowed to look at them?”

Marina walked to the side of the aquarium and spread her hands like a pair of earmuffs over the ends of the tank. She turned toward Brett and whispered, “I love fish, both in the water and on my plate. But let’s keep it our secret.”

His eyes twinkled. “Then we’ll do seafood. I know just the place.”

Expecting to go to a waterfront fish house, Marina was surprised when Brett turned the car left onto Hibiscus Avenue and drove toward the exclusive Sandlewood Point section of town. She squirmed in her seat and began to worry her red and yellow batik sundress and leather-thong sandals might be too casual. Brett was wearing neatly creased, gray serge slacks and a Wedgwood blue silk shirt. She glanced into the back seat. No tie or jacket. The place couldn’t be too formal.

“I didn’t know there were any restaurants out this way. Are we going somewhere obscure and elite?” she asked, checking the scarlet polish on her nails for chips and wishing she’d had more time to primp.

“Obscure, not exactly. Elite, definitely. There are only two patrons at this place tonight. We’re eating at my house.”

“Oh.” Her pulse tripped and sped. Was that a good idea? Worry about her appearance faded and was replaced by more unsettling concerns. The meal at Rosa’s had been business. Borrowing his car was friendship. But dinner at his house was crossing a line toward intimacy and a relationship. What if he’d misunderstood her motives and expected her to spend the night?

She pushed her hair behind one ear and stole a glance at him. Her bracelets jingled, and he looked her way. She jerked her eyes back toward the road, smoothed her dress down over her knees, and then twisted her hands together in her lap.

“You’re safe. I’ll be a perfect gentleman.”

“I never suggested anything else.”

“You’ve got a wary expression on your face.”

She forced a laugh. “Like the fly when the spider invited her into his parlor?”

He pursed his lips for a couple seconds. “You know it was actually a male fly and a female spider, but still, I’ve never been compared to a spider before. Should I be flattered?”

“Maybe. Spiders are quite talented. Of course, they’re also pretty creepy. I think the analogy has to be taken liberally.”

“Thank you, I think. That’s the best pseudo-compliment I’ve had all day.”

Looking at his good-natured grin, some of her tension dissipated. She squared her shoulders. She could handle a friendly dinner at his house just as well as at a restaurant. All she had to do was resist any sexual thoughts, stay strong and remember her priorities.

“Anyway, here we are,” he said. “Fly away now, or be prepared to be caught in the web of my cooking.”

She peered through the windshield as he turned off the road. In the fading sunlight, tall, Royal Hawaiian palms stood like sentries guarding the curving drive. But their attempt at formality was dispelled by the petunias growing along the sidewalk in whimsical mounds of purple and pink. She smiled. The yard suited him perfectly.

He parked in front of the triple-car garage, and they walked to the front door. She stepped into a tiled foyer lined with shoulder-height potted ferns growing so thick they could have concealed a dozen leprechauns. The greenery made a magical frame for an elegant, curved staircase.

“Your home is beautiful.”

He shifted his weight from one foot to the other and shrugged slightly. “Thank you. Sometimes I wonder why I have it. It’s too big for one person.”

Marina thought about the cramped little office space she called home. “You wouldn’t say that if—never mind.”

He looked at her quizzically, then asked, “Would you like to see more of the house?”

Sandals slapping against the glossy, oak-planked floor, she followed him into the living room. She noted his preference for earth tones in the two upholstered sofas, a mahogany, Queen Anne-style coffee table, and an ivory, cinnamon and mink-brown Oriental rug.

But she was most interested in the unique items scattered around the room. A large display case exhibited dozens of antique toys. A veritable mountain of over-stuffed pillows tumbled out of the old-fashioned window seat. And in the far corner, an adult-sized rocking horse waited impatiently for riders. She made a date with the rocking horse for later. Obviously, Brett had a playful side to his nature.

He led the way into a huge, ultra-modern kitchen with oak cabinets and sky blue countertops. She was amazed by the neatness and organization of his bachelor quarters. Most of the men she’d dated cooked in the midst of excessive mess and clutter, if they cooked at all. But Brett had only a couple mixing bowls, mixing spoons, and a small assortment of ingredients arranged on the cooking island and countertops. The large, recessed chopping block and the double stainless-steel sink were spotlessly clean.

She smiled. “Your kitchen looks like an operating room.”

“Thank you.” He inclined his head toward the counter. “Right now, I need to get back to operating if we’re going to eat sometime tonight. Feel free to wander around and explore.”

“May I assist, Doctor?”

“Not right now, thanks.” He flexed his fingers like a concert pianist preparing for a performance. “I work more like an artist than a surgeon. I need room to create.”

Nice hands, she thought, recalling how exciting it felt whenever he touched her. A tiny current of electricity rippled up her spine.

With a nervous little chuckle, she reminded herself to focus on friendship and looked around. The rest of the room held more surprises. A red and green crayon stick drawing labeled *Dr. S* hung on the refrigerator door under a tyrannosaurus magnet.

She walked over for a closer look. “This is a good likeness.”

He grinned. “One of my patients caught the real me.” Then his smile faded. “Holly has leukemia. Her prognosis is poor.”

“You seem to care about these kids a lot.”

“Yes. In a way, they’re all a little bit mine.”

“Why don’t you have any of your own?” She wanted to snatch the words back. *How stupid, intimate and personal can you get?* “I mean—” her cheeks heated, “you obviously would be a great father.” *Not much better.* She snapped her mouth shut and fiddled with her bracelets.

He met her gaze and arched an eyebrow. “I’ve never found the right woman to be their mother. I’m old fashioned. I believe children deserve dedicated parents. That means the right woman would be intelligent, beautiful and self-confident but also willing to put her career on hold for a few years while she changes diapers.”

“That’s kind of a sexist attitude, you know.”

“I suppose.” He removed two covered bowls from the refrigerator.

She thought of the obvious situation that most men ignored. “You could stay home with a child. Be a house-husband and let your wife work.”

“If she could support a family and wanted to do that, I could handle it. Although, professionally, I’d need to stay active, and I do have a few patients whose treatments I would never want to disrupt by sending them to someone else.”

“In other words, you expect your wife to be a stay-at-home mom, but if the situation was reversed, you’d refuse to give up your own career completely.”

“My patients are important to me. They’re on my mind even after I’ve gone home for the day. I care about what happens to them. They’re like my extended family.”

Her hot blood surged. She crossed her arms over her chest and put a huge check in his *faults* column. This guy had stones, and a major case of self-importance.

“So you think it’s fair to expect your wife to give up her career! Did you ever stop to think she might want to stay involved with people she works with and maybe cares about?” She diverted her eyes for a few seconds. Why should it matter how he felt about the subject?

“I said ‘put on hold’ not ‘give up’. And I wouldn’t ask her to sacrifice hard won expertise and skills. Everyone needs to stay current with new developments in their field and keep in touch with their network of associates.”

Calm down and reason with him.

“Most women lose their career momentum after they take time off to stay at home with a baby,” she pointed out.

Brett swung open a cabinet door and removed a broiler pan. “True, but when you’re a parent, family should be the driving force in your life. When the time comes, I plan to reduce my office hours and do my share, as a working father not an absent breadwinner. Anyone who has a child should be prepared to make that child his or her top priority.”

“Even if a woman works, her children can still be very important to her.”

“Yes. But when you’re the four- or five-year-old kid, you don’t know that. All you know is Mom’s gone all day. And when she does come home, she’s doing important things like cooking and cleaning. She doesn’t have time to listen to your kindergarten escapades or sit with you and read about *The Cat in the Hat*. You believe you’re a burden and insignificant.”

He paused, stared out into the middle of the room as if remembering a specific boy then pulled in a deep breath. “As an adult, I can understand the dynamics. I realize a lot of mothers have no viable alternative. Claudia, for example. She needs to work. Without her paycheck and medical insurance, the family finances would collapse.”

He turned toward her, and she felt as if his eyes were looking directly into her soul.

“But the woman I’m looking for, Marina, is one who, given the choice, will want to be a full-time mother and nurturer, at least for the children’s formative years.”

His eyes probed, and she wondered if her confusion was visible. She wanted to be a mother. But she had always pictured herself driving her toddler to daycare then rushing through morning traffic to open the shop. Or, if possible, having daycare at the shop so her children and her students’ children could socialize. Somehow the idea of play dates, library story hours, volunteering as a class mom, or any of the tasks of full-time motherhood had never taken hold in her brain. Even with a small life depending on her for love and safety and guidance, could she ever be a twenty-four-seven stay-at-home mom?

She thought about Inés, her cousin with three boys and two girls all under nine years old. Her life seemed like a blur of cooking, cleaning and laundry. She wanted to get a part-time job to help with expenses and break up her routine, but her husband refused to let her work outside the house. Her only relief from taking care of her family was the hours spent in church praying, not for salvation, but for enough money to buy groceries.

Marina sighed. Latino women always worked their fingers to the bone caring for everyone but themselves. But when she got married, she wanted her life to be different. Reality hit her between the eyes.

What she wanted didn't matter. She wasn't about to get married any time soon, and right now, her life couldn't be different. She had to take care of Papa and his shop.

Interrupting her thoughts, Brett cleared his throat and said with a faint grin, "You need to scoot out of my kitchen, now. I'll find you when dinner is ready."

He slipped a long, baker's apron over his head, crossed the waist ties behind his back and knotted them in front. Then he stepped to the sink and washed his hands. She was amused that he actually soaped and rubbed the way television dramas showed doctors scrubbing before surgery.

Happy to let the subject shift, she shoved back a question about whether his mother had worked when he was growing up and how much she'd been helped by his father. "Okay. I'll go wander around and look for dust on your knick-knacks."

"There is no dust in this house, my housekeeper's a perfectionist."

Even in an apron, he exuded a strong masculinity. She lingered and studied the strong shape of his jaw, the skin next to his eyes that wrinkled when he smiled or frowned in concentration, and the locks of hair that fell across his brow as he tilted his head.

His hands sliding in expert and purposeful movements sent an electric current rippling through her body and struck with lightning intensity at the center of her heart. She raised her hand toward his errant locks of hair, but the little hairs on her arms stood on end. She drew her hand back and tore her gaze from his face.

Shaken by the power of her sudden attraction, she felt an urgent need to escape.

Focusing on maintaining a normal pace, she turned and walked through an archway and into the dining room. She stopped a few steps inside and sucked in several deep breaths. Her mind raced: Brett, babies, Papa, classes, long hours, bankruptcy, the shop, daycare, Brett. Brett? Any romantic relationship was absolutely impossible. Out of the question. Slowly, her pulse returned to normal, and she became aware of her surroundings.

A crystal chandelier hung regally over an oval, teakwood table. The cut-glass bowl centered on the table turned the rays of sunlight slanting in through the window into an arc of miniature rainbows. She pictured Brett at the head of the table and children seated along both sides: three boys and three girls, all with his beautiful features, and all with his marvelous blue eyes.

Hurrying from the room, she went through a doorway and came out onto a flagstone patio surrounding an Olympic-sized swimming pool complete with a bathhouse. In the middle of the patio, a table held a candle and place settings for two. Four chaise lounges clustered around a smaller table off to one side.

She stopped and admired the magenta bougainvillea climbing over the bathhouse. Then slipping off one sandal, she perched at the edge of the pool and stuck her toes in the sparkling water. An image of Brett skinny-dipping in the moonlight floated through her mind. She smiled, savoring the image, but wondered

why her mind's eye chose the viewpoint of another swimmer. Shaking off the question, she slipped her foot into her sandal.

Back inside, she passed a grandfather clock ticking loudly then followed a long hallway to the curving staircase she'd seen from the foyer. At the top of the staircase, a balcony with four doorways opening onto it ran the length of the house.

The doorways must be bedrooms. One of them was Brett's bedroom.

She envisioned his hair mussed and damp, his fingers tracing circles on her bare shoulder, his legs entwined with hers beneath ruffled sheets. Heat seared her lower body. She gasped, bit on her bottom lip, and berated herself for her erotic musings. She had to get a grip on her thoughts.

Adjoining the foyer, a small room created a cozy office. A mahogany desk and a swivel chair sat near the doorway. On two walls, hundreds of books were shelved on ceiling-to-floor bookcases. Centered on the third wall was a small, brick fireplace with a varnished mahogany mantle holding two framed photographs.

She crossed the plush, cinnamon-colored carpet, idly brushed her fingers over the smooth desk, and breathed in the lemony scent of furniture polish. She looked at her fingertips and grinned. There really was no dust in Brett's house.

Moving to a bookcase, she scanned the titles. One wall was filled with textbooks, professional reference materials and medical journals. The other was home to a set of encyclopedias and dozens of hardcover editions of best-selling novels. An entire shelf was devoted to murder mysteries by Tony Hillerman, Agatha Christie and P. D. James.

She crossed to the fireplace, picked up one of the photos and studied the faces. Laughter bubbled up and out.

"You've discovered my secret now." His tone sounded deadly serious.

She spun around toward him and drew a cross over her heart. "I promise I'll never tell a soul. No one will ever find out Santa Claus actually lives in Florida."

He walked into the room until he was so close her pulse started throbbing at the base of her throat.

"That picture was taken in the pediatric ward at the North Palms Hospital. They have a party every Christmas for the patients. I've been Santa for the past two years."

"You've shaved, Mr. Claus..." she chuckled and ran her fingertips over his rock hard abdomen, "and lost a little weight." Her brain registered the intimacy of her gesture, and she jerked her hand away.

He slapped at his midsection and puffed out his chest. "A diet, a razor and some hair dye does wonders. When I'm wearing my doctor's suit the rest of the year, none of the little ones even suspect I have a double life."

"Playing Santa is a wonderful thing to do. I'm impressed you find time to organize parties for the children."

“It’s nice that you’re impressed. But unfortunately, I can only take credit for showing up.” He picked up the other photograph, held it before her, and pointed at a woman’s image. “The blonde in this picture is Joyce Gallagher. She’s the head nurse in pediatrics. She does all the work of organizing the party. All the patients, and most of the parents, are crazy about her.”

Marina studied the photograph and developed a sudden dislike for the perky-looking nurse. “If that hug is any indication, she seems rather fond of Santa.”

“Everyone loves Santa Claus.”

A lump formed in her throat while she searched his face for any clue to his emotions. Unable to interpret his expression, she asked, “What about when you’re in your doctor’s suit the rest of the year? How does she feel then?”

“It’s all history now. I have great admiration for her professionally. She bakes me chocolate chip cookies once in a while.”

“Were you...in love with her?”

His eyes darted toward the woman’s image then met her gaze again.

“I was very fond of her. But we have philosophical differences. No matter how hard we tried, we were never going to resolve them. But she’s about to get the most important thing in her life: a promotion to Director of Nursing.”

Marina’s heart thumped in an erratic rhythm.

He set the photograph back on the mantle. “Joyce is very dedicated to her work, bakes great cookies, and we’re still friends.”

Marina shook her head. “I’m sorry if I’ve made you uncomfortable. I was rude to pry.”

He smiled and seemed more relaxed. “That’s okay. Asking questions is the first step in getting to know each other better. Now we’ve moved past being strangers.”

Their eyes collided, and she thought of the lyrics to an old song that said even strangers could start out exchanging glances and end up making love before the night was through. Worried Brett might have heard the same song, she swallowed then moistened her lips.

He jutted out his forearm like an Arthurian knight preparing to escort her to a banquet. “Well then, m’lady, now that we’re acquainted, shall we dine?”

She slipped her arm through his, glanced back at the woman in the photo, tapped down a sizzle of jealousy, smiled, then raised her chin and sniffed the air. Woodsy after-shave mingled with the food scents. “Mmm, now that you mention it, several things around here smell awfully good.”

Chapter Eight

The small patio table by the lounge chairs held a platter of sizzling, broiled oysters and stuffed mushroom caps. Marina claimed her tingling hand from Brett's forearm and sat.

He poured two glassfuls of Sauvignon Blanc and handed her one. Sitting in the adjacent lounge chair, he raised his glass in a toast. "Here's hoping this visit is the first of many."

She smiled, touched her glass to his with a clink, and sipped the chilled wine. He looked devilishly handsome and all too tempting. And her inner defenses whispered she'd be wise to keep her priorities straight and make this visit the last.

He passed the platter of hors d'oeuvres, and she cautiously sampled an oyster.

The spicy flavor danced on her taste buds. "This is very good. I never cared for shellfish when I was a kid. It's amazing how tastes can change." She thought of his feelings toward the nurse in the Santa photo and how relationships also change, some fading, some getting closer. Then dragging her mind back where it belonged, she continued, "I suppose the fact that I was a terrible cook, and managed to burn almost everything, had a big influence on my likes and dislikes."

"Did you cook meals yourself or just help your mother?"

An old sadness crept into her bones. "My mother died of leukemia three days after I turned six. But she was weak for months before she died. I can still see and hear her sitting in the kitchen patiently giving me instructions. I chopped and mixed and peeled. And together, we prepared the meals." Marina filed away the precious images and shook off her nostalgia. "Later, when I learned to read, I tried to follow the instructions printed on packages. But a lot of it was confusing. How does an eight-year-old know if she's at a high altitude, or even what an altitude is?"

He laughed and his eyes roved over her. "You've survived very well. I'm surprised an eight-year-old cook didn't burn the house down."

"For a while, my Aunt Enedina tried to help. She'd herd me into her kitchen on Sundays and have me practice making bistec de lomito, papas fritas, or tortillas. Then she moved to New York, and I was on my own. Have you ever had chocolate molido?"

"No."

"My aunt's molido was the best in the world. She tried to teach me, but no matter how hard I tried, I never got the hang of cooking any traditional Mexican foods. Mostly, I warmed up anything that came in a can and boiled black beans to go with it."

Her thoughts turned to how much had changed in her life. Mama and Ricki were gone, most of her close relatives had moved north for reasons she couldn't understand. Papa was the only one left. Papa and an ailing dive shop.

For a minute, she reclined in silence on the cushioned lounge chair thinking about her microwave meals in the office. Even if she had a stove, could she still remember how to boil the black beans? The last, brilliant rays of a pink sunset illuminated the underside of distant clouds. She steered her mind back to the present. Had Brett noticed their beauty?

She turned toward him and followed his gaze. Too low for clouds. He was staring at her bare legs. The muscles in her shoulders went taut. She smoothed her dress in a desperate attempt to make it longer and recalled his words about the spider and the fly. She had no intention of getting snared in his web. She was only here to pick up his car.

Hoping to draw his attention from her legs, she reached out with a trembling hand and picked up another oyster. Her bracelets jangled. She regretted wearing the darn things and hoped their racket wouldn't give her nervousness away. Her best cover was to talk. "This patio is a great place to be at this time of day."

He met her gaze. "It is. I love to put on the stereo and sit out here and watch the sunsets. It's the best way I've found to relieve the stress of work."

"It does seem like the perfect place to relax," she said, calming a little now that he'd been distracted.

"Unfortunately, on too many days my appointments get backed up or I'm buried in paperwork, so I wind up staying late at the office. By the time I get here, the sun is long gone. It's too late to do anything but fall into bed."

Her heart jumped. Just when she thought she was safe, he moved from her legs to his bed. She beat the idea of falling into bed with him out of her head.

I will ignore my attraction to him. I will think of him only as a student.

Trying to stay with the conversation, she said, "Now that I'm living at the shop, I appreciate how nice it was to have a place to go home to."

He shrugged slightly. "I imagine people who have a family waiting for them to come home place a higher value on their personal time."

"Maybe, but a family probably makes working more stressful. A lot of times, I work late in the shop doing something I really need to finish. If someone was waiting for me at home, I'd feel pressured to go home rather than complete something I regard as important."

Brett stood abruptly, and she noticed a sudden stiffness in his posture. He walked to the bigger table, pulled out a chair, and announced, "Dinner is served."

Marina blinked in surprise. "I'm looking forward to it," she said to be polite.

Moving toward her seat at the table, she got the uncomfortable feeling she'd just committed a social gaffe. She tried to figure out what it was and began replaying their earlier conversation in her mind. When she reached his opinions about parenting and children and stay-at-home moms, his response to her remark about work being important became less puzzling.

He lit the candle in the middle of the table, then took the empty hors d'oeuvres platter back into the kitchen. In no more than a minute, he returned carrying two cups of creamy, New England-style clam chowder.

The soup was delicious. She savored every drop.

"That was wonderful," she said as she finished her last spoonful.

He made another trip to the kitchen. For their entrée, he served rolled fillets of flounder with crabmeat stuffing, steaming baked potatoes and asparagus spears draped with hollandaise sauce.

She sampled a forkful of the fish and closed her eyes. "*Ay caramba*, this is heavenly. Where did you ever learn to cook? Do they teach this in medical school?"

He laughed and seemed relaxed. This was the Brett she knew.

"Definitely not," he said. "Actually, I worked my way through college cooking in a restaurant."

"Did they give you lessons?"

"No, I started out as a lowly assistant. But I picked up the techniques quickly, and before long, I was filling in for the chef. Everything I do, I do one hundred percent. From the minute I took the job, I was determined to stand out and rise to the top."

She remembered how, at the carnival, he'd continued throwing darts until he'd won a prize. "So you went after the chef's job?"

"No. But I wanted to be as good or better than he was. And after a while, I succeeded. I memorized the recipes for all his specialties. When the owners came into the kitchen one night and saw I was doing the cooking, they must have decided to save some money. The next day, the chef quit. The owners offered me the position, and I accepted. Before I knew it, I was the best fed and best paid college kid in my dorm."

She chuckled. "Remind me to watch out for *my* job if you learn to dive too well."

Her concentration shifted to the mouth-watering food. After every morsel vanished from her plate, he rose and cleared the table. He returned from the kitchen balancing a serving tray on his shoulder. With the flare of a waiter in a Cordon Bleu restaurant, he placed coffee cups, creamer, sugar cubes, and two bowls of chocolate ice cream on the table.

All the while, he looked sexy and totally male.

"I hope you're okay with chocolate," he said. "If not, I have some vanilla."

"I love chocolate. You might say it's my only vice."

He smiled and fiddled with his napkin. "I like a woman who enjoys eating. Did you know most birds would starve to death if they had to survive on the amount of food a fashion model consumes?"

She laughed and dipped her spoon into the ice cream. “These days, I get a lot of calories from packaged dinners warmed in the microwave, but diving and swimming are good exercise and I burn energy quickly.”

“You should never eat microwave meals. You ought to place a higher value on your health.”

“Those of us who are kitchen-challenged have no choice. That’s why I appreciate a man who enjoys cooking.”

His eyes burned into hers. “You can join me here for dinner anytime you like,” he said in a seductive voice.

She dropped her gaze to the table as a surge of warmth skated through her. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

Hoping to make the heat subside, she slid a spoonful of the ice cream between her tongue and lip. It melted into creamy sweetness but had no cooling effect on her body. As she picked up another spoonful, Brett’s gaze followed the ice cream to her lips. Her insides burned hotter. Was he reading her mind? Did he know she was thinking about their one brief kiss?

Crickets chirped in the lawn, and a Whip-poor-will called from somewhere in the darkness beyond the flickering candlelight. Content as a soaring condor, Marina sipped her second glass of wine as the sun’s heat gave way to a dewy coolness.

Brett stood, slipped a couple CDs into the disc player, held out his arms as Celine Dion began to weave her spell, and beckoned, “Dance with me.”

Her heart slammed against her ribcage, and her mouth went dry.

He stepped closer.

A ferocious war raged inside her head.

Don’t be stupid, go home now!

It’s only a dance.

Think about Papa.

A few minutes won’t matter.

He’s only after a sexual conquest.

Don’t jump to conclusions.

Her thoughts snarled in a hopeless knot, and her instincts assumed control. She found herself on her feet and walking into his arms.

Bathed in the silvery light of an almost-full moon, she followed his lead as he stepped and turned with fluid grace. His arms felt strong but gentle. The cool night air contrasted with the warmth of his body. She rested her forehead on his shoulder and closed her eyes. She leaned into him, thinking they fit well together.

Somewhere nearby, jasmine was blooming, and its sweet perfume floated around them on the gentle breeze. Another CD clinked into playing position and a tenor began to croon. The moon rose higher as the stars continued their timeless journey across the night sky.

Their thighs brushed, and a tremor of sexual awareness disrupted her equilibrium. Heat seemed to radiate from his body and sear her everywhere he touched. Her heart thumped a dance of its own, much more frenzied than the rhythm of the music.

She opened her eyes and looked at his mouth. His full lips were slightly parted, sensual, and inviting. Wondering how it would feel to stretch up on her tiptoes and press her mouth to his, she ran the tip of her tongue over her lips.

He dipped his head as if he'd read her mind.

She lifted her chin, closed her eyes, and met his lush, wet lips and probing tongue.

A wild fluttering sparked in her chest. His fingers caressed the nape of her neck, and his arms pulled her close. Hip against hip, breasts against chest, they swayed side to side. She felt his erection pressed against her belly. Yearning oozed through her veins.

His lips drew evocatively on hers, then he left a trail of kisses on a path to her ear. His teeth caught her earlobe and gently tugged. Warm puffs of breath flowed across her ear as the tip of his tongue toyed with the lobe between his teeth.

She turned her head slightly and realized the music had stopped, but they were still swaying in a silent ballet.

His fingers twined in her hair and his lips slid lower onto her neck. His hand skimmed down her back, around her waist, then up to caress her breast. The slight sucking motion of his warm lips sent tendrils of pleasure rushing to every cell in her body, and she opened her mouth further in invitation. She longed for the sensations to continue forever.

As she drew in a deep breath, the grandfather clock chimed. Dreamily counting each successive chime and Brett's accompanying light kisses, she was shocked into reality when the tally reached twelve.

Her eyes shot open. What was she doing? How had she let herself fall under his spell?

Mortification grabbed her by the throat and her mouth went dry. Why had she let this whole evening get so out of hand? Starting any kind of a relationship with him would be futile. She could never be the woman he wanted. She had obligations and a business to run. And she'd been a fool to forget them.

She pushed away from him. "I have to go."

He looked startled but raised her hand and kissed each of her fingertips. "Ah yes, midnight. The magic hour when the ball is over and Cinderella runs home."

"She started a trend. I have to go, *now*."

"But it's still early."

He locked onto her eyes for several seconds then pressed a feather-light kiss to her lips. The pressure of his mouth increased, and he pulled her closer. Thoughts swirled as her body melted against his. His warm mouth felt sinfully good, sinfully intoxicating. She was dizzy and breathless by the time he eased away and rested his forehead against hers.

“You know something, *Senorita Hernandez*? You’ve got my head spinning.”

Her heart pounded wildly. But she felt a sudden tremor of fear. If she stayed under his spell, her world could be knocked off its axis. She had to leave before it was too late and she started down a path leading to hurt and heartache.

She squared her shoulders, swallowed hard, and pushed her palms against his solid chest. “I’ve already been here for several hours when I should have been finishing paperwork at the shop.”

He dropped his arms to his sides. “Well, I wouldn’t want to interfere with something as important as paperwork.”

In the garage, Marina’s cheeks heated as she stammered out her thanks for the dinner. She slid behind the steering wheel of Brett’s spare car, a shiny, black BMW. He leaned across in front of her to explain the stereo controls, and his left hand rested on her knee. The drumming of her heartbeat drowned out his words. She tried desperately to concentrate on the instructions. But even after he drew back and closed the car door, her breasts felt heavy, and her nipples ached. An eternity passed before he handed her the keys and she started the engine.

All the way back to the shop, every place he’d touched tingled with phantom excitement. Her lips still felt slightly swollen from the pressure of his kisses. She savored the lingering, masculine scent that clung to the upholstery as if he were still right there in the car. The lyrics of the sad, country ballad playing on the stereo triggered thoughts about building a wall to protect her heart and never seeing him again.

She sagged back into the soft seat. That was impossible. She *had* to see him during lessons. Besides, simply being with him made her feel wonderfully alive. She *wanted* to see him. Her breath whooshed out and she chewed her bottom lip. Tonight had been a total disaster, but somehow in the future she had to fight temptation and remain focused on what was important.

Marina spent Sunday morning attacking the shop’s financial records. Then she took two aspirin for the resulting headache and walked to church. Prayers completed, she headed toward the nursing home in Brett’s car.

The Florida sun peeked through the puffy clouds and shone brightly. Her headache eased, but she felt anything but cheerful. She kept seeing the numbers from the balance sheets that proved the financial condition of the business was worsening. Juggling the bills was more difficult every day. How much longer could she hide the truth from Papa?

Thinking about him, she enjoyed a brief fantasy. She would walk into his room and he would hug her, pat the bed, and invite her to sit down close to him. Then he would ask her how the business was going, and she would pour out all her problems with the new competitors. They would discuss her ideas about how to increase sales. Then he would say to her, "I know you're doing your best. I have faith in you, sweetheart. You can handle it."

A wry smile touched her lips. She longed for all that to happen but doubted it ever would. When it came to her methods of running of the shop, he only knew how to criticize. Tension built in her shoulders, and the drum solo in her head started an encore.

She parked at the far end of the nursing home parking lot where the shiny car would be safe from the main stream of traffic and less likely to get nicked or scratched. After locking the doors and activating the alarm, she tucked the keys into her pocket.

At the end of the long, depressing hallway, Papa's door stood open. He was sitting in his favorite armchair by the window with a wistful smile brightening his face.

"How are you today, Papa?"

He spoke without turning toward her. "I'm feeling good. Very good."

Too often, he was cranky, belligerent or depressed. She never quite knew what to expect. Now, hearing the happiness in his voice, relief washed over her, and a surge of tenderness toward him squeezed her heart.

"That's wonderful, Papa. It's good to see you happy."

He turned and looked at her. "Are you curious why?"

A strange sense of foreboding chilled her for an instant. She quickly shook it off and laughed at her own silliness.

"Well, let's see. Could it be that the cook has been forced to eat his own food?" she asked with a light, joking tone in her voice.

He chuckled. "No, but that's something I'd like to see."

His gaiety lifted her spirits higher. "Your physical therapist is on an extended vacation?"

He shrugged. "She's a pain in the neck, but I can handle her."

Small incidents had affected his moods drastically since he'd been hospitalized. She wanted to avoid a lot of subjects. For a few seconds, she searched for a safe topic. Finding none, she said, "I guess I give up."

He picked up a manila envelope from the table next to him, opened the clasp, and slid out a folded sheet of paper and a glossy brochure. He held up the brochure so she could see the picture on the front. "I got your brother the recognition he deserves."

"Oh?" She squinted to read the printing. "What is that?"

"A gold plaque I saw advertised in *Diver's World* magazine. They usually just engrave them with a name, certification date and instructor number. But I'm having the text say 'In memory of beloved master

diver Ricardo José Hernandez, taken from us by the deep blue sea off the coast of Cozumel, Mexico on the tenth day of April, 2005.' His certification date and instructor number will go at the bottom. That other sheet is the confirmation of my order."

Her happy bubble popped like a pricked birthday balloon. The blood drained from her face and pooled behind her stomach. "Your order?"

"They won't ship the plaque for a couple weeks. But I had to pay in full before they'd engrave it."

She strained to take a breath. "But Papa, how did you order anything? Where did you get the money?"

"That took planning." He puffed out his chest and said smugly, "Seeing as you've let them take away my wallet, I had to improvise. A few weeks ago, the doctor called you into the hallway to talk about me behind my back. Well, that smartypants put opportunity right in front of me. You left your purse next to the bed. I slipped out the shop's charge card and copied down the number so I'd have it for the order blank."

Her fingers suddenly felt numb and cold. She had to ask but didn't want to know. "How much did that plaque cost?"

"Only seven hundred and fifty dollars."

"Seven..." The rest of the figure stuck in her throat. Her mind screamed she couldn't afford seven hundred fifty dollars worth of anything. She wanted to grab him by the shoulders and shake him, make him understand.

How could you have done this? I've told you business is bad. Why Papa? Why do you always think of Ricki first? Why do you always just take me for granted? Can't you see how hard I'm working to keep your business solvent?

His proud voice penetrated her gloom. "It's an impressive remembrance, *gatita*, isn't it?"

She hated being called Kitten. As a child, Ricki had taunted her with *Kitten, Kitten, you're weak as a kitten* because she wasn't strong enough to lift the heavy air tanks that constantly littered the shop. Today, the nickname cut like a dagger.

"Marina," she corrected shortly.

He scowled. "Hey, what is this? I expect to see a little more enthusiasm here. After all, he was your brother. He's got to be remembered. We're going to display the plaque in the shop. It will be a fitting way to honor him."

"It's not the idea of a plaque. You know I loved Ricki too. But seven hundred and fifty dollars? Oh, Papa..." She released her breath in a heavy sigh.

"The money's there. I run a good, profitable shop."

She was tempted to admit how bad the shop's finances were but afraid his health was too fragile to know the truth. She wanted to tell him about sleeping in the office, about juggling creditors, about not having the money for something like an engraved gold plaque. She wanted to scream nothing he bought

would bring Ricki back. But she could only force out, “Well, no, the money might not be there right now. But that’s only part of it. I mean...”

“What do you mean, ‘might not be’?” He shook his head, rolled his eyes toward the ceiling and raised both hands into the air. “This is why men should always handle finances. Woman have no sense about money.” His elbow swept an old baseball cap off his bedside table and onto the floor.

Marina stared at the worn cap with the faded red lettering. He’d bought it at a baseball game on her tenth birthday. He and Ricki were going to the game and were forced to take her along when the babysitter cancelled at the last minute. All through the game, Papa explained the rules to Ricki, pointed out each player, and gave Ricki a commentary on the players’ statistics.

When she asked questions, Papa snapped, “Just sit there and be quiet, girl. Eat your hotdog and pretend you’re invisible. American baseball is a man’s game. Your brother and I are here to enjoy it, and we’re not going to let a whining little girl spoil it.”

During the seventh inning stretch, he bought Ricki the baseball cap and refused to buy one for her.

Looking away from the cap, she shook her head to banish the memory. But the familiar heaviness surrounding her heart remained.

As he continued to rant, sarcasm dripped from his voice. “If you don’t even know how much money we have, I’d better hire an accountant to go over the books. You probably have them in a tangled mess.”

She squared her shoulders. “The books are in perfect order. Don’t get upset. I’ll cover the bill, Papa. Somehow.”

“You see to it that you do. This plaque is important. Give up your hairdresser for a while, or buy fewer clothes. There are probably a lot of frivolous things you could do without.”

She could hardly remember her hair stylist’s name, and most of her wardrobe lived in an eighteen-inch-wide filing cabinet in the shop’s office. But it would be useless to tell him any of that. He wanted a plaque for his son, and he expected her to do anything necessary to pay for it.

“Sure. I’ll do without something,” she said, measuring out her syllables.

He picked up the hat like he was handling the Holy Eucharist and placed it back on his bedside table.

“Don’t take that tone of voice with me, young lady. It won’t hurt you to do this for your brother. I saw you get out of that fancy new car in the parking lot. If there’s money for a car for you, there’s money for his plaque.”

“The car is borrowed from Dr. Sutherland. Mine still isn’t running.”

He rolled his eyes again and nodded. “That’s probably what this is about.”

She blinked in confusion. “What? My car?”

“No. That man. You’re neglecting the business, I’ll bet. All infatuated with that doctor. You’re probably spending all your time daydreaming about him instead of working.” He shook his head slowly and gave her a skeptical look. “Did you close that deal with the group of stores up north yet?”

“I told you last week, Papa, it’s on hold.”

“Your brother would have kept after them. He would have closed it months ago.”

Her heart knocked. She grabbed her purse and leaped from the chair. “I’m going now.”

“Bring me a warmer sweatshirt when you come next week. And don’t you drive that flashy car to the old neighborhood. My friends will think you’re trying to be better than them. They’ll say you’ve fallen in love with money. Remember the words of the Bible: *el amor al dinero es la raíz de toda clase de males.*”

Marina wanted to scream that the love of money was *not* the root of all evil, and contrary to the beliefs of many old-world Latinos, poverty would not please God. The old attitudes toward money were foolish. Making money meant security. Making money meant she could hang on to his dream. She opened her mouth to remind him money bought things like plaques, and doctors, and heart medicine. But a lump of emotion formed in her throat choking off the words. She turned and fled the room.

With her head held high and her chin quivering, she ran to the sanctuary of the car. She grabbed the door handle, and a screeching, warbling alarm blasted.

Mortified and flustered, her eyes puddled with hot tears. Horns joined the cacophony of noises. She frantically punched tear-blurred buttons on the remote control.

The screeching and horn blowing suddenly stopped. Without looking back toward Papa’s window or waving, she jumped into the car and drove away.

Her hands trembled, and as soon as she was out of sight of his window, she pulled over and stopped on the shoulder of the road. Dropping her head back, she squeezed her eyes closed, listened to her pulse roaring in her ears, and clenched her teeth in frustration.

Like most Latino men, Papa had always controlled the family finances. Consulting with her, or any woman, before making a purchase would never even have entered his mind. But that would have to change before he did anything else disastrous. Tomorrow she’d remove his name from the credit card account and take exclusive control.

After several minutes of deep breaths, her trembling subsided. She gathered her defenses and let herself concentrate on the problem of the money for the plaque. Should she try to cancel the order or was it already too late? She rested her elbow on the steering wheel and leaned her forehead against her hand. Even if she could cancel it, how would she tell Papa?

Her heart sank. She had no choice. She was going to have to scrape up the money for the plaque just like she’d promised. Somehow.

Chapter Nine

Tuesday afternoon, Marina walked into the shop from the pool area and recognized the sound of Greg's laughter. Rounding a corner, she stopped where his wheelchair blocked the aisle. He was refolding a beach towel while Trish arranged others on a sale table.

His laughter stopped abruptly.

"Have I caught you two telling secrets about the wicked SCUBA instructor?" she joked.

Greg looked toward Trish with a conspiratorial smile. "Trish was telling me about her school. It sounds like a really great place, but there's this one guy in her chemistry class who's a colossal idiot."

Trish burst out laughing. "I was telling him about this kid, Roger Pito. He switched the chemicals the teacher was going to use in a class demonstration. The teacher burned the stuff and got sick on the fumes. The dumb guy bragged about it to the whole school and got suspended. Can you imagine anybody being so stupid?"

Marina shook her head and chuckled. "Not really. A practical joke is one thing, all chemistry teachers must expect that once in a while. But you'd think the boy would realize bragging would circle back to bite him and he'd get caught."

"Yeah, I always thought he was bright, but he sure proved me wrong. And, of course, the worst part is all the parents and the Board of Education are in an uproar now. They'll come up with some crazy rule that's supposed to prevent anything like that from ever happening again."

"I'm sure they will," Marina said.

"It was a stupid thing to do," Greg added. "But I bet it was hilarious to see the teacher turning green. Home schooling is okay, but I sort of miss the other kids and all the stuff that goes on, you know." Then he lowered his eyes and shrugged. "I guess I'm lucky, though. I learn a lot more without those distractions."

Marina saw Trish's solemn expression and knew she'd heard the distinct note of sadness in Greg's voice, too.

Trish said, "You'll have to put up with the creepy kids soon enough when you go to college."

Greg shrugged again. "Yeah, I guess so." He turned toward Marina, sat up straighter in his chair, and made an obvious attempt to change the subject. "Anyway, I came early tonight because I wanted to talk to you about buying some equipment."

"That's a good idea. Having your own gear is more convenient than renting. Do you want any particular style or brand names?"

“Well, I’m not exactly sure yet. But, before I pick anything out, I kinda need to know about how much a complete outfit costs.”

“I stock several different manufacturers’ equipment, everything from a good quality, basic line that’s relatively inexpensive to a deluxe line that’s higher priced. I also have some packages that offer an excellent combination of the two. What kind of a price range did you have in mind?”

He seemed to shrink down into the chair. “Cheap. I’ve only got about a hundred dollars. I was hoping you could like...you know, arrange payments or something.”

She sighed, wishing her credit was good enough to let him order gear and postpone the payments. She used her stock answer to layaway questions but felt like a louse. “I’m really sorry, Greg. But my bookkeeping system is only set up for cash or credit cards.”

“Oh.” His shoulders slumped lower, and he hung his head. “Well, then I guess I’ll just have to wait until I can save up some more money. Mom’s already struggling to make ends meet. Uncle Brett is real generous, and I’m sure he’d give me the money if I asked. But I hate to always be bothering him for stuff.”

Marina’s mind was so busy she almost lost track of his explanation. She had valuable equipment in stock no one else wanted to buy. Her suppliers had already charged her account, so what difference would it make whether the gear sat unsold or she let Greg buy it on some kind of in-house payment plan? Several ideas collided. A solution to another dilemma suddenly seemed possible.

“You know, Greg, there may be something I can do.”

His face brightened. “What’s that?”

“Your uncle says you’re really good with computers.”

He nodded. “Yeah. I spend a lot of time messing around.”

“Do you know how to design Web sites?”

“Sure. They’re pretty easy.”

“I mean a really good one, not the kind that looks like a template or a standard format copied from a book?”

“Yeah, they’re harder, but putting one together is more fun because the programming is more of a challenge.”

The typically Sutherland attitude brought Brett to mind. She shook off the invading thoughts.

“For a while now, I’ve wanted to have a really good Web site for the shop. It could be a great marketing tool. But the software development company in town charges so much that I’ve had to postpone the idea. Would you be interested in trading some time developing a Web site for me in exchange for a full set of equipment? There’s only one restriction. You’d have to pick something from what I have in stock.”

A huge smile burst across his face. “I can do a site in no time.”

Trish interrupted. “If he works on a Web site for the shop, would he be like an employee?”

“Yes, I guess he would.”

Trish's eyes sparkled. "Then he should get an employee discount. Right?"

Marina rolled her eyes. "I think I've just been double teamed. You're turning this into the great gear give away." She looked back at Greg and smiled. "Okay, you're an employee, of sorts. And employees get a discount on everything."

He turned from Marina to Trish and laughed. "Wow! I get to work here, my very first job, *and* buy all the stuff I want too. Wait 'til I tell Uncle Brett."

Trish asked, "Would it be okay if he explained to me what he does on the computer? I'd like to learn more about how Web sites are programmed."

"If you're here, and there aren't any customers, it's okay with me," Marina said, thinking how common that occurrence was lately.

Trish looked toward Greg and blushed. "I'll make sure I'm here."

Thursday night after class ended and Trish and Greg left, Brett asked Marina, "Would you like to go to a Marine Corps Band concert in the park Sunday afternoon?"

Her mind screamed: *NO, NO, NO!* Her heart screamed: *GO, GO, GO!*

Her mouth formed words. "Yes, I'd like that."

Sunday morning, she hurried back from the nursing home early so she'd have plenty of time to dress. Guilt tried to darken her mood, but her spirit improved with every mile she drove. She was only taking a few hours off, and she would make up for every second by working harder tomorrow. The concert was in the daytime and public, she'd be in the middle of a crowd and wouldn't have to worry about temptation.

By three o'clock, she'd changed her clothes five times. Settling on shorts and a lightweight, cropped top borrowed from a now half-naked mannequin, she paced the floor and peered out through the windows every other minute.

When Brett drove up in front of the shop, her heart soared. All day, she'd been looking forward to the pure joy of being with him. She grabbed her purse and rushed outside toward the car but stopped short. Trying to appear casual, she about-faced, went back, activated the alarm and locked the door.

The sun heated her bare arms, and she was glad to be wearing cool clothing. But the temperature had already peaked for the day, and hot day or not, she felt glorious.

Brett got out of the car, and his gaze slid from her head to her toes and back up again. "Well, hello there," he drawled through an appreciative grin.

Releasing the happiness bubbling inside, she smiled broadly. They might not be headed for a long-term relationship, but right now he was here, and she was here, and she felt like singing.

He reached out and took her hand. He tilted his head, bent close, paused for an eternity, then brushed his lips over hers. The kiss was brief, but the impact was lasting. Would she ever get used to the way her heartbeat accelerated each time they touched. Should she?

She looked into his eyes, feeling tongue-tied. "Hello yourself."

In his car, she breathed in his unique male scent and let it thrill her senses.

"How did your visit with your father go today?"

Unwilling to let memories of Papa's behavior spoil her afternoon, she hid behind a flippant façade and forced a small laugh. "The usual. He got a chance to complain about the food and the nurses. We took a short walk and sat on a bench in the garden, but he wanted to go back inside after five minutes because the sun was too bright. He bragged about Ricki and told me how incompetent I am. I got upset and left."

"Bad?"

"Not very." She realized she felt better just telling someone the saga. "Maybe I'm getting hardened to his criticism."

"The business again?"

"Not entirely. I should buy some new, more conservative clothes so I'll look more professional, and my hair is getting too long and starting to look shaggy." She put her chin down almost on her chest and made her voice low and stern. "A diver's hair shouldn't be allowed to grow so long that it goes wild underwater."

Brett chuckled at her imitation. "I like your hair."

"Thank you. I know it needs a trim, but all the salons are getting so expensive. I've been economizing and cutting corners."

"Instead of hair?"

Her lips twitched. "Yes, wise guy, instead of hair."

He reached over and brushed a few strands from her cheek. "Your father's only looking at your hair from a business standpoint. I see shimmering, black satin framing a gorgeous face."

Warmth spread over her cheeks. "Now I'm embarrassed. I wasn't fishing for compliments."

"You've only prompted me to voice my thoughts. I've wanted to tell you how beautiful you are ever since I first saw you."

Hearing him say he thought she was beautiful made her feel beautiful. Excitement sizzled through her. "Thank you."

At the parking lot nearest the band shell, a policeman doing traffic duty directed Brett to the far end.

"I guess we're a little early. Are you hungry yet?" Brett asked.

"Of course."

He looked scrumptious in his shorts and chest-hugging T-shirt emblazoned with a smiley-face lollypop, and her present hunger had little to do with food. She grasped for a diversion.

“Let’s walk over to the duck pond before we find a spot on the lawn.”

He helped her out of the car then opened the trunk. “I just happen to have something here the ducks might like.” He took out a giant, plastic bag filled with popcorn.

“Do you always carry things like that?”

He draped an arm lightly over her shoulder, pulled her closer, and started toward the pond. “I was a Boy Scout for ten years. I learned to be prepared for every conceivable event.”

Her heart pounded almost painfully, but she tried to behave normal, as if his nearness didn’t affect her one way or the other. “Oh? What else do you have lurking in that trunk? Oats, in case we see a horse? Maybe a bit of brandy, in case we get caught in a snowstorm?”

He turned toward her. “My oat supply is low, but I’m good to go on the brandy.” He stopped and wrapped his arms around her. “If we get caught in a snowstorm, body heat must be conserved and shared.” His embrace tightened. “I’ll keep you warm, and we can save the brandy to bribe our rescuers to go away.”

She rested her head against his shoulder and wished for snow. She pictured the two of them cuddling in a cozy cabin before a roaring fire. “In case you haven’t noticed, it’s ninety degrees and we don’t live in Alaska.”

“I have a friend who owns a restaurant with a walk-in freezer. Will that do?”

She laughed and playfully pushed him away. Then she took the bag of popcorn and started walking toward the flock of ducks waddling across the grass.

“We have to stay here. That cute, green-headed duck and his friends have been eyeing the popcorn since you opened the trunk. They would never forgive us if we left now.” *And I’d never forgive myself for what I’d do to you in your friend’s freezer.*

At a good vantage point for enjoying the concert, Brett laid out the blanket and unpacked their picnic lunch. The band took the stage and played “The Star-Spangled Banner” exactly at five o’clock. As they launched into their first set, Marina listened and Brett hummed intermittently.

After a few selections, her gaze wandered to the food and her curiosity was piqued. “Let’s see what all these little packages contain.” She unwrapped his fancy chicken salad sandwiches, a delicious egg-potato salad and a platter full of crisp, raw vegetables.

She giggled trying to munch carrot sticks quietly, and he held a finger upright in front of his smiling lips in a mock demand for her to be silent. Then with loud hand slaps, he beat out the rhythm of a march on his muscular thighs.

When the sandwiches had been devoured and she couldn’t eat another bite of salad, they packed the leftovers into the picnic basket and stretched out on the blanket. He whipped two little pillows out of the blanket bag, and put one under her head as a cushion.

“You really are prepared for everything,” she whispered.

His eyes brimmed with mirth. “I try.”

She pretended to listen to the music as he settled down. After a minute, she stole a glance at his face and hair. She marveled at the way the afternoon sunlight seemed to make his hair glow and studied the wonderful laugh-lines next to his eyes.

As if sensing her gaze, he looked her way, winked, and flashed her a boyishly disarming grin. Her pulse accelerated to breakneck speed, and she flushed all the way to her toes.

Two numbers later, the bandleader announced, “Don’t go away, folks. We’ll be back after a ten-minute break.”

“I feel like I’m part of a Norman Rockwell painting,” Marina said. “It’s all here, a picnic, the park, and the band. I can picture this scene on the cover of a nineteen-fifties magazine.”

“There’s a lot to be said for those days. Close-knit families ate meals together and shared the events of their day. There was no cable television, Internet or video games. People spent more time doing things like having picnics and visiting with friends. Back then, people talked face-to-face, not just through cell phones and text messages.”

She grinned. “You seem like you would have enjoyed living fifty or sixty years ago.”

“I do?”

“Sure.” She mustered up the courage to test the thin ice. “You’re old fashioned. Your whole philosophy of a woman’s role as a mother and homemaker is right out of our grandparent’s era.”

He rolled onto his side and propped up his head with his arm and fist. “Did I ever say all women should be homemakers forever?”

“Not exactly in those words.”

“Well, for your information, I’m in favor of women having good educations and fulfilling careers. But when they marry and have children, I disagree with modern society’s philosophy of women being expected to juggle husbands, children, homes and jobs. Many women are so insecure about their jobs, they over-compensate and believe going home to eat dinner with their husband or staying home with a sick child makes them look uncommitted to the success of their careers.”

She thought about the reasons women had to over-compensate. Because men run most of the business world and make the rules. Because they worship competitiveness and aggression and denigrate nurturing. Because if a woman takes time off to do anything domestic, she’s accused of not taking her job seriously. She mentioned none of them.

“So what’s the solution? How does a woman make the choice between home and work?” she asked with a challenging note in her voice.

“Take a sabbatical and concentrate on child-raising.”

And lose your career momentum forever.

She'd found the edge of the safe ice. She'd been having a similar disagreement with her father most of her adult life. Men had hard heads and were unable to see society's outdated rules from a woman's perspective. She wanted to enjoy the rest of the day and the company, so she detoured back toward thicker ice. "I'll bet you believe in marriages that last a lifetime and rigid laws to make divorce more difficult."

"Guilty. Children need two parents." He reached over and ran a finger down her cheek.

A sizzle of pleasure rippled through her bones, but she refused to let him see how easily he could distract her. "What if the parents don't love each other any longer, and the environment in the house is hostile?"

"Then they've made a mistake and they need to make peace with each other, behave responsibly, and think of their children first. No one should get married in the first place unless they're really in love. If two people are really in love, they'll stay in love forever. They'll work hard at their marriage and keep it together."

"I'll bet you believe elderly parents and grandparents should live with their children."

"Guilty again. It keeps their lives more meaningful."

"Well, then, I rest my case, you *are* old fashioned. Your ideas are unusual. And that makes you a bit of a radical."

He took her hand. "Okay, I'm guilty as charged." His eyes locked with hers, and a melting sensation sparked in her middle. "Is that so bad?"

She moistened her lips wishing he'd kiss her. "No."

Except for the part about a stay-at-home wife.

She shrugged mentally. His beliefs about marriage didn't pertain to her. She had a career. And even if she did get married some day, it wouldn't be to a man who wanted her to stay at home, cook and raise babies. That kind of marriage would only prove her father's beliefs were right and she was meant to spend her life in a kitchen.

The heaviness of disappointment squeezed at her chest. Why should she feel disappointment? She pulled in a deep breath and banished the puzzling feeling. "Your beliefs just make you a lot different from most men, who seem to think work is more important than family life."

"Or," he countered as his thumb caressed her knuckles, "the average workaholic who avoids committing to a husband or having a family because *she's* too tied up in a career."

"Is that the way you see me?"

"The workaholic part certainly fits."

"Really?" She pulled her hand from his and crossed her arms over her chest. "I guess I never thought of myself that way."

“Hey, fair is fair. If you can label me old fashioned, I can label you a workaholic. You have your whole life organized around the dive shop. You’re a perfect example of a modern, overzealous career woman.”

Overzealous! She drummed her fingers on her arm, and her Latin temper sizzled.

The band began playing, but Marina’s mind wound through their conversation again. The idea that elderly parents should live with their children was good. In fact, it was part of her heritage. But bringing Papa to live with her was impossible. And so what if she was a workaholic? If she hadn’t spent the last year working every possible minute, the shop would already be in bankruptcy. She glanced over at Brett.

Overzealous, my foot. I’m doing what I have to do. I have no choice but to postpone marriage and a family.

The lively music vibrated all around her. The crowd cheered a couple dancing under a tree. But her mood turned somber and the day didn’t seem quite as bright. She released a long, heavy sigh. Her reality and Brett’s ideas were as different as night and day.

The drums thundered out the last notes of a Sousa march and the band bid the audience good night. Brett took Marina’s hand and helped her up off the blanket. She stretched her muscles slowly like a waking cat.

“That was wonderful,” she said. “Thank you for inviting me.”

His hands settled on her hips. “Thank you for coming with me.”

Electricity seemed to radiate from his fingers, and her insides went all stupid. Hungering for the taste of his kiss, she stared into his eyes and tried to concentrate on all the reasons they could only have a simple, short-term relationship. Her lungs began to ache, and she realized she was holding her breath. When he didn’t move and the seconds stretched too long for her to bear, she raised up on tiptoes to be nearer to his mouth. If they were only going to have a short time together, than why not make the most of it? With an uncommon lack of restraint, she closed the gap between them and angled her mouth over his. Her hands lifted and slid eagerly into his thick hair.

“Look Mommy, those people are kissing,” a little girl said.

Marina drew back.

Brett’s eyes were wide and his mouth slightly agape. His look of shock made Marina giggle.

He blinked then removed his hands from her hips and waved to the little girl.

After a long, quizzical look in Marina’s direction, Brett bent down, and picked up the blanket.

“The band really lived up to their reputation,” he said. “I suppose that’s why the crowd is so huge tonight. It’ll probably take an hour to get out of the parking lot.”

They gathered their belongings and shuffled along with the mass of people moving toward the parking area. After a few minutes, Brett pointed toward a semi-circle of trees near the pond and said, "Let's sit and watch the moon come up while the crowd clears."

He spread the blanket under a tree, then produced a bottle of wine and filled two glasses.

She shook her head and rolled her eyes playfully. "Brett Sutherland, you are unbelievable."

They settled into a comfortable conversation. He talked about experiences in medical school, and she shared stories of dive trips hijacked by Murphy's Law. Twilight crept over the park. The noise from the parking lot quieted, and frogs began their melodious song. The scent of water lilies perfumed the air. Fireflies flitting among the trees flashed sporadically.

Marina watched the eastern horizon brighten as the moon rose. It changed from a fuzzy reddish disc to a distinct silvery orb and lit the park with a magical glow. She wondered why she'd never noticed the phenomenon before.

Brett's face was toward the moon, but his mind seemed to be somewhere else as he sat silently for several minutes. Marina sensed tension in his posture. She began to worry the public spectacle of a kiss had been out of bounds for a casual relationship. Could he be upset and thinking she was too possessive or clingy? Or had she violated his comfort zone during the stay-at-home mom conversation?

Suddenly, he turned toward her, framed her face with his hands, leaned closer and kissed her softly.

Her concerns vanished. Wonderful sensations swirled through her. He slid his hands behind her head and slanted his mouth over hers with more pressure and more heat.

He started to draw away, but she slid her arms around his neck, and pulled him back into the kiss.

His teasing and caressing tongue swept between her parted lips. She met it in a gentle dual. He probed deeper into her mouth. Heat seared her nerve endings. The roaring of her blood consumed the sounds of the night, and the silvery flood of moonlight ripened into the colors of an aurora borealis.

His fingers tangled in her hair. His thumbs traced a line at her temple. Then his hand slid to her waist, and his fingertips brushed the ribbon of bare skin below her cropped midriff blouse.

A sizzling charge shot through her bloodstream. Her breasts yearning for attention, she strained toward him. Her fingers explored the sensitive skin behind his ear. Slipping toward complete abandon should have frightened her, but somehow the realization only made her heart beat a little wilder.

His hand rubbed slowly up her ribs and then stroked the underside of her breast.

She felt dizzy, as if spinning in a whirlpool. Muscles tightened low in her belly. She whimpered, a low sound of need that reverberated in the back of her throat. She clutched his shoulders and held on tightly.

He sipped at her lips, and then his tongue went back to plundering her mouth. He drew her against him with impatient pressure. The hard length of him rubbed against her thigh.

Something else hard rubbed against her other thigh and vibrated faster than the strings of a mariachi's guitar.

Brett groaned, pulled his mouth away, and rested his forehead on hers. "That's my pager. I turned off the auditory signal for the concert."

"Your what? Oh...your pager."

He ran the backs of his fingers down the side of her face. His eyes were glossy with desire. "I'd better see what's happening."

Her heart begged him to pitch the damn thing into the pond, but she sucked in a lungful of air and nodded.

He kissed her again softly, then leaned back and removed the pager from his pocket. He stared at the display. "I'm sorry. I have to make a call."

"Sure. That's okay."

Still tasting him on her lips and still heated by the blood surging through her veins, she pushed her hair back into a semblance of order. For the first time since he'd touched her, her brain was winning out over her hormones.

"This may be an emergency," he said.

Marina sat silently and watched him rummage in the bottom of the picnic basket until he found his cell phone. Each number he punched on the keypad beat her desires down another notch.

"Hi, Joyce. It's Brett. What's up?"

Concern spread over his face.

"Get him over to the emergency room so I can examine him," he said into the phone. "The abdominal pain may just be gas. But with the vomiting and a temperature that high, you may be right. It could be appendicitis. I'll have to see him before I can say anything definite. I'll leave right now and meet you there."

He closed the phone and turned toward her. "I'm off to the hospital. I'm sorry, Marina, but I don't have time to take you home. Do you mind waiting while I examine the boy?"

"Of course not."

She wanted to ask why he'd been so quick to recognize the number and call Joyce. But a tiny, irrational fear coiled inside her, and she wasn't sure she wanted to hear his answer.

Chapter Ten

At the hospital, Brett showed Marina to the doctor's lounge. "I've got to run to my locker. I'll be right back. Help yourself to a cup of coffee."

He returned wearing a white lab coat. A stethoscope was hooked around his neck, and a blue nametag with white lettering was pinned on the coat's lapel. He'd replaced his shorts with neatly pressed trousers.

"Joyce's neighbors just arrived. I may be with them for a while."

Marina noticed his transformation from a strong, casual man into a professional and efficient doctor and decided, if she were a parent, she'd feel confident trusting him with the welfare of her child.

"Don't worry about me," she said, patting the top of a magazine pile. "I'll find something to do."

He looked like he wanted to say something, but he just nodded and left.

She flopped onto an old leather couch that was softer than the one in her office, pulled a pencil, a notebook and a calculator from her purse, and jotted down a list of items to include in next week's newspaper ad. Then she sketched a rough outline of the ad. She opened the calculator to compute the discounted prices of the listed items and subtract her cost, but the fog gray display winked at her once and faded away. Dead batteries. Math had never been her favorite subject in school and usually gave her a headache. So after half an hour of pencil pushing, she decided her brain was too tired to continue. She stuffed her papers into the notebook and flipped it shut.

The coffee smelled as strong as the *café con leche* her grandmother served in one-ounce portions, but she poured herself half a Styrofoam cup and hoped it was decaf. She took a sip. The black ooze tasted as lethal as Abuela's too. After diluting it with four containers of artificial creamer, she wandered back to the couch with no question about whether or not she could use the concoction to keep herself awake if needed.

Around midnight, a doctor trudged in and asked, "Mind if I crash on the couch for a few minutes?"

She moved to a chair, and he stretched out and closed his eyes. Almost instantly, he began snoring.

She picked up a National Geographic magazine and flipped through the glossy pages.

Ten minutes later, the door opened and a nurse poked her head in. "Doctor, you're needed in the ER."

The man struggled to a standing position, went to the sink, and splashed some water onto his face. He dragged a paper towel across his eyes and cheeks, muttered something about sleep-deprivation and interns, then left.

Brett pushed open the lounge door a little before one o'clock. His eyes were bloodshot and weary. But the shadow of beard stubble gave a sensuous look to his jaw and cheekbones. Her pulse danced. He would probably look spectacular any time, any place.

"I'm going to be needed here for a while," he said handing her a key. "Take my car home and get some rest. I'll take a cab to the shop later and pick it up. I have another key, so don't be surprised when it's gone in the morning."

Marina felt a pang of disappointment. In her wildest daydreams she'd never imagined this date would end in a doctor's lounge.

"Is the problem the boy's appendix?"

"Yes, it's very close to rupturing. We're trying to arrange for an operating room and a surgeon."

"Call me tomorrow, and let me know how he makes out."

He rubbed his thumb over her chin. "I will, and Marina, thank you."

"For what?"

"For not getting upset that our evening together was cut short."

"Did you think I would?"

"Some women might feel slighted."

"I realize your work is important to you, and I respect you for your dedication. That boy is fortunate to have you as his doctor."

He slipped his hand around the back of her neck, drew her closer, and lightly kissed her. "I've got to get back, but I know you turn into a pumpkin at midnight or thereabouts. You might as well go get your beauty sleep."

Marina lay on her hard couch and tossed and turned under a light blanket. She pictured the details of Brett's face: the bold squareness of his chin, the sensuous curve of his lips, the deep blue of his eyes. Her pulse beat wildly at the base of her throat. She relived each kiss. Then relived them again. Her skin grew hot and sensitive.

The next morning she ached, and every muscle begged for mercy when she moved. Her eyes felt like they'd been rubbed with sandpaper. She remembered hearing Papa's ship's clock strike five the last time she rolled over.

A long, cool shower brought her fully awake.

She unlocked the shop's front door then moved a dozen empty air tanks from the pool area to the back room so they could be filled. She carefully checked all the hoses, pressure gages, and compressor fittings to avoid a catastrophic tank explosion. When she was satisfied the equipment would fill the tanks safely, she placed the first four in the water bath, hooked them up, and started the air compressor.

The bell over the door jingled.

She went out into the shop and walked to the customer browsing the wetsuit racks. “May I help you find something?”

The man spoke, but she raised a hand to cover a yawn and missed most of his reply. “I’m sorry.” She stifled another yawn. “Were you looking for anything in particular?”

The man frowned, shook his head, and left.

Marina watched the little bell over the door as it stilled and stopped ringing. She compared the bell to her body and decided she’d stopped functioning, too. She dragged herself into her office and slumped into the chair behind the desk. Releasing a huge sigh, she propped her elbows on the desk, rested her forehead on her hands and closed her heavy eyelids.

“*Gatita, gatita*, you killed him, *gatita*,” Ricki said, while riding a black and white stuffed whale that swam through the air at Papa’s gravesite. “All Papa wanted was for the shop to continue like before. But *you* had to spend all your time with that *doctor*. You cared more about him than saving the business.”

Ricki rode in circles around her, and she spun round and round to follow him.

“No! I’m working hard. Please, Ricki, it’s not my fault.”

He stuck his tongue out at her like when they were children.

The top of Papa’s coffin lifted and Papa sat up. He looked like a Halloween skeleton. Fires blazed in empty eye sockets, and a red-lettered baseball cap perched on top of his bony skull. He pointed a gnarly finger directly at her face.

“You’re not my daughter any more. I don’t want you. You’re letting my shop go to ruin. Don’t you think I know that doctor is more important to you than I am.”

He floated into the air next to Ricki and they both drifted away.

She jumped up and ran after them.

She ran and ran. Vicious wind clawed at tears burning down her face. Lungs bursting, she ran faster and faster. Then something slammed her face.

Her eyes flew open. Her face was planted firmly on the surface of the desk.

She was drenched in sweat, her forehead throbbed, her heart hammered against her ribs like she’d swam an Olympic race.

Raising her head, she dragged trembling fingers down her cheeks and shivered at the message in her dream. She never should have gone out with Brett. Her feelings for him were flying out of control, and she had to put an end to this impossible relationship now. She had to be stronger. She couldn’t let him kiss her again the way he had in the park.

The bell over the front door jingled, and she heard the sound of the door clicking shut. Was someone coming in? Or had she slept through someone entering and roaming the shop and now they were going out?

She jumped up, rushed out into the shop, and made a quick scan of the aisles. The shop was empty. Goose bumps bristled on her arms. Was the person who'd just left a shoplifter? She ran to the cash register. The money was there. She dashed to the display of expensive dive computers and checked the shelf for empty spaces. None. She counted the video recorders. Five. Nothing was missing. She let out a sigh of relief, closed her eyes and bowed her head over steeped hands. "Thank you."

The tanks filling in the back room!

Her eyes flew open, and she jerked her head up. How long had she been asleep? Overfilled tanks were time bombs if their relief valves stuck.

She sprinted for the back room. Her stomach twisted into a hard knot. Bursting through the doorway, her gaze shot to the pressure indicators. The needles were hovering just above the bottom edge of the red zones. They could explode any minute.

Fear raced icy over her skin. She sucked in deep, controlled breaths to keep oxygen flowing to her brain and mentally ran through her emergency checklist.

First things first. She quickly grasped a knob and turned off the compressor. Then she twisted the main relief valve handle to relieve the compressor pressure.

Hands trembling, she opened the relief valve on each individual tank to stabilize the tank pressures. Perspiration beaded on her forehead and rivulets of sweat trickled between her breasts. The needles on the gages moved painfully slow. Seconds ticked by. Out of the red. Into the green zones.

She breathed out a huge sigh. "Thank you again."

Adrenaline still zinging in her bloodstream and her breath roaring in and out of her lungs, she closed her eyes and sagged against the wall for support. Catastrophe averted. This time. But she had to stop allowing Brett to distract her.

She had to stop seeing him on Sundays.

Squaring her shoulders, she marched into her office, picked up the phone, and called the newspaper. She dictated her ad starting with two bold, banner lines:

Paradise Dive Center is now open seven days a week.

New Sunday hours 1 to 5.

Shortly after lunch, Marina answered the phone.

"Tommy's out of surgery and comfortable," Brett reported.

His voice sounded like a symphony to her ears.

"Thanks for letting me know."

Then remembering her resolution, she wet her lips and said, "I'm sorry, but I'm very busy. I really can't talk right now."

“Okay.” He said nothing for several seconds. Then he added, “I’ll talk to you later.”

She hung up the phone and looked across the shop. The aisles were empty and she felt the same.

After Tuesday’s class, Brett asked, “Would you join me for dinner?”

Exhilaration filled her chest. They could be together again. She yearned to take his hand and stroll out through the door.

She pictured the needles on air tank gauges sitting in the red zones. No, she couldn’t go, the shop had to come first. Her heart suddenly felt so heavy she was surprised it could even beat.

“I can’t take the time,” she forced out. “I was busy all day doing inventory, and now I have paperwork I need to finish.”

“Oh, paperwork, sure.” His tone was cold and unsympathetic.

All day Wednesday Marina worked around the shop. She tackled the jobs she had to do, but couldn’t summon up any enthusiasm. Her thoughts continually wandered to Brett. She missed seeing him laugh and feeling his touch.

After lunch, she pitched an expensive BCD to a customer. She knew she sounded like she’d memorized a brochure and guessed even Trish could probably do better.

“I’m surprised your boss lets you work here,” the man remarked, shaking his head. “I would think he’d hire a salesperson who was a little more animated. I heard this was a friendly place to do business, but I guess I heard wrong.”

She stammered out a lame explanation in her defense, and thought how mortified Papa would be if the incident ever got back to him. But the customer was lost, probably forever. He left empty-handed.

Every time she heard the bell jingle over the shop door, she jerked her head around in anticipation, hoping to see Brett stride in.

While she taught her evening class, she kept picturing his face. That night, the couch felt like stone and she felt just as lifeless and cold. She tossed and turned but hardly slept.

Thursday night, Brett watched Marina demonstrate neutral buoyancy techniques in the pool and admired her form. The air of authority in her voice and her professional manner as she directed the class were fascinating. But his mind wandered from the lesson. Her rejection of his dinner offer Tuesday grated on his mind.

Disheartened that she wouldn't take time out from her work to be with him and enjoy life, he debated his next move. Should he keep pursuing what he wanted or walk away and protect himself from more rejection? Each time she brushed him off as if he were insignificant in her life, choosing to step up and try again grew more difficult. He considered walking out the door, taking the path of least resistance, finding another woman who would actually appreciate his attention. It would be the smartest course of action. It would save him from the flashbacks to the sad and lonely days of his childhood.

An unsettling sense of loss settled in his chest at the thoughts of turning away. What was so special about Marina? Did he want her badly enough to continue laying his pride on the chopping block?

Telling himself he'd never been a quitter and should give her one more shot, he stayed after class and waited until they were alone. Then he stiffened his spine and asked, "Would you like to join me for dinner at Rosa's?"

She didn't answer right away. The ship's clock over the door loudly ticked off several seconds. Had she heard the question?

"Marina?" She raised her head, and he stared into the dark depths of her eyes. He wondered what was going on inside her beautiful head. "Would you like to join me for dinner at Rosa's?"

She moistened her lips and averted her gaze. "No thank you. I need to get some rest. I'm exhausted and have a pounding headache."

His heart flinched. "Oh. Okay. A headache tonight. I think I understand."

Stung by her cool dismissal, he turned and headed for the door. Outside, he stomped to his car. Why was he bothering? He seemed to be drawn to her like a moth to a spotlight, but he needed to rethink the attraction. She wasn't the only spotlight around. And in her case, changing course might be a smart move. They weren't headed for a long-term relationship, and persistence could lead to getting burned.

Chapter Eleven

Marina skipped breakfast and visited Papa early so she could get back and open the shop for her new Sunday hours. He droned on and on complaining about something of little interest. She stood staring out the window toward the nursing home's perfectly trimmed grass, occasionally nodding in agreement, frequently checking her watch, anxious for the moment he would be talked out and she could escape.

"Where is your mind, girl?" He shouted into her gloom. "You haven't heard a word I've said."

"I'm sorry Papa. What was it?"

"I asked if you ordered more stock for the new model year."

"Yes, Papa." She sighed and went back to staring.

"What is this? Are you mooning over a man? Are you still seeing that doctor?"

Her throat tightened. "No."

"Well, that's good at least. I don't need you forgetting about me."

Understanding jolted her. All his jibes about Brett in the last few weeks had been his way of accusing her of deserting him.

"Even if I did fall in love someday, Papa—" her voice started to crack, "—I would never desert you."

"Hah. Look what you've done to me already. You put me in this miserable place. You might as well have slit my air hose during a dive."

Marina turned from the window. "You need more care than I can give you at home. You know that. Who would run the shop while I was taking care of you?"

He caressed Ricki's baseball cap. Then in barely a whisper, he said, "Ricki was supposed to run the shop for me and take over when I wanted to retire."

She swallowed. "I know." Sad memories paraded before her mind's eye.

He blew his nose loudly. Silence grew thick in the room before he sat up straighter and a muscle flexed in his jaw. "Call your cousin Manuel. Joaquín's boy, not that other one in Cozumel."

Her parade of memories ground to a halt. She frowned. "Why?"

"Tell him I want him to take over running the shop when he gets out of school."

She stared at him in stunned silence. Her tongue felt numb. After several seconds, she managed to swallow and said in a tight voice, "You can't be serious. He's just graduating from college. He has no experience." *I'm ten times more qualified than a raw twenty-two-year-old kid.*

“He’s studying business. He’ll know how to handle money and our suppliers will respect him. He has a good head on his shoulders.”

The implication that she didn’t was as clear as the age spots on his wrinkled hands.

She crossed her arms tightly and stood wooden as a mannequin. “If he wants to learn the business, he can come work for me after he gets his degree. But I’m not turning over the shop to him.”

Papa’s eyes narrowed. “You’ll do as you’re told, girl.”

She didn’t like playing on his pride, but it was her only hope of winning this battle. She met his gaze without flinching and lied, “We don’t need Manuel or anyone else to come in and take over. It’s our family shop. You and I can handle it just fine alone.”

His face turned scarlet. “I need a right-hand man. What if you meet another doctor, desert me and the shop?”

“That’s not going to happen.”

He snorted and looked ready to explode. “A man sticks to business no matter what. But girls...*locas*.”

Worried his blood pressure was soaring, she said what he wanted to hear. “Okay, I’ll talk to Manuel.”

She clenched her teeth. She’d talk to him, but she wasn’t offering him the business on a silver platter. Period.

Temper heated close to a boiling point, she grabbed her purse. “I have to go now. I’ve started opening the shop for Sunday afternoon hours.”

“Good. It’s about time you did something that shows a little common sense.”

At twelve-thirty, Marina rummaged through the tiny refrigerator in her makeshift home. She didn’t feel like eating, but hoped a little food would give her a shot of much-needed energy. She found only a chocolate bar and a can of Coca-Cola, hardly a balanced diet, but certainly quick and easy. Eating the sweet chocolate, she thought about Brett and wondered if he was enjoying a more nutritious lunch. Like the picnic lunch they’d eaten in the park.

Memories of crunching carrot sticks and Brett keeping time with the music seeped into her mind. As she tossed the candy wrapper into the trashcan, she wished it was as easy to discard memories. She sighed and bit on the inside of her cheek.

She’d focus on the business and forget Brett.

She plopped behind her desk, picked up a stack of yesterday’s mail, and leafed through the envelopes. Judging by the telltale window, the last envelope probably contained a bill, but the return address was unfamiliar. Curiosity piqued, she ripped it open. Her breath whooshed out.

Marina read the charge confirmation for the seven hundred fifty-dollar plaque twice then slapped the invoice down onto the desktop.

Her hands balled into fists. Her smoldering anger at Papa's thoughtless, irresponsible spending reignited. The room became a suffocating dungeon. She'd implode if she didn't escape.

She stomped out of the office and slammed the door. Her footfalls drummed against the pool area tiles and echoed off the walls. At the edge of the pool, she yanked her shirt over her head, kicked off her shoes, and pushed her shorts down her legs. Snapping her arms up over her head, she dove into the water.

When she surfaced, she sucked in a quick breath, and then sprinted the length of the pool. She turned, pushed off the wall, and charged back. She raced from one end of the pool to the other again and again. Her heart pounded against her ribcage. She pulled furiously with her arms and worked her legs like motorized scissors. Anger drove her faster and further. Hot blood surged in her veins, and she moved in a blind frenzy.

She grabbed the edge at the shallow end of the pool, stood, and slumped over until her forehead rested on the cool tiles. Her whole body felt drained. Her breath came in rasping pants. A lump formed in her throat.

I'm not going to cry. I'm not. I'm not.

Clenching her teeth, she pushed off the wall in a back float. Emptiness settled in her chest. She stared at the skeletal gray strips of fluorescent lights hanging from the ceiling. The new bulb she'd just put in three days ago flickered and went out. The pool filter hummed a sad, monotonous tune, and the air smelled musty from the racks of salty rental wetsuits stored too damp.

Her crushing sadness gave her a sense of déjà vu. She had buried the period around her mother's death in the furthest corner of her mind. Yet vivid memories rolled out in quick succession and came to haunt her now.

All she'd known was that Mama had gone away and abandoned her. Intense fear had gnawed at the pit of her stomach all-day and sparked terrifying dreams at night. She couldn't understand why, and not understanding made things worse. But she was sure she was responsible for Mama leaving. Maybe if she'd picked up her toys, or been quiet during dinner, or not bickered with Ricki, Mama would have stayed with them instead of going to heaven. Over and over, she dreamed about making Papa unhappy. And then he went away and abandoned her too. Night after night, the same dream jolted her awake and she sobbed until her pillow was soaked.

And lying in bed in the darkness, she'd felt the same overwhelming sadness that blanketed her now.

Marina's heart ached. Papa should have realized back then how traumatic her mother's death had been for his children. But he'd been just as distant then as he'd been two hours ago.

Realizing the irony of their current relationship, she smiled wryly. She had outgrown her fear of him abandoning her, but now, he was afraid she would desert him.

She shook herself. Dwelling on the past was useless; she needed to focus on the present. Her mind's eye pictured the charge confirmation for Ricki's memorial plaque. She needed to sell some equipment this afternoon if she was going to earn the money to pay that bill.

She swam to the ladder, climbed from the pool, scooped up her clothes, and padded to her office. She stripped off her wet underwear then removed a dry bra and panties from a filing-cabinet drawer and glanced at the clock. In eight minutes it would be time to open the shop.

A tinge of regret induced a sigh. Instead of waiting on customers, she longed to slip into her white chenille robe and fuzzy slippers, curl up in her favorite rocking chair, and lose herself in a good book.

Brett is probably enjoying his day off doing something like that.

She imagined him in his cozy office reading a novel. No. He'd be relaxing in a patio lounge chair soaking in sunshine and his favorite music.

She rubbed a towel over her dripping hair and told herself to think about anyone but him. But her heart wasn't listening.

Brett stared at the print in the John D. MacDonald mystery. When the detective, Travis McGee, spotted a sexy woman in a string bikini strutting down a beach, Brett's mind's eye pictured Marina.

He shut the book with a thunk, pushed to his feet, and prowled into the living room. The pool water shimmered outside the sliding glass doors, and he imagined Marina's ebony hair shining even brighter. No distraction there.

He grabbed the remote and hit *power* as he flopped onto the couch. His thumb tapped the *up channel* button and he flicked past home shopping, ancient reruns of Lawrence Welk, a priest sermonizing from a pulpit, a real-time police chase, cartoons, and two British teams playing soccer. The PBS channel flashed into view with a documentary of divers exploring the Great Barrier Reef.

The last thing I need.

He punched the *off* button and tossed the remote onto the coffee table. Dammit, he was supposed to be pursuing interesting women and wringing every ounce of joy from life. Why the hell was he spending his Sunday wandering from room to room like a frustrated panther?

He clenched his teeth. He was going to get on with his life and not think about Marina anymore. And that was that.

The doorbell chimed. *Marina?* His heart missed a beat. He jumped up and yanked the door open, pulse pounding in anticipation.

"Oh...Joyce." His blood pressure crashed. "What a wonderful surprise."

"Is it? You look a little disappointed to see me."

Embarrassed by his rudeness, he managed a smile. “Not at all. It’s just that you’re the last person I expected.”

She held up a plate covered with a bulging sheet of aluminum foil. “I took a chance you’d be home and brought you some cookies.”

“I’m sorry, come in, please.” He arched his eyebrows and inclined his head toward the kitchen. “Your cookies are always delicious. Let’s go get some milk.”

He stepped aside, and she strolled into the house.

There was no need to show her the way. She turned right and started down the hallway. Her rubber-soled shoes squeaked on the tile floor. The familiar scents of baby powder and hand lotion followed in her wake. In a minute, she was sliding onto a stool at the breakfast bar. While she rustled foil and uncovered the plate, he removed a half-gallon jug of milk from the refrigerator and filled two tall glasses.

“This is great. Nothing hits the spot like your chocolate chip cookies and a big glass of ice-cold milk.” He eyed her white uniform slacks and a teddy-bear print smock. “Have you been working on a Sunday?”

“Two part-timers called in sick. We were critically short-handed.”

“And you jumped at the chance to get some hands-on time with the patients.”

She smiled. “Okay, busted. Being in charge is satisfying, but still, it’s nice to be able to reconnect with the kids occasionally.”

“How’s Joshua Glazier doing?”

“Fine. He can go home tomorrow.”

Brett nodded. He would examine the boy during morning rounds. But he’d probably agree with her recommendation. Joyce was seldom wrong about a patient’s condition.

“Cassandra Toomey?”

Joyce sighed. “A lot of pain today. She’s a brave little girl.”

“I’m considering a pre-op modification to her meds. I called Jake Harley for a consult. Do you know if he stopped in to review her chart?”

“Yes. He’s going to call you in the morning.”

They munched cookies and sipped milk in silence for a minute. Then Joyce said with hesitation in her voice, “This is just like old times, isn’t it?”

Memories rushed through his brain, towing a jumble of emotions best left dormant. “How have you been?”

“Busy. You?”

“Busy.”

“How’s Greg?”

“Doing well. He and I are both learning to SCUBA dive.”

“SCUBA diving? How did that happen?”

“He was spending too much time alone in his room. I’m giving him the lessons as a birthday present so he’ll get out and mix with people. We have a great instructor who handles his limitations very well. She’s really wonderful with him.”

“What’s that look on your face?”

“No look. We’re having a great time. Greg even has a crush on the salesclerk at the dive shop. She’s a senior at Ridley High.”

“It was bound to happen. All teenage boys have testosterone raging out of control.”

“It’s still under control. So far, he’s handling the attraction well. Trish isn’t put off by his disabilities. She seems like the perfect girl for him at this stage in his life.”

“It must be rough on him. I remember the guys I dated at that age. We played some great cat and mouse games. Learning those courtship rituals is all part of maturing.”

Brett’s thoughts wandered back to one of the many evenings he and Joyce had spent together at the beginning of their relationship. And a game of terrible teasing that ended with them playing in his shower, water sizzling off their blazing skin.

She seemed to have read his mind. “We had a lot of good times.”

“Yes, we did.”

“We could get back together again,” she suggested in a sultry tone.

He studied her eyes and felt a tug of temptation. A couple hours in bed might relieve his tension and wile away the afternoon. But pretending enthusiasm would make the aftermath more difficult. He’d be stirring old fires he’d have to extinguish again later. He squelched the idea. “Wouldn’t that be foolish?”

She dropped her gaze to her glass of milk. “You still feel the same way?”

He interrogated his heart to be sure. “Yes. Do you?”

“Yes.” She sighed. “What if you never find this perfect woman?”

“Then I’ll spend the rest of my life as a bachelor.”

“You really need a woman in your life.”

A chuckle bubbled up from his chest. “Spoken like a true female.”

She rolled her eyes and blew out her breath. Then she stabbed a finger on his arm. “You know, I’ve thought a lot about us. And I think I know your problem.”

He selected a cookie bulging with five large chips of chocolate, arched an eyebrow, and grinned, hoping to lighten her mood and steer the subject away from his relationships. Or lack of. “Are you branching out into psychology now?”

“Seriously, Brett, you’re searching for an enigma. You want a steel magnolia who smells, sounds, tastes, feels and acts like a buttercup. You’re attracted to women who are independent, emotionally strong and intelligent. But, before you commit, you want assurances she’s willing to give up her job and make

you, your marriage and a family the center of her world. Is it reasonable to expect someone with those qualities to do that?"

He pursed his lips. If she wasn't going to let it drop, he might as well enter the debate. "To me it is. That's how I'll know I've found the right one."

"You'd be more likely to find her if you would stop being so stubborn. You could compromise a little."

He shifted in his chair, increasingly uncomfortable with the direction of the conversation. "You know I've never been able to settle for less than one hundred percent, in myself or others."

"And because I'm too ambitious, I didn't pass muster."

He stalled for a second by chewing and swallowing then slowly taking a sip of milk. "Your career wasn't the whole problem. We both agreed that whatever we had was something other than love."

"Right, just a close friendship." Her tone sounded slightly bitter.

He wondered if he was lucky his short-lived relationship with Marina was over now, before her feelings got hurt or she became reluctant to let go. As Joyce was proving, when relationships got one-sided, they got sticky. He cleared his throat. "I'd like us to stay friends. Is it going to do any good to rehash this?"

The refrigerator clicked on and hummed. Ice cubes dropped into the freezer bin.

Joyce sighed. "Okay. I guess we're back where we were months ago."

"What about Roger Silverstein? I thought you were seeing him."

She shrugged. "He wasn't you." She looped a few strands of loose hair behind her ear. "So, have you met anybody?"

He felt an unexpected pang of regret. A week ago, he might have honestly answered *yes*. "No."

Her eyes settled on him. "That look is back again."

He pursed his lips and looked down, pretending to examine the cookies. "Your inclination to psychoanalyze is surfacing again."

"Okay," she said. "I'll drop it. I can see you're thinking about someone else, and I'm trying to resuscitate a flat-lined patient on life support."

He munched another cookie without really tasting it. Her persistence in coming here today surprised him, said their relationship had been more important to her than he'd believed. A year ago, the visit, and a few more like it, might have made a difference. But now, her metaphor was apt: the spark of life was gone. She'd slighted him too often. Her effort to show he mattered in her life was too little, too late.

She sighed and rose to leave. "Well, I'd better get going."

He sensed she wanted him to ask her to stay, but stood and walked her to the door.

She turned, rose on her tiptoes, and brushed her lips over his cheek. "We could be good together again. I'll be around if your new thing goes cold."

"I'm not sure there is anything to go cold."

“Want to talk about it?”

“No. Thanks.”

As he said the words, he realized he did want to talk, but with Marina. He wanted to be spending his day with her, talking, laughing, sitting in easy silence. She heated his blood, lightened his heart, made the sunshine brighter and music sweeter. With her, he felt a depth of emotions Joyce had never stirred.

A jolt of adrenaline shot into his veins. He shouldn't let this thing with Marina fizzle and die without a fight. He needed to be persistent and draw it out to a definite conclusion. The restlessness he'd been feeling all day was because a spark of life still existed and he couldn't walk away from Marina the same way he could walk away from Joyce. She mattered to him, and he couldn't give up on her yet.

Joyce squeezed his hand. “The typical male response. Don't talk anything out, just bottle it all up inside.”

He held the door open, waiting for her to go. “Don't be a stranger.”

“I'll bake more cookies as an excuse to come back. Maybe you'll need me to listen to your problems eventually.”

Wondering if that was true, he forced a smile and gave her a friendly peck on the forehead. “You're impossible.”

Her eyes found and held his. “Can I give you some advice?”

“No.”

She grinned wickedly. “Well, I'm going to anyway. I want you to be happy, if not with me, then with someone you love.”

“I'm doing fine.”

“No you're not. And you won't until you realize you can't always get exactly what you want. You can't always make other people into who you think they should be. Life is less frustrating when you accept that your dreams have limitations.”

Seeing an opportunity to counter-attack, he grinned. “When you were working toward Director of Nursing, you said just the opposite. That nothing is impossible and persistence is the key to success.”

Her bottom lip went out in a slight pout. “You know that was different.”

He laughed half-heartedly, took hold of her shoulders, turned her, and aimed her out the door. “Thanks for the cookies and the pep talk, Sigmund. You've messed around in my gray matter enough for today. Now scoot. Go psychoanalyze someone else.”

Late Tuesday morning, Marina walked into her office and got her first glimpse of the home page of the Web site Greg was designing for the shop.

Momentarily speechless, she shook her head and blinked. "This is unbelievable, Greg. I never expected anything so elaborate or professional looking. You're an absolute computer genius."

"Isn't it great?" Trish said.

"I had help with the artwork," Greg said. His cheeks were tinged with pink and his voice sounded humble, but his chest puffed out in pride. "Trish did the graphics."

The bell over the door jingled.

Trish jumped up and rushed for the door. "I'll take care of the customer."

"You both amaze me," Marina said.

Greg smiled ear to ear and his eyes had a strange glow as he watched Trish leave. "Trish has lots of talent for this sort of thing. Art, I mean. She's really fantastic."

Marina raised an eyebrow. "Maybe you should ask her out. I think she likes you."

Greg's smile vanished, and worry lines creased his forehead. "You mean like a date? I could never do that." He shook his head emphatically. "She wouldn't want to be seen with me."

"What makes you say that?"

"My chair, and my leg. I mean...she's really something. She probably goes out with the captain of the football team or some other super jock."

Marina heard the defeat in his voice and frowned. "You might be very surprised if you asked."

"Well, I'm not going to. I'd just feel like a fool when she..." He cast a furtive glance toward the doorway. "Can we just talk about the Web site? She might come back and hear us."

Empathy squeezed at her heart. He was so obviously unhappy and had as much to offer Trish as any basketball or football player. Rejection was always hard, but he should at least give it a shot. She realized even Sutherland determination must have limits, and wondered how many times she could turn Brett away before he would accept defeat too. Feeling a need to bolster Greg's courage, and her belief in Sutherland persistence, she opened her mouth to argue with him. But then she heard Trish's voice somewhere near the office doorway and decided to be prudent and honor his request. She turned her attention to the computer monitor.

"The home page seems to have all the information anyone would need to know about where we are and what we do." She pointed to the left side of the screen. "What's this over here?"

Greg moved the cursor over a menu item labeled *Travel Destinations* then clicked the mouse button. A map of the southwestern portion of the North Atlantic Ocean Basin appeared. Different colored little flags marked the locations of her affiliates' resorts and dive sites in Florida, the Bahamas, Central America and the Caribbean islands.

"When I'm finished, these flags will be links to the Web sites of all those resorts," he explained. "That way people can get information about the places they might want to go."

Greg clicked *Home*. The previous page reappeared on the screen and he skated around with the cursor. “They’ll be able to leave their name and e-mail address in this box so you can contact them. And over here, they can get driving directions to come into the shop and deal with you directly. This item is going to be a link to your class schedule.”

“You seem to have thought of everything. What’s that at the bottom?”

“Oh, that’s only temporary. I’ll delete it before we go live. It’s a link to a Web site and chat room for wheelchair jockeys. I posted some of those pictures you took of us in the pool for the other guys to see.”

“Could you set up a link to allow someone at that site to access ours? There may be some interesting feedback from those photos and someone may want to follow your lead.”

“Sure, I could set it up that way. I’d just have to contact the webmaster there and ask him to list you. The other thing I could do is include keywords so you’ll be picked up by robots and crawlers.”

“By what?”

Mischief danced in his eyes the same way it often did in Brett’s. She stifled the absurd desire to phone him just to hear his voice.

“Robots and crawlers. Some search engines want you to register with them so they know your site exists. Others use robot programs or programs called crawlers that go around and read sites. I’d just need to put in the right stuff for them to find.”

“Like what?”

“If I put words like *disabled*, *physically challenged*, *handicapped*, *paraplegic* and *wheelchair* in the HTML meta-tags, and somebody searches any of those subjects, your site will be displayed in the search engine’s results.”

A grin tugged at the corners of her mouth. “Okay, well, good, do that. The crawler thing, I mean. And ask for a link from any of those sites for people with disabilities that you visit. I’d like to have our site set up so your friends and other people in wheelchairs can get information on diving. I’ll bet a lot of people with disabilities never thought they might be able to learn.”

Greg’s face lit up. “Hey, you know something? You’re right. I’ve been to a couple chat rooms for veterans and amputees too. I told everybody about my lessons. They were all surprised I found an instructor. And a bunch of them were interested.”

Marina pursed her lips and tapped her fingers on the top of the computer monitor. Her brain raced, and a flutter of excitement brightened her mood. “Hmmm, let me think about this some more. Maybe I could come up with some special programs for them. I might be able to offer interactive classes so they could avoid traveling for the classroom portion and only need to get here for a block of pool sessions. Things like that.”

Trish entered the room. “Online classes would probably be great. I’m sure they’d want to come here for the pool, though. Greg told a couple guys about using your swing. They wrote back and said they wished they could try it.”

Marina laughed and rolled her eyes. “Fantastic, I’ll be famous for training the next Tarzan.”

Trish smiled. “There’s a lady out front to see you.”

“Okay, carry on.”

She walked into the showroom, instantly recognized an old friend from high school, and gave her a long, warm hug. “Wow, it’s been years, Delores. You look great. How have you been?”

“Pretty good. How’s your father doing?”

“About the same. A little grumpier.” Marina decided to preserve her upbeat mood by changing the subject. “What brings you to Paradise?”

Delores’s smile appeared full force. “I got a new job with the Palm Beach Post. Youth Section correspondent.”

“Oh, Dee, how wonderful. Congratulations. You must be thrilled to get away from editing obituaries.”

“I’m in heaven. Now I get to be out scouring up news. That’s how I finally got over to say hello. You get lots of teenagers in here. Would you get in touch if you hear of any stories I can use?”

Greg’s laughter drifted out from the office and an idea popped into her mind. “Does the paper still do an article on the Student Athlete of the Week?”

“Sure. It’s a favorite with both the parents and the kids.”

“Well then welcome to the right place.”

Chapter Twelve

Brett's excitement built as he carried his SCUBA gear aboard the dive boat. He deposited the gear in a heap on the long, flat aft deck then shot back to the municipal parking lot to make a second trip with Greg's gear. On his third trip, he helped Greg maneuver his wheelchair across the bumpy, gravel lot and onto the wooden dock.

As they waited near the stern of the boat on the warm and sunny morning, he blotted the perspiration from his forehead and squeezed Greg's shoulder. "Ready for real diving in the ocean?"

Greg nodded. "You bet."

He studied his nephew's demeanor closely. Greg looked calm and prepared.

Marina popped out of the small cabin and called to them, "You guys all set?"

Greg answered, "Let's do it."

Brett smiled and gave her a thumbs-up.

Captain Kurt and a crewman jumped to the dock. The captain shook Greg's hand and with a mischievous gleam in his eye said, "Don't worry, we've only dropped a couple people this week. Besides, it's a real nice morning for a swim."

"Great." Greg laughed. "Whose idea was this, anyway?"

The captain chuckled then nodded to the mate. They each grasped a side of the wheelchair and, in two seconds, Greg was on the deck of the boat.

Brett grinned, in awe of the fast action. He'd hardly had time to worry.

Trish arrived and loaded her equipment aboard.

The boat's engines roared to life, and the mate slipped the stern lines. The ride down the Intracoastal Waterway to the notorious Boyton Beach Inlet took less than ten minutes. The boat sped under the highway bridge and into wild, confused waves and white, churning water. Brett held on to a grab rail as the boat crashed along. Fighting to make headway against the rushing current, the powerful boat seemed to be going fast, but the shoreline crept slowly by. The captain maneuvered skillfully through the chaotic water. Then as quickly as the turbulence had started, it was gone. They were in the calm, blue waters of the Atlantic Ocean. The sea's surface undulated with lazy four-foot swells. An occasional whitecap reflected the sun's rays and sparkled like mica on a sandy beach.

"Gather around for the dive briefing," Marina announced. "We're going to a shallow site just off Terra Verde. It's the perfect place for your first open-water dives. There's an old wreck on the bottom in

about twenty-five feet of water. We'll descend by following the anchor line to the bottom and I'll have you demonstrate your mandatory skills, then we'll go explore the wreck. I think you'll find the open water a lot more fascinating than the walls of a cement pool. I'll let you know when it's time to suit up."

The boat rhythmically rose and fell in the swells, and Brett stood at the rail with a rush of wind hitting his face. Exhilaration quickened his pulse. He felt happy as a kite dancing in the trade winds.

He thought about the white lab coats, institutional corridors, and muted, pastel walls he'd lived within for years. Then he drew in a huge breath to savor the tang of salty sea air and erase the scent of hospital antiseptic.

The sunshine warmed his shoulders right through his shirt. Overwhelmed by the bold colors of the seascape, he squinted and stared at the horizon, where dark blue water met the light blue sky. Somewhere, just out of sight over the curve of the earth, were exotic places. Several gulls flew in that direction and he wished he could follow.

The bow of the boat rose sharply then sliced through the wake of a powerboat, and he swayed to stay balanced.

Watching a young couple steer an open sailboat across the waves, he remembered days spent sailing with his brother. They'd whiled away many summer vacations sailing their beach catamaran through the water so fast one hull would fly high in the air.

Thoughts of how quickly time passed, and how much of it was wasted, reminded him of his vow to make the most of every day. He should be spending more time like this, enjoying simple fun and simply enjoying life. Tourists came from all over the world to enjoy Florida's coastline, but this was the first time since high school he'd taken the time to be on the ocean.

He climbed the ladder to the flying bridge, spread his feet to brace against the boat's motion, and clasped a hand tightly around a stainless-steel rail.

"Nice day out here, Captain," he commented.

The captain nodded. "Sure is. Your group's lucky. Been calm all week. You'll have good visibility."

"Do you make the trip out here often?"

"Every weekend and holiday. Occasionally a weekday."

"Does Marina teach that many classes?"

"I work with other shops beside hers. One in Cocoa, another in Orlando. Between all of them, I stay busy."

Brett watched the spray flying in a huge semi-circular pattern radiating from under the bow as the boat sped over the sea. "How big a boat would I need to do some weekend diving on my own?"

"Depends. How many people you taking along?"

"One other person, at least. Better still, a total of four."

“A twenty-two footer should do. That’ll give you space for people, tanks, and gear. ’Course, something bigger is better in a seaway.”

Brett glanced around, studying the equipment on the dive boat for a minute. “My only boating experience was a little beach catamaran back when I was in high school. What makes a boat good for diving?”

“Almost anything will do with the right accessories, like tank racks, rails and a swim platform. I got a friend Ed at Poe Marine Sales. He’s honest as they come. And a diver himself. Go see him, he’ll steer you right.”

“Sounds good. Ed, at Poe Marine.”

The captain chuckled. “Ed’s last name’s Allen. Edgar Allen. He named the place Poe Marine as a hoot.”

Brett nodded. “That should make remembering it easy.”

He turned toward the stern. Marina walked onto the aft deck below him. She looked sexy in a sleek, white bathing suit that accentuated her honey-colored skin. Her cheeks were rosy, and her ebony hair blew freely in the breeze. He stared transfixed as she squeezed a puddle of white sunscreen into her palm then began smoothing the lotion over her arms.

His hands itched to help. He still felt the warm embrace of those slender arms and the softness of her skin under his fingertips.

“She’s a real eyeful,” Captain Kurt remarked.

The sunshine made the hair around her face shimmer. She put her foot up onto a deck chair and bent to reach her calf with a handful of lotion. She looked tantalizing, and he definitely wanted to help. His pulse accelerated.

He remembered the man standing next to him and said, “Yes, she sure is.”

“I’ve been trying to drop anchor at her place for years.”

“What?” Recalling Marina’s glowing praise of the Captain, dread pressed in on his chest. He wondered if he’d been the third corner of a triangle, and visions of being trolled behind this boat as shark bait flashed through his mind. “Are you two involved?”

“Nah.” The Captain laughed and slapped him on the back. “You won’t be stepping on my toes. Give it a shot. We went out a couple times. But she’s too wrapped up with her daddy and his shop. I need somebody up for partying at a minute’s notice.”

Brett’s gaze was glued to Marina. She replaced the cap on the sunscreen and looked up toward the flying bridge. Their eyes met. She glanced away, then quickly looked back again. Longing rippled through him. His blood raced through his veins, and a silly grin tugged at his cheeks. The sky and sea seemed beautiful. The world seemed right. But why did he get the wind knocked out of his sails when he thought she and the Captain were a couple?

Suddenly, a thought slapped him in the face: *My God, I'm dangerously close to the futile and stupid mistake of falling in love with her. I'd better remember she's married to her job and be careful.*

The crew anchored the boat less than a quarter mile off Terra Verde's beach.

Marina instructed Brett, Greg and Trish, "Let's suit up."

She wiggled into a lime green wetsuit with a white seashell pattern on the sleeves and glanced at Brett. The muscles in his bare back rippled as he helped Greg dress. She dragged her eyes back to her pile of gear then strapped her black-sheathed knife to her calf, attached her dive computer to her wrist, and wrapped her weight belt around her waist. Keeping one eye on her students, she checked the big accessory ring clipped to her BCD. Slate, underwater pencil, light stick, camera and compass. All accounted for.

Satisfied her students were doing everything properly, she assembled the tank and regulator with her yellow BCD then sat and snuggled backwards into the unit. She adjusted the straps then situated her mask and snorkel, donned her favorite pair of bright, neon-yellow fins, and pulled on her iridescent, yellow gloves.

"Wow, you're certainly colorful," Brett remarked.

"Thank you, but it's by necessity as well as personal choice. The bright colors are like beacons underwater. Even distracted students can usually keep me in sight."

"With or without bright colors, I'll be watching your every move."

The wind ruffled his hair and his eyes crinkled in a mischievous grin. She tried to ignore the fluttering of her heart and concentrate on teaching. "Okay everyone, check your buddy's equipment and move back onto the swim platform. Are you ready to become divers?"

"Yes," echoed three times. Greg's was loudest. Trish sounded slightly apprehensive. She made a mental note to watch her closely underwater.

On the swim platform, Brett and Trish partially inflated their BCDs and put their regulators into their mouths. Marina demonstrated the giant stride entry, popped up, and arched her arm until her fingertips touched her head. Kurt returned the *okay* signal, and then she said to Brett and Trish, "That's how you enter without a jungle grapevine. Now impress me with what you've learned."

The pair took a giant stride off the stern platform and signaled *okay*. Kurt lifted Greg, gear and all, from his chair and launched him over the gunwale. He popped up with a huge grin around his regulator and signaled *okay*.

Swimming toward the bow of the boat and the anchor line, the eighty-degree water seeped into her wetsuit and she settled into familiar procedures. Everyone held on to the anchor line and seemed comfortable, so she brought two fingers together then gave a thumbs down signal telling them to buddy-up and submerge.

She hovered a few feet from the line and scrutinized her class. They followed the anchor line exactly as she'd instructed, moving downward, hand over hand, and equalizing the pressure in their ears frequently.

On the white, sandy bottom, she circled the little class and asked them to perform exercises demonstrating their mastery of the required skills. In turn, each student removed, replaced, and cleared the water from their masks. Then they dropped the regulators from their mouths, recovered, cleared and breathed again. Trish's confidence level seemed to increase with each completed exercise, and Marina felt less apprehensive about her adjustment to open water.

Satisfied with their competence, she signaled for them to adjust the air in their BCD's to attain neutral buoyancy then follow her on a tour around the wreck. She swam slowly, and they seemed captivated by the boat's ribs encrusted with red and yellow corals. They toyed with wide-eyed fish living among the wreck's remains and gazed at the purple sea fans and lacy Gregorians that waved lazily in the slight current undulations caused by the motion of the surface waves.

Three people who'd grown to be very special were seeing the world she loved for the first time, and she was relieved the water was clear today. She felt a bubbly sense of joy to be sharing this beautiful world.

After exploring for twenty minutes, she checked her dive computer and air tank pressure gauge. She looked back up to signal her students to check theirs. Greg was gone.

Her heart leaped into her throat and, in a split second, her pulse rate doubled. She spun in a circle, frantically searching for him.

Memories of Ricki, separated from his buddy and lost, speared through her brain. No, Greg had to be here somewhere. She'd only looked away for a minute. He couldn't get far.

She turned back toward Brett and Trish and signaled her question. Brett must have already realized the reason for her concern. His eyes were searching too.

Trish tapped her on the shoulder and pointed. Greg poked out from behind a coral head, a huge grin on his face as he pointed at a retreating nurse shark.

Relief stole her breath. She waved him over to rejoin the group. Then she gave him an exaggerated scowl and raised her hands with her two index fingers side by side, letting him know her disapproval was the result of his leaving his buddy.

His expression went contrite, and he nodded.

The incident over, she signaled everyone to check their air pressure gauges. Greg held up nine fingers. She'd suspected Greg would have the least air because he used more upper body strength to do the same work as the rest of the group. But at nine hundred pounds of air, he was getting too close to the safe five hundred pound minimum, so she led them back to the anchor line and gestured a thumbs up for them to start their ascent.

They popped above the surface and swam to the boat's stern platform. Kurt and the mate hoisted Greg aboard with the air tank sling. Marina kept Brett and Trish treading water.

When Greg was settled on the swim platform, she said, “Okay, Trish, you’re first. Hand up your fins then climb the ladder.”

With all her students safely aboard, she climbed out and joined them. “Fantastic job, everyone. What do you think of diving now?”

They all burst out laughing and talking. Greg said louder than anyone else, “Did you see that awesome shark?”

Marina couldn’t decipher most of the confused conversation, but a warm glow spread through her, and she realized she lived for this moment with every class.

She peeled off her soggy wetsuit and towed herself dry then pushed her damp hair off her face. For a brief minute, she closed her eyes, tilted her head back, and welcomed the penetrating warmth of the sun.

Slipping back into instructor mode, she checked that everyone had secured their tanks so they wouldn’t roll, then gave Kurt an *okay* signal.

He snapped her a small salute, started the engines, and weighed anchor.

She debriefed the group. “Okay, everyone, let’s calculate the minimum required surface interval time. How long do you have to remain out of the water before you can dive again?”

She checked their answers and agreed. She called up to the flying bridge. “Captain, we’ll need at least forty-four minutes.”

He nodded, pulled back a little on the throttle, and proceeded at a more leisurely speed toward the next dive site.

Suddenly, Trish screamed and pointed overboard. “Look! Look!”

Only five feet from the boat, a bottlenose dolphin shot skyward from the water. Turning in mid-leap, she appeared to peer back at them. Then she fell back into the water causing a towering splash. Another pair of adults and a calf surfaced and wiggled their tails as if sending a greeting.

Kurt shouted. “Eyes forward. Four more at the bow.”

Greg grabbed the boat rail, pulled himself up to a standing position and craned his neck forward to get a better view.

Racing with the boat and weaving smoothly from port side to starboard side, the pod of dolphins frolicked in the pressure wave at the bow for several minutes. The two calves kept close to the adults and practiced the maneuvers that would keep them safe around boats in the future.

Marina tapped lightly on Brett’s forearm. He turned, and she motioned toward Greg.

He turned his head toward Greg, and when he turned back to her, a broad smile lit his face. Their eyes met, and he lifted a finger and held it vertically in front of his lips. She nodded.

A minute later, one of the dolphins jumped clear of the water in the boat’s wake, and as suddenly as they’d appeared, they were gone.

Greg lowered himself into his chair, and Marina saw him beaming and exchanging looks of pride with Brett. A warm glow of affection for both of them swelled in her heart. And the pain of having to exclude a warm and compassionate man like Brett from her life speared into her like a dagger.

“Did you see that big one?” Trish asked. “He was a real acrobat.”

“Yes *she* was,” Marina said. “The adults were all females.”

“How could you tell?” Brett asked.

“Males never swim with the females when they have young ones. So, if you see calves, the pod is all females.”

Greg and Trish wandered off.

Brett chuckled wryly. “The male dolphins sound like my father. Off traveling while the kids are raised by their mother.”

“What did your father do?”

“When I was young, he sold industrial equipment to factories all over the country. He was gone so often that, until I was about five, I didn’t understand he lived with us. Later he started his own textile business and worked seven days a week.”

“Not exactly the kind of father you seem to want to be,” she said softly.

“Definitely not. My children will know what I look like.” He stared toward the horizon for several seconds. “I want them to know what *both* their parents look like.”

His determined tone was further evidence she and Brett could never share a future.

At the next dive site, the divers strapped on full air tanks and repeated the procedure of splashing into the water. Marina studied the faces of each student for panic as they all slowly descended the sixty feet to the reef. The deeper water was cooler and the visibility was even better than at the wreck.

Hovering over the reef, Marina buddied Greg with Brett and, with a warning to stay together in her eyes, handed him the line attached to the float the dive boat was following. She buddied with Trish and led the way. At sixty feet, she knew the air supply would be used quickly with any exertion, so she guided them slowly and let the northward flowing current sweep the group along. Schools of tiny blue tangs and striped damselfish scattered before them. Multicolored corals and magnificent elkhorn formations passed majestically below. Marina tapped her mask and pointed out the head of a green moray eel protruding from a fissure in the rocks.

She wrote on her slate and held it up for them to read:

Green moray, not friendly, keep your distance!

Obviously enjoying his weightless environment, Greg sprinted toward a school of yellowtail snapper. The school instantly separated into four smaller groups. He rolled into a graceful turn and swam back to rejoin Brett.

Marina's heart swelled with pride and admiration, and she smiled around her regulator. He'd learned to be a proficient diver. And the credit for that achievement was mostly his. Greg's determination to overcome his disability was the key to the success of her teaching efforts.

After watching a stingray pass by and scaring a couple lobsters into a backwards escape dance along the sand, Marina wrote on her slate, *bottom time's up* and drew a frowning face beside the message. She flashed the message to everyone then signaled thumbs up to start their ascent.

She was pleased when all three students remembered to pause for the decompression safety stop without the need for her to remind them. She hovered with them at a depth of twenty feet.

Brett faced her. She checked her watch; there was nothing to do but hover and stare at each other for three minutes. What was he thinking? Was she in his thoughts like he was constantly in hers? Did his mind keep returning to the carnival and the park? She covered her nervousness by counting down the minutes until they could surface safely. But she couldn't resist the temptation to gaze at his face. His eyes were shining so enthusiastically that the pinpoints of light reflected in them seemed to dance. His long lashes swept closed and up again with mesmerizing grace. Longing ate at her soul. She glanced at her watch; the stop was over. She gave another thumbs up, and they surfaced.

Back aboard, she smiled and said, "Congratulations. You've passed the first half of your test. We'll do a similar routine tomorrow with you demonstrating different skills."

Greg beamed. "That was so super. Imagine, at first I had this dumb idea I didn't want to learn."

Trish said, "It's great. If I knew how fantastic this is, I would have learned to dive years ago."

Brett laughed. "I know exactly what you mean, Trish. Even in the pool, it's hard to imagine how great it is out here."

Seeing Brett's pleasure, a wonderful feeling of shared excitement made her day grow even brighter.

Kurt started the engines and turned the boat toward Boynton Inlet.

She debriefed her students, and then had them break down their gear. She sat on deck with them and listened while they discussed their underwater adventures. Brett's voice was intoxicating, and she wished the afternoon could last forever.

But in what seemed like only a matter of minutes, the tall hotels along the Boynton Beach shoreline appeared as bumps on the horizon. And before she knew it, they were at the docks.

Brett carried his gear and Greg's gear across the municipal parking to his car. Then he announced, "I'm buying burgers. You're all invited." He turned and met her eyes. "Especially you, Marina."

Her heart leapt.

A late lunch with Greg and Trish as chaperones couldn't hurt, could it?

Then she remembered she was paying someone to mind the store and the sooner she sent him home, the less she'd have to spend on payroll. She suddenly felt like she was made of lead.

"I'm sorry. I can't. I have work to get back to. But thank you."

Brett turned away. "How about you Trish, are you game?"

"Yeah, great. I'm starved."

"You and Greg jump in my car, then. We'll leave yours here, and come back for it later."

Trish rushed off with Greg, helping him get his chair through the gravel lot.

Brett's eyes collided with hers and she was frozen by his stare. She wasn't sure if the darkness she saw was hurt or anger or both.

She swallowed the lump in her throat. "Remind them to be here the same time tomorrow morning."

He nodded. "Yeah, see you then."

She watched him walk away and wanted to cry as he drove away without her.

The boat brought them back to the dock after the last required open-water dive trip, and Marina told Brett, Trish and Greg, "Congratulations, you're all officially certified open-water divers. I'll sign your logbooks now and you can pick up your temporary certification cards at the shop. The permanent cards will be mailed to you."

Greg whooped.

Trish did a cartwheel and then pumped her arms in a cheer, "Yay, team...yay, team."

Claudia arrived, congratulated all three of them, and fiercely hugged her son. "I'm so glad you did this. I hope now you can see how much you're capable of doing and you'll reconsider other activities like getting your license to drive the van."

"I've been thinking about that. If we can afford to get the van modified, I want to try."

Claudia's and Brett's mouths dropped open.

Marina noticed Claudia glance at Brett.

"I think we can do that," Brett said. "I'll look into it tomorrow. After we get a lift added, we'll contact some driving schools."

"I know of a good one, Academy Driving over on Sixth Avenue," Trish said.

A mischievous smile spread across Greg's face. "Is that where you learned to park?"

Trish punched him playfully on the shoulder.

"Hey," he yelled, laughing and massaging the spot.

"I want to be there and see how well you parallel park that big van on your first try, bobble head. Then we'll see if you can talk nasty about my driving."

"No fair beating up on somebody in a wheelchair."

Trish punched him again then dashed beyond his reach. “I saw you in the water. You’re not so bad off.”

“Wait,” he told her. “Next time we dive, you’re in big trouble.”

She chuckled. “Oh yeah? We’ll see.”

Marina laughed at the exchange.

Brett stood beside her and smiled.

Trish, waving and blowing her car’s horn, drove out of the municipal parking lot.

Claudia and Greg pulled onto the roadway too.

Brett slipped his fingertips into the back pockets of his snug jeans. “Well, now that I’m officially certified and classes are over, I guess I’ll have to think up other excuses to come by and see you.”

With the end of his classes, her bi-weekly temptation to date him ended also. She knew she should be relieved to be able to concentrate solely on the business again, but instead, sadness squeezed like a vice on her heart. With a growing sense of loss, she groped for any way to keep him coming back to the shop on a regular basis.

“You could continue with another class. I’m scheduling an Advanced Open Water class as soon as I get a couple more students. That includes night dives. The reefs are even more fabulous after dark.”

“How do you see them?”

“Lights.”

“When does that class start?”

“I haven’t set a date. I only have three students so far. I normally like to have at least six in a class.”

She realized that if he signed up she’d do everything humanly possible to make sure the advanced class started soon. Not because she wanted to date him, of course, but because he’d be paying for a class. And that would be income for the business.

“I have another Open Water class finishing next week. A couple students from that group might be interested in continuing too.”

“I’m in,” he said. “Organize a class quickly. But for now, let’s walk on the beach. It’s still early, and I’m too energized to go home.” He reached out and took her hand.

A quiver shook her, but she smiled, and tried to conceal her breathlessness. “You mean speeding around on a pounding powerboat didn’t relax you? I thought men liked that sort of thing.”

He brought her hand to his mouth and gently kissed her fingers. “Hanging on for dear life got my adrenaline flowing, but now I need to be with you. I need to listen to your voice and walk with you in the surf.” His husky tone and the warmth in his eyes made her knees go rubbery. “That will make my day almost perfect.”

She thought of other things more intimate than a walk that would also make an almost perfect day become perfect. “I’d love a walk,” she said, ignoring the little voice telling her to go home.

Chapter Thirteen

Marina held on to Brett's hand. They crossed the municipal parking lot and the bridge over the Intracoastal Waterway. Kurt was rinsing off his aft deck at the dock below. He looked up, saw them and waved.

Brett gave him a small salute, and Marina wondered at the strange smile on his face.

A narrow finger of land separated the businesses fronting on the Waterway from the ocean. They walked over the dunes to a strip of white sand beach and slipped off their shoes. Strolling hand in hand, they wandered along the foamy surf line. Tufts of his hair blew freely in the breeze, and his skin was rosy from the day's exposure to the sun. She felt warmth and strength in his grip and wished this day would never end.

"Do you have any new beginner classes starting soon?" he asked.

"Not yet."

"Does that mean you'll have Tuesday and Thursday nights free?"

"I'm afraid not. I really need to do an inventory of my sportswear and order new stock. I've just been putting it off because I hate the paperwork. Styles change practically overnight. A lot of my customers are high school or college-aged, and they want whatever's hot at the moment. I'm also planning an underwater photography class that will meet one night a week."

"You work too hard. You should schedule a regular day off."

"That would disturb my rhythm."

Ahead of them, terns raced along on the hard packed sand, picking up tiny morsels behind receding waves. More than anything, she wanted to spend long days and nights with Brett, but she knew she'd have to be satisfied with tiny morsels, too. Morsels like a walk on the beach.

"Besides," she continued, maintaining her resolve to focus on the business, "right now, I'm swamped. My cousin Manuel is graduating from college soon, and I invited him to work for me in the shop while he looks for a permanent job. But until he gets here, I have to do most of the work myself. When sales were better, I had two other instructors to teach classes and sell equipment. Now, I can only afford one, and he's only part-time."

She wondered where she would find the money to pay Manuel. The bright sun reflecting on the surf triggered an idea. If she could finance the purchase of solar panels to heat the water in the pool and

showers, she could save enough electricity to cover the loan payments plus reduce her operating expenses. Then maybe she could shift a few dollars from there to payroll.

Her breath whooshed out. No bank would give her a loan for the initial investment. She'd just have to pray harder for business to improve.

"Is business that bad?"

She laughed wryly. "Bad? It's pathetic. I try to sound like everything is fine when I visit Papa, but just between us, sales are miserable. I hardly have enough cash flow to keep a half step ahead of the bill collectors."

"I could loan you some money."

Annoyed by his offer, she stiffened. "No thank you. I'll manage."

They skirted around a dead horseshoe crab lying upside down in a line of broken shells and seaweed. The breeze spread the pungent odor.

"I've been thinking," Brett said. "Now that I have my certification, I should probably buy some new equipment."

Marina frowned. "Why? You have very good gear."

"Well, sure, it's serviceable, but new stuff would be nice."

She stopped, dropped his hand and planted her fists on her hips. "Does this brainstorm have anything to do with the fact that I could use the money?"

He looked a little sheepish. "Not entirely."

"Well, don't buy new equipment on my account. I can survive without your charity."

Hot, Latino blood gushed to her brain and she stomped away from him.

He grabbed her arm. "It's not charity. I can see you're in trouble."

"Oh? And you're the knight-with-shining-wallet who's going to save me?"

"I'm just trying to help."

"Did it ever occur to you that maybe, I don't need your help, maybe I'm capable of handling my problems by myself?"

"I never said you couldn't."

"You may as well have." A tidal wave of pent-up anger surged in her veins. "You took the typical male attitude. A woman can't make it in business. A man's got to jump in and help her."

"Why did you mention things were so bad unless you were looking for solutions?"

She yanked her arm from his grasp. "I thought you were offering a sympathetic ear."

"Why not accept my help? Then you could do more than talk about your problems. You could solve them."

She narrowed her eyes to slits and flexed her jaw. "You just don't get it, do you?"

"Get what?"

“I can solve my problems myself. And I will.”

He threw his hands into the air. “Women!”

“Men!”

She gritted her teeth and marched back to the municipal parking lot. At the car, she spun around. He was two steps behind her. “Good day, Doctor Sutherland.”

Marina slammed the dive shop door behind her, stomped to her office, and dropped down into a chair. Why did men always have to act so superior?

She squared her shoulders; working would help vent her anger. She grabbed the newspaper off the desk and flipped it open. Turning each page with a satisfying snap, she searched for her new advertisement.

But her eyes locked onto a different ad. She stared in horror at the bold, two-inch numbers. The competition had lowered their lesson prices again.

She crumpled the paper against the desktop and growled through clenched teeth. “Damn. Damn. Damn. If I meet that price, I might as well *give lessons away*.”

Closing her eyes, she inhaled deeply and slumped against the back of the chair.

A mountain of self-doubt weighed down her shoulders. The business was facing a long slow death. Should she just give up? Had Papa been right all along? Was she crazy to ever believe she could run the business as well as he had?

An intense throbbing pounded inside her skull, and she pressed her fingers against her temples trying to alleviate the pain.

Suddenly, her own words came back to her. *I might as well give lessons away*.

Opening her eyes wide, she cackled like the Wicked Witch of the West. “So you want to lower your prices, do you? Well my little pretties, two can play that game. If I’m going bankrupt anyway, I might as well go down fighting.”

She picked up the phone and speed dialed the Palm Beach Post. When her advertising agent’s voice mail started recording, Marina left a message.

“Mona, this is Marina Hernandez at the Paradise Dive Center. Please call me. I want to change my ad again. I want it to say that when a customer purchases more than two hundred and fifty dollars worth of equipment, they’re going to get SCUBA lessons absolutely free. When they buy a wetsuit, they’ll get a pair of booties free. When they buy a dive computer, they’ll get an extended warranty free. When they buy a mask and snorkel, they’ll get a dive knife free. When they buy a pair of fins, they’ll get four air-fills free.” She paused to catch her breath. “And just for good measure, double the size of my ad. I want the word *free* all over it in big, bold letters. Free, free, free, free, free.”

The response to her new ad was fast and overwhelming. Customers flooded into the shop. The first day she sold three complete SCUBA outfits, a dive computer and four wetsuits. The second day, two more complete outfits sold, along with five wetsuits, a dive computer and three masks with snorkels. The third day, the couple who bought gear and qualified for free lessons booked a honeymoon dive trip to Bonaire.

By the end of the week, sales revenues were up sharply, and she was filling her lesson schedule with new beginners and advanced classes.

The following Tuesday morning, she made out the work schedule for the coming week and put her part-time instructor back on full-time. Then she called Dave Rodgers, one of her former instructors who had defected to the competition.

“Dave, this is Marina. I was wondering if you’d come back and teach my next Open Water class.”

“Sure, I’ve had enough of this place. I’d much rather work for you than these chain store guys.”

A few minutes later, Marina finished framing the newspaper article that appeared last Sunday. She hung the article on the wall behind the checkout counter and wondered how long it would take Greg to notice his picture under the banner declaring him the Student Athlete of the Week.

Trish squinted at the article then she stepped closer and pointed to the last paragraph. “My friends thought it was awesome that I got honorable mention as one of his dive buddies. And they all wanted to hear about the dolphins.”

“They’re wonderful animals. Seeing them was a real bonus.”

“A lot of people must have read the part about pictures of Greg diving being posted on the shop’s Web site. He said the photo gallery page has been getting hundreds of hits.”

Marina nodded. “Some of yesterday’s customers said they became interested in the shop after reading the story.”

Marina left Trish at the checkout counter and went into her office. Greg looked up from the computer and smiled ear to ear.

“Guess what, two more wheelchair jockeys just signed up for lessons.”

Her heart warmed at the prospect of teaching a class for the disabled. She felt so satisfied after training and certifying Greg that she was anxious to work with other special-needs students.

“Our Web site is amazing. You’re a wizard,” she told him. “I never could have done this without you.”

“Getting modern was a great idea. Your business will be booming in no time. Young people dive the most, and they’re all online.”

“That’s probably true.” She laughed. “My father refused to utilize the Internet for years. I’m glad that, this time, I ignored his advice.”

She paused for a minute, taking pride in her decision. With the new Web site and the new advertisement, she was proving she was capable of managing the shop and attracting customers as a result of her own initiatives. Now when Papa's criticisms threatened to weigh her down again, she had confidence and self-esteem to buoy her spirits.

She held her head high. She'd also found the perfect niche market. Teaching disabled students required extra time and effort the big chain dive shops weren't willing to give. But a small shop like Paradise could specialize in providing exactly that kind of personal attention.

Greg interrupted her musings. "Hey, Marina. Guess what?"

A twinge of unease raced through her mind remembering Papa's guessing game about Ricki's plaque, but Greg was beaming and her curiosity was piqued. "I'm a terrible guesser. What's up?"

"Trish asked me to be her date for her prom."

Marina impulsively hugged him and ruffled his hair. "Oh, Greg. How wonderful. See, I knew she liked you."

He averted his eyes, and his cheeks turned a mottled pink. "I guess maybe she does, but a prom? Wow. That's something I never expected."

"You'll have fun, I know you will."

"I hope so. It's gonna be strange seeing all those kids dancing. But Trish says she'll teach me to move my arms and the upper half of my body." He demonstrated by rocking in his chair and jerking to an imaginary rhythm. "She expects me to get out on the dance floor, chair and all." His eyes dimmed. "That's going to look really weird."

"You're not thinking about turning down the invitation, are you?"

"I really want to go. I like Trish." He lifted his shoulders and pursed his lips. "But what if I embarrass her in front of all her friends?"

"The people who matter are the ones who will welcome you and accept you as you are. Trish is someone who matters. She must want you to go. She asked you."

He grinned, and his eyes were merry again. "I know. And that's why I'm going. She's the only girl I've ever really liked. I'd be pretty stupid to refuse."

"Have you told Brett?" After not seeing him for eight days, she felt a huge stab of pain just saying his name. But she forced herself to keep smiling.

"No. I'm going to tell him when I see him tomorrow."

She wished she could be there to share Brett's joy when he heard the news. "Well I know he'll be thrilled. I'm sure he'll be able to help you rent a tux and all that men's stuff."

"I hope so. Do you think he knows what the popular styles are, though? I mean, he dated the same nurse for four years. It was almost like they were married. He was out of the bachelor scene for a long time before he met you."

“Did you know her?” she asked, cocking her head to one side and immediately chiding herself for using Greg to satisfy her jealous curiosity.

“Sure. Joyce came to our house with Uncle Brett a couple times. She was nice. She still comes to visit me when I’m in the hospital for surgery.”

Marina flicked her hair away from her face. She had to get that man out of her mind forever. She turned and left the office. Greg was in there. And Trish was in the showroom. And she had nowhere to go and cry.

After the last patient left his office, Brett removed his lab coat and stethoscope, rolled up his sleeves, and drove toward Marina’s shop. He tapped his fingers against the steering wheel and split his concentration between traffic and the best strategy to get his relationship with her back where it was before he’d offered to loan her money.

He walked into the shop and spotted her standing behind the checkout counter. She turned toward him, and he flashed her his most charming smile. A joyful look lit up her face and sparked a wild pounding in his chest. But after a few brief seconds, her expression turned guarded, and the wild pounding under his ribcage slammed to a halt.

Approach A, being charming and acting as if everything was fine, wasn’t going to work. He mentally shifted to Approach B, all business.

He walked to the counter. “I came to pick up my certification card.”

She pulled a paper card from a drawer, signed it and pushed it across the counter to him as if he had the black plague.

“I’ve been wondering when you’d come in for it.”

“Are you still mad at me?” he asked, giving charm another shot.

“No.”

Her chilly tone contradicted the answer. A lump formed in his throat, and he felt as tongue-tied as a gangly teenager.

She picked up a bottle of glass cleaner, sprayed some onto the checkout countertop, and bent over it.

He forced out the words he’d rehearsed in the car. Trying not to sound like he was reading from a teleprompter, he said, “I have a special invitation for you.”

Without looking up, she rubbed a paper towel over the glass and pushed the cleaner into broad, white swirls of foam. “I’m awfully busy with the shop these days. I doubt I can consider an invitation to anything.”

Her rebuff stabbed at his heart. He leaned over the top of her head, noticing she smelled wonderful. He whispered, “You’re supposed to give me a chance to invite you before you turn me down.”

She remained bent over the counter and cleaned furiously. "I'm sorry, if I seemed curt. I thought I made it clear when we first met that I have very little time for a relationship."

Marina was pushing him from her life, and his chest tightened with dread. He swallowed hard, determined to stay the course. "You're invited to a surprise birthday party Claudia is having for Greg on Saturday."

She stopped cleaning and looked up at him. "A party for Greg?"

"Yes, a party for Greg. Remember, when we first met, I told you the SCUBA lessons were an early birthday present? He'll be eighteen on Sunday, but she's surprising him Saturday night. Will you come?"

She moistened her lips. "What time does it start?"

"Five. What time do you close on Saturday?"

"Six." She paused then bent over the counter and began cleaning again. "I would like to come, though. Thank you."

He clenched his jaw in frustration and reined in his urge to reach out, take her by the shoulders, and make her look at him. "I can pick you up. Unless, of course, you would rather drive alone." He realized his voice was a little too clipped.

She peered up again with surprise and confusion in her eyes, and he regretted allowing his aggravation to affect his tone. His palms grew moist. Her next words were extremely important to him.

Her lips parted, then she pulled in a long breath. "You should be there on time to yell surprise. Since I'll be getting there late, I'll drive myself. But after the party, I'd like to drop by your house and return your car. Then if you have no other plans, you could give me a ride home."

His heart sputtered and stumbled. Was she trying to sever the last tie between them? Or did she want to be alone with him at his house? Had he just been rejected, or did he have a reason for hope? He chose to hope. "That'll be fine. I take it that means you had your car fixed."

"They finished the work a few days ago. I paid the ransom yesterday."

He stuffed his hands in his pockets. "I'll watch for you at six-thirty. Do you know how to get to Canal Street?"

"I have Greg's address in my class records. I'm sure I can find it."

An awkward silence fell between them. He guessed that if he tried to give her directions she'd probably squirt him with cleaner and rub him out like a spot. Searching his mind for something to say, he shifted his weight and rubbed the back of his neck for almost a minute. She said nothing. He decided not to press his luck and turned and left.

Driving home, he congratulated himself on messing everything up big time. The only thing he was sure of was that he would be getting his car back. But return of the car was the least of his worries. It was the driver he wanted and feared he might have lost.

Chapter Fourteen

Marina handed the bag containing the halter top and matching shorts to her last customer of the day. "I hope your daughter enjoys them."

"Everything in your display window looks so marvelous it was really hard to choose. Whoever dresses your mannequins should be complimented."

"Well, thank you. I do them myself, and it's nice to have someone notice."

"If it wasn't for that display, I probably would have driven right by." The woman shook her head and smiled. "I wish I had your flair."

Marina thanked the woman again, followed her to the door, locked it behind her, then blew a kiss to the closest mannequins. "Thanks ladies, you're doing a terrific job."

She glanced at the time on Papa's bronze clock. Five after six. Her pulse accelerated. She needed to hurry and dress for Greg's party. After flipping the sign in the door to *closed*, she rushed into her office. Pursing her lips, she stared into her tiny closet, trying to decide what to wear.

White shorts and a raspberry blouse? The party was probably casual, but shorts seemed risky. What if she guessed wrong and everyone else was dressed more formally? Her best navy suit with a sleeveless red shell and stiletto heels? No, if she looked overdone she might embarrass Brett in front of his family and friends.

Her palms grew moist and she worried her bottom lip between her teeth. Brett had a huge house and was financially successful. His friends and family were probably well-off too. Why had she ever said she'd go? She didn't belong with rich, society people. She didn't know how to act and wasn't going to fit in.

For Pete's sake, I don't even know what to wear.

She glanced toward her display window, wracking her brain. Was there anything out there she could borrow?

The last customer's remark passed through her mind. *I wish I had your flair.*

Some of her nervousness leaked away. *Obsessing about what to wear is just plain silly*, she told herself. She was *not* going to meet Brett's family for some sort of approval. She was simply going to Greg's birthday party. That's all. Greg and his mother were friendly, down-to-earth people, and this was *not* a date. If she could dress a mannequin to look striking and get compliments, she certainly could dress herself.

She pulled out a marigold orange, sleeveless shift with a vee neckline in front and spaghetti straps that cross-tied in back. Wearing it with a polished driftwood pendant, matching earrings, and sling-back heels, she would blend with any group unless they wore floor-length gowns and tuxedos.

She slipped the dress on and smoothed her hands down the sides, pleased with how it clung to her hips but wondering if the mini-length showed too much of her thighs.

She thought about Brett staring at her legs at his house, felt a slightly naughty thrill at the prospect of flashing him some thigh, and her heart raced with anticipation. Then she hit her palm against her forehead and scolded herself for the feeling. She wasn't going to think like that tonight. She was going to control her attraction to him.

Applying gloss to her lips, she glanced at the clock. Yikes! Quarter after.

Raising her chin high and giving herself a confident smile in the mirror, she grabbed her purse and Greg's gift then dashed from the shop.

Reading the house numbers on mailboxes, Marina drove Brett's car slowly down Canal Street. There was a cluster of cars surrounding number fourteen seventy-nine. *That must be the place.* As she parked behind the last car, the front door of the house opened, and Brett stepped outside.

The sight of him, tall and handsome on the porch, took her breath away. The smile that spread over his face warmed her heart. She rushed to unlatch her seatbelt, reminding herself to be cool and to remember to control her attraction.

He strode across the lawn and swung open her door. Bending slightly, he brushed a light kiss over her lips. Then looking sheepish, he straightened and stepped back.

"You look fabulous," he said. His blue eyes sparkled and caressed her.

She swallowed as tendrils of pleasure spread to every cell in her body. "Thank you."

Taking her hand, he asked, "Did you have any problem finding the house?"

"No. Was Greg surprised?"

"A little." Brett inclined his head toward the cars. "But the crowd tipped him off." He reached out and smoothed the hair next to her ear. Then his hand slipped down to the skin at her nape. "I was starting to worry you'd changed your mind."

"I...ah...wanted to be here." His closeness unnerved her. Her heart beat faster. With fumbling fingers, she clutched Greg's present and her purse to her chest. "Greg's becoming a man. This is an important day for him. I had a small *Quinceañera* celebration when I turned fifteen. It was kind of the same idea, my symbolic graduation from childhood to womanhood."

His eyes captured hers. "And since then have you become a woman in other ways?" he asked in a low, intimate tone that made her yearn for him to be closer.

She moistened her lips and swallowed the lump of emotion blocking her throat. A quiver tickled through her abdomen.

He slid his hand to her shoulder, and his thumb caressed her skin. “Let’s talk more about that subject later.”

Staring at him through wide eyes, she felt like a deer caught in a car’s headlights. All she could do was nod as her determination to stay distant flooded out through her toes.

A smile spread across his face. “Shall we go in to the party?”

The inside of the tiny, stucco house was wall-to-wall people. Brett led Marina through the crowd and out to the backyard where a light breeze blew hickory smoke from the barbecue across a buffet table jammed with tempting casseroles and salads. Marina’s mouth watered as she circled the table filling her plate, and after helping herself to a generous serving of lasagna, she had no space left for a scoop of potato salad.

“Loading up on carbs?” Brett teased.

“Someday I’ll probably regret it. But right now, I need the energy. I seem to burn the calories before they can settle to my thighs.”

His gaze moved down her sides. “They’re gorgeous thighs.”

A flash of heat seared her cheeks.

“What are you saying to that young lady to make her blush like that?” a hearty male voice boomed.

Brett’s head snapped up and he turned. “Dad! I’ve been wondering when you and Mom were going to get here.” He handed his plate to her then caught his father in a bear hug. The two men patted each other on the back for a few seconds. Then Brett released his father and gave him a playful punch to the arm.

“Our plane was delayed leaving New York,” Brett’s dad said. “We just got in. Your mother was a nervous wreck worrying about missing the party.”

“How was the skiing?”

“Miserable, but the lodge was warm, and the wine was good.” He looked toward her. “Well, son, where are your manners? When are you going to introduce me?”

The blood drained from her face. Brett was about to introduce her to his father! What she wouldn’t give for ten seconds in front of a mirror. Was her hair windblown? Was her dress wrinkled? Were there spots of lasagna on her chest?

“Dad, this is Marina Hernandez. Marina, my father, Stuart Sutherland.”

She gulped and scanned the area around her, frantically searching for someplace to set a plate so she could shake his hand. Her feet itched to run away and hide. She wished the earth would open up and swallow her.

He stepped toward her, leaned past the plates, and kissed her lightly on the cheek. “Nice to meet you, Marina. Brett’s told me a lot of wonderful things about you and your SCUBA school.”

“It’s nice to meet you, too, Mr. Sutherland.”

She managed a flustered grin, glanced at Brett, and wondered exactly what wonderful things he’d said about her. Had he told his father about their kisses in the park or how easily she’d surrendered to his advances? Her mouth went dry. Then she blinked and jerked her mind back to reality. He must have been talking about Greg’s lessons.

“Please, Marina, call me Stuart.”

“Dad, you must be starved,” Brett said. “Want me to fill a plate for you?”

“Would you please? All I’ve had today are cardboard, airplane meals. Make some good choices for me.”

“You and Marina get acquainted. I’ll be right back,” Brett said, then headed for the buffet line.

Marina felt a wave of panic. Papa had disapproved of every girl Ricki ever dated. If all fathers believed no woman was good enough for their sons, then Stuart Sutherland was probably going to disapprove of her, with or without mussed hair or a wrinkly dress. She took a deep breath and told the butterflies in her stomach she’d come for Greg’s party, not for Stuart Sutherland’s approval.

She moistened her lips, reminding herself this was not really a date and she and Brett were just friends.

“So, where have you been skiing?”

He shook his head and said in a conspiratorial tone, “I don’t really ski anymore, but every year we spend a week at a cozy chalet in the Swiss Alps. We get our fill of snow and enjoy the mountain scenery in contrast to our home here in the Florida flatlands. We were supposed to be back in plenty of time for the party, but the airline had a different schedule.”

“I’m sure Greg’s glad you made it.”

“I was delighted to see how well he’s looking. I understand you’re responsible for his interest in diving.”

“Not entirely. The lessons were Brett’s idea.”

“You’ve had a profound effect on him too, you know.” He gave her a wink.

She furrowed her brow in confusion. “Brett?”

“My son is a much happier man these days.”

“He does seem to enjoy diving.”

Stuart smiled with a knowing look in his eyes. “He’s neglected his personal life for too many years. I’m thrilled he’s found you. I hope you’re happy together.”

For less than a heartbeat, she saw Brett at his dining room table with those beautiful children, and she was there with them. She banished the image with a toss of her head and opened her mouth to protest his

mistaken conclusion about her relationship with Brett. But then she realized denial would be useless and bit back the words.

A plump, silver-haired woman emerged from the crowd and stepped to Stuart's side. "I should have known I'd find y'all with a pretty girl," she said, clucking her tongue and shaking her head.

Stuart chuckled. "This is Marina, honey."

The woman turned toward her and smiled from ear to ear. "Well, hello dear. I've just been dying to meet y'all. We really *do* need to get to know one another." She leaned over and rubbed a soft, face-powder-scented cheek against Marina's jaw. "I'm Molly Sutherland, Brett's mother."

Marina's stomach knotted even tighter. Brett's mother! His father might not have noticed a wrinkled dress or uncombed hair. But this woman's appearance was meticulous. She was sure to notice every flaw.

Her hands trembled, and she reminded herself she was not here for Brett's parents' approval. They were just two people she'd never see again who'd greeted her warmly. She found the courage to return their smiles. Even if they did disapprove of her, they were doing a good job of hiding it.

Brett came up beside her, passed a full plate to his father, and then slipped his arm around her waist. "Well, my two favorite ladies together at last. Hi, Mom."

Molly reached out with one hand and smoothed Brett's hair. "I knew y'all would be hovering close by," she said. "When a man falls in love he's like a big, old bear guarding a beehive. He's not going to take any chance that a trespasser will steal his treasure away."

Marina felt the blood drain from her face. Her breath seemed trapped in her lungs, threatening to suffocate her. The wheels of her mind spun Molly's words round and round.

When a man falls in love...

Brett's arm tensed ever so slightly. "She *is* a treasure, Mom, but she compared me to a spider inviting a fly into his parlor, not a bear."

Molly patted Marina's arm. "You're absolutely right, dear. He wants to snare you in his web."

Marina nodded politely but was too dumbstruck to speak.

Brett heard Claudia's infectious laughter seconds before she separated from the crowd. She walked toward him holding two plates heaped with birthday cake and vanilla ice cream. Grinning broadly, she handed him one. "Here you go, a month's supply of junk food. Where did Marina get off to?"

"She's over by the presents table visiting with Greg and Trish."

Claudia scanned the crowd on the far side of the yard for a few seconds, paused, smiled, then turned back to him. "While I have you alone for a minute, I want to thank you again for Greg's SCUBA lessons. They're just what he needed."

"I'm glad he's so enthused about diving. Seeing him active and socializing is all the thanks I need."

She moistened her lips. "I don't know what we would have done without you these last couple years."

Surprised to see tears glistening in her eyes, he tried to cheer her before they rolled free. "I'm just trying to make up for all the times you wiped blood from my skinned knees and made me PB and J sandwiches after school."

Her lips twitched in a tiny smile. "You were always an ungrateful brat, complained the antiseptic stung and the jelly wasn't thick enough."

"I didn't realize then how lucky I was to have an older sister to take care of me. Without you, who knows what trouble I would have gotten into? I know for sure my homework would have been turned in a lot less frequently."

"I hated badgering you. But Mom made me promise."

"Promise what?"

"To help you, make sure you were getting the most out of that fabulous brain of yours. My job was to make sure you studied your spelling words, did your class projects, read the books for your book reports, all that stuff."

He digested that news. "I thought the hours at the kitchen table were all your idea."

She chuckled. "Don't get me wrong. Most of the time, I liked pretending to be your teacher and didn't mind at all. But I wouldn't have been half as zealous if it wasn't for Mom checking up on me and paying me bonuses when you got A's on your report cards."

He blinked. "You're kidding, right?"

"No. She bribed me to tutor you."

"I always thought she was oblivious to what we did as long as we got decent grades and didn't misbehave."

Claudia's eyes widened. "Now you have to be kidding. She was the driving force behind everything that went on in our house. I was just the messenger for the trips to the aquarium and the huge piles of books that got checked out of the library. She orchestrated it all."

"But she spent all her time at work. And when she was home, she cleaned, cooked, did laundry, even painted the ceiling in the living room. Anything except bother with us. We were in the way and the last things on her mind."

"I can't believe you'd say that." She scowled, planted her free fist on her hip, and her shoulders stiffened like she was preparing for a fight. But then her expression softened and her muscles relaxed. "I guess you were too young."

"Too young for what?"

"To understand that woman worked her ass off for us. After Dad started the business, things got pretty bad for a few years. Her paycheck was the only thing keeping food in the house. It wasn't that we were the

last things on her mind, it was the volume of things that got piled on her shoulders. She was struggling to help him realize his dream by fighting the wolves away from the door.”

Vague memories stirred and crept out of the dusty corners of his brain. Snippets of conversations and tiny incidents bumped together, stuck and formed new impressions. He filed them away carefully so he could pull them out to examine and analyze later.

Troubled to learn his childhood assumptions had been flawed, he picked up the plastic fork, poked at his cake, and shrugged, “No one ever told me there were serious financial problems. I never knew the cause of Mom or Dad’s preoccupation, just the result.”

“The result was she paid the mortgage and bought us shoes and clothes for school, ran the house and worked a full time job. During those five or six years before Dad’s business became profitable, she sacrificed everything to care for her family.”

He recalled a shift in their family life about the time he started high school, but the details were fuzzy. Only one Saturday, when both parents had been home all day and his father had tossed a football with him for the first time ever, stood out as an extraordinary occasion. But as a teenager, he had been growing and changing, expanding his horizons. He’d been less concerned with spending time with his parents, and more concerned with extracurricular activities, his plans for the future, and the opinions of his peers. By then, home and family were no longer the nerve centers of his world.

Soft words tinged with pride and love interrupted his musings. “During those years, Mom became my hero. I’ve been trying to be as good a person, and as dedicated a parent, as her ever since.”

He jerked his gaze to Claudia’s face. “You’re a great person. And a fabulous mother.”

“Thanks to Mom’s example. I only wish I’d taken more of her advice and established myself in a career before I married Steve and had Greg.”

“You didn’t need a career.”

She twisted her mouth in disgust. “Oh yes, I did. I found that out when I went looking for a job after Steve’s accident. A thirty-eight-year-old woman with an incomplete liberal arts education, no work skills and no real experience, is bottom of the barrel in the eyes of prospective employers. If I’d had a career earlier in life, I would have had some skills to fall back on when I needed them to provide for my son. Re-entering the workforce would still have been difficult, but at least I wouldn’t have had to beg for a job.”

“You’re smart as a whip. Excelsior is lucky to have you.”

Her eyes sparkled with tears again. “I’m the lucky one. I was hardly even qualified to handle the phones, but my boss gave me a chance. That’s another reason why I appreciate all you’ve done for us. You’ve saved me from the consequences of my poor judgment when I dropped out of school. If we had to survive on my clerical salary alone, Greg and I would be in dire straits.”

He felt an awkward rush of emotions and shifted his weight. “No one could have foreseen Steve’s accident. You can’t beat yourself up for choices you made almost twenty years ago.”

“I’m not. I’m learning from them.” She dropped her voice to a whisper and grinned, “I haven’t told Greg yet, but when he starts college in the fall, I’m going to begin taking advantage of Excelsior’s advancement program and enroll in night classes. I want to earn a paralegal degree and make something of myself.”

“Good for you. If you need anything...”

She leaned over, stretched up, and kissed his cheek. “I know. But I’m going to try to get out of your hair so you can start thinking about a family of your own. If you ask me, Marina is a keeper.”

At the mention of her name, his gaze shifted and he automatically searched for her in the crowd. Questions about their relationship slipped back into the forefront of his mind.

Claudia turned and walked away, calling over her shoulder, “Eat your ice cream, little brother. Once Marina comes back within radar range, the heat blazing between you two will melt it in a flash.”

Chapter Fifteen

The party broke up at ten-thirty. The moon was high, and stars sparkled directly overhead. But lightning flickered to the east, silhouetting cumulus clouds heaped over the warm water of the Gulf Stream.

Following Brett toward his house, Marina drove across the Ocean Avenue Bridge and onto Beach Road. Scudding black clouds raced across the sky and obscured the moon. The wind increased, and leaves and debris tumbled across the roadway. As she turned onto the street where Brett lived, a rumble of thunder punctuated the first fat raindrops tapping against her windshield. She switched on the wipers. Seconds later, a torrent of water engulfed the car and blurred the road ahead.

She slowed the car to a crawl and clutched the steering wheel.

The taillights in front of her flashed brighter and turned right. Peering through the rain, she searched for the entrance to Brett's driveway.

She recognized the mound of petunias at the base of his white mailbox and inched the car into the driveway. A hazy rectangle of light appeared ahead. The entrance to Brett's three-car garage. He was standing in the doorway motioning her inside. Lightning lit the yard, and thunder rumbled as she pulled the car in next to his new one and parked.

"We almost made it dry," Brett said as he swung open her door.

She unbuckled the seatbelt, slid out of the car, and stood, avoiding the puddle forming on the garage floor.

"I've been watching the lightning all the way," she said.

The garage door rolled down and thunked shut.

"Me too. I was hoping the storm would get here in time to give me an excuse to get you inside." He slipped his arm around her waist and guided her toward a doorway. "We're going to have coffee and wait this one out. There's no use trying to drive you home until it passes."

She opened her mouth to protest, but he silenced her with a finger across her lips.

Mischief danced in his eyes. "You don't really want me to go out there and drive in that, do you?"

She couldn't suppress a grin. "You're terribly obvious."

"I know. But the end justifies the means."

He ushered her up the steps and into the dimly lit kitchen. His hand brushed across her bare back. The gentle warmth fogged her mind.

She turned toward him and met his gaze. "I'm glad your *means* worked."

He went still, staring into her eyes.

She held her breath. Her brain shouted *go home*; her body screamed *touch me*.

His arms slipped around her and pulled her closer. His mouth lowered toward hers. She closed her eyes, and her heart soared.

Lightning sizzled the air close by, thunder crashed, the house shook, and the lights went out.

She gasped, jumped back, blessed herself, and muttered a quick, "*Si Dios quiere*."

"If God wills what?" he asked striking a match and lighting a candle.

"I'm sorry. That's a silly habit." She shrugged to hide her embarrassment. "I got it from my mother. Whenever there was a thunderstorm, she'd herd Ricki and me into a closet. And every time lightning struck nearby, she'd have us cross ourselves and repeat that blessing. I'm not sure exactly why. I guess we were ready to accept death, life, the house burning down, or anything else God willed."

"Do you think I can get a kiss in before any of those awful things happen?"

"*Si Dios quiere*."

He chuckled and lowered his mouth to hers.

She parted her lips and welcomed the caress of his tongue. Another lightning bolt struck and every nerve ending inside her reverberated with thunder. Her arms slid around him.

He drew back slightly. "I've been waiting for hours to get you alone."

"And lure me into your web?" she asked with a throaty laugh. Her mind replayed his mother's words: *He wants to snare you in his web*. But then she remembered the rest of her words: *When a man falls in love...* Her stomach curled with tension.

His fingers skimmed over her back, and she felt a hot surge of need.

"You can still escape," he whispered. "If that's what you want."

The desires of her body warred with the logic of her mind. He nuzzled her neck, and suddenly her brain short-circuited. "I can't leave yet. It's still raining out there."

"Good, I want you to stay."

Her skin felt hot, and her head was spinning. She yearned for him to caress every inch of her body. Papa, money, bankruptcy, the shop all got more and more difficult to remember, until she couldn't recall them at all.

"I want to stay and make love with you," she heard herself whisper.

His lips covered hers. His tongue plunged and slid and teased. She savored his warmth and clung to him, breathed deeply and delighted in his male scent.

The ache in her breasts rose to a crescendo. She pressed along the length of him, feeling the evidence of his desire. The proof he wanted her as much as she wanted him produced a swell of joy in her heart.

Swaying her hips side to side, she rubbed her lower body against his erection. Her movements brought a low groan from the depths of his throat.

All her control evaporated. She needed to run her hands over his skin and touch the muscles she'd admired for so long from afar. With trembling hands and fumbling fingers, she unbuttoned his shirt.

His fingers traced the edge of the back of her dress and suddenly the spaghetti straps went slack.

She tugged his shirt out of his pants, pushed it from his shoulders, and ran her fingers down his bare arms as he shrugged out of the sleeves.

He sipped tenderly at her lips. His hands urged the top of her dress to her waist. Then he slid his palms up her ribcage.

She pulled in a deep breath. Each of his hands cupped a breast and caressed. Her breath whooshed out in a sigh. Tingling sensations shot through her. Never had a man made her want to melt into his hands this way. She arched her back to encourage him.

"Ah, Marina, you're so perfect, so sweet," he said in a soft, seductive voice.

He recaptured her mouth. His tongue explored lazily while his thumbs teased her throbbing nipples.

Muscles tightened low in her belly. Heat spread between her thighs. She felt wanton and wonderful.

His mouth moved to the sensitive skin at the underside of her jaw. She tilted her head back. Her eyelids fluttered shut, and a moan of pleasure escaped her throat.

"You must have specialized in erogenous zones in medical school," she whispered.

"I was playing doctor long before I went to college."

She smiled at his ability to make every minute with him fun. Even a minute like now, when he had her burning up inside.

She hooked her thumbs in the fabric of her dress. The clothing kept him too far away. Maintaining contact with the heat of his front, she wiggled the dress down over her hips and it fell.

"Thank you for doing that," he said breathlessly.

His hand slid across her abdomen and inside the waistband of her panties. Lace and elastic slipped off her hips and down her legs.

Then his fingers scorched a trail across her belly. And moved lower.

She drew in a sharp breath, and her legs felt rubbery.

The pressure of his fondling strokes increased. Bending one knee high and wrapping her foot behind his leg, she savored his magical touch.

Rushing blood thundered in her ears. She rocked against his hand and matched his rhythm. Then giving in to a mounting sense of urgency, she slowly increased the tempo.

She wanted to caress him and feel his strength and heat. She wanted him to know her need and share her world of pleasure. She unfastened his belt buckle and pulled down his zipper.

He made a sound somewhere between a groan and a low, sexual growl. Then he lowered his head and skimmed his lips over her breast.

Her insides caught on fire. He seemed to know just how to touch her, where to touch her, what she needed. She wondered if he was clairvoyant and able to read her desires directly from her brain. The thought brought a smile to her lips: some men might use that as a weapon, but Brett was kind and generous, and she could trust him to be gentle with her body and her soul.

His teeth tugged gently at her nipple and his silky hair brushed against her skin.

“Oh! Brett.”

Her breathing turned ragged. She was running out of oxygen. The heat in her lower abdomen was unbearable. Her legs turned to gelatin, and she sagged against him.

Suddenly, she was lifted in his arms, carried to another room and lowered onto something soft.

Lightning flickered outside windows. The flashes illuminated the overflowing window box and the rocking horse and backlit Brett with an entrancing glow. She watched him remove the rest of his clothes. Her fingers itched to touch him again, and the seconds passed like hours. Her pulse beat wildly at the base of her throat.

Darkness stole his image, but she sensed the heat of his body beside her. His mouth reclaimed her lips. His wonderful hands returned and caressed her neck and shoulders. His tongue flicked over the skin of her neck.

Her heart raced and thumped in her chest. She wondered if he could feel the pounding as he rubbed and stroked and gently squeezed her breasts.

Her hands explored the fine hairs on his chest and smooth texture of his skin then hungrily roamed over his moist back and buttocks. His musky scent was more arousing than any cologne or after-shave. She found his erection, ran her fingertips over his hot, taut skin, delighted in the way her caresses could evoke a response in his muscles. She slid down his body and tasted him, amazed at her own boldness.

His hands seared paths over her stomach then massaged her inner thighs. He tortured her with talented fingers until she cried out with need.

He whispered, “Don’t go away,” then left her for several seconds. She heard the sound of ripping foil, held her breath and waited. He returned and drove inside her, filling her, rocking her. The room started a slow, sultry spin.

She gasped. She gasped again. She thought she would die from the pleasure.

Psychedelic lights exploded behind her eyelids. Her mind shuddered. Her body shuddered, and she melted around him.

He buried himself deeper. Then he groaned.

She felt him get lost in his own ecstasy, and smiled.

Thunder rumbled somewhere, and she wondered if the sound was her heart exploding.

The cool air blowing from overhead raised goose bumps on Marina's bare shoulders. She tugged the warm comforter and satiny sheets higher. Cozy again, she snuggled against the pillow and, savoring the contentment in her bones, made a purring sound.

After a few seconds, she raised reluctant eyelids. Sunlight was slanting in through a window. *Morning. Memories flooded into her mind. The party. Returning the car. The storm. The...*

Her eye flew open wide.

Ay caramba! I spent the night with Brett.

Her heart slammed into her ribcage. She tossed off the comforter and jumped from the bed. Her clothes were nowhere in sight. Her mind was spitting out recriminations and listing the jobs she had to finish at the shop. And it was Sunday; she had to go visit Papa. She shivered and tried to remember where she'd left her dress. She scanned the room.

Brett stepped through a doorway, vigorously rubbing a towel against his hair. The corded arms, muscled legs, and broad chest were familiar from the dive classes. But the rest of him was a magnificent surprise. With sunlight reflecting off the moisture clinging to his skin, he looked like a glistening statue of Adonis. She gaped at the perfection of his nude body. He lowered the towel and a wide grin spread across his face.

"Well good morning, Sleeping Beauty. I was starting to think you were going to stay in bed all day."

Her breath caught in her throat. "All day? What do you mean? What time is it?"

He walked to her, tossed the towel onto the bed, and put his hands on her hips. "I was only kidding. It's still early. We have plenty of time."

He leaned closer, and she smelled shampoo. He kissed her gently.

Her pulse accelerated to breakneck speed, and her traitorous body pressed against him.

His arms slid around her, and his tongue began a wonderful symbolic motion. His palms moved to the curve of her backside.

Breathless, she forced her body a tiny step away. "Brett..."

"I love the way you say my name. You make every letter sound like music."

"I'm sorry, Brett. I have to go."

A mischievous smile danced in his eyes, and his fingers traced slowly down her spine. "There's no hurry."

A thrill rippled through her, and her insides went molten.

In half a second his hands were full of her breasts, and his thumbs began tracing tiny circles around her hardened nipples.

"Brett..." Her eyes fluttered shut.

"I couldn't see you very well last night in the dark," he said in a deep, throaty voice. "But I felt how beautiful you are. Now that I can see you, I have to make love to you again."

“I really should go.” More than anything, she wanted to stay.

“Touch me again, Marina, like you did last night. I’m ready to lose control just thinking about the sensations.”

She looked into his gleaming blue eyes. Electricity sizzled through her veins. All thoughts of the shop were lost as longing welled between her thighs.

“Maybe I could stay for a few more minutes,” she said, her breathing suddenly ragged.

“Hallelujah.” He wrapped his arms around her, lifted her off her feet, and dove onto the bed. He settled on top of her and found her mouth. Their tongues began to duel.

She sunk into the mattress, and her blood heated. She ran her hands down his moist back and over his buttocks.

“I’ve been waiting for you to touch me my whole life,” he whispered.

A smile of satisfaction came to her lips.

He rolled onto his side. With his leg pressed against her hip, he stroked her breasts tenderly.

Her hand found the evidence of his desire. She caressed his smooth skin. His moan of pleasure swelled her heart.

His thumb circled her nipple, and the nub went taut.

“I can pull up the blanket if the air conditioning is too cold,” he said with a teasing chuckle.

“You’re doing a wonderful job of keeping me warm.”

She arched toward him and closed her eyes. Being with him felt right.

Chapter Sixteen

Guilt started to gnaw at her insides the minute Brett left her at the shop.

She changed out of the wrinkled dress that screamed out a story about spending the night in a heap, ran out through the front door and jumped into her old car. *How could I have spent the night with Brett?* She pushed the accelerator almost to the floor and watched the needle inch above the speed limit as she raced toward the nursing home. *What possessed me to stay this morning?*

Sure what she'd done would show, she avoided eye contact with Papa. What kind of a woman would he think she was if he knew? She paced and fidgeted and heard little he said. She listened to his criticisms without mounting a defense. When an aide came in to get his lunch order, she jumped at the opportunity to leave and bolted for the parking lot.

She opened the shop five minutes early. As the afternoon dragged on, she tried to concentrate on helping customers but kept remembering the sensations of Brett's strong hands touching her. In the long minutes alone, her conscience nagged she should have been forceful and demanded he take her home. Then none of last night or this morning would have ever happened. By closing time, guilt was a suffocating weight on her chest. She wished the wonderful night had never happened, then quickly rescinded the wish.

A few minutes after she locked the door, the phone rang. She grabbed the receiver. Her heart pounded with anticipation.

Brett said, "Hi. Would you like to come over for dinner?"

Warmth welled inside her, but she swallowed and lied, "I can't."

"Oh. Well then, how was your day?"

His voice caressed her. She wanted to climb through the phone and listen all night.

"A man I haven't seen since my new competitor opened came in and bought a tank."

She sat cross-legged on the floor, smiling as they exchanged stories of the little events of the last few hours. She clung to the phone sharing impressions of customers, chuckling at remarks that weren't really funny, and finding everything he said fascinating.

For twenty minutes, she reveled in the connection to him. Then silent pauses grew longer. Finally, there was nothing left to discuss.

"I miss you, Marina. Good night."

Goose bumps erupted on her arms. She missed him, too. She wanted him nearer. She wanted to drive to his house. She wanted to cuddle in his arms. But her guilt was like a heavy anchor buried deep in the seabed, and it held her firmly in place.

She skipped dinner, ignored her cleaning chores, and went to bed. She tossed and turned on her couch for hours as thoughts of Brett revolved in her mind. He didn't want a long-term relationship with her. He wanted a woman with time for children and travel and intimate evenings on the patio. She had Papa, and a full-time career and a business to manage. She should have kept their insurmountable differences in mind and been less impulsive. But no, she had to look into his eyes; she had to go to his house; she had to fall into the trap of rationalizing that one night wouldn't hurt; she had to forget her priorities and harbor selfish fantasies of finding her Prince Charming and falling in love.

Apprehension squeezed her chest like a vice. She'd let a simple flirtation get way out of hand. Now she was staring at a dangerous train coming down the tracks, but seemed powerless to jump out of the way.

In the morning, Marina dragged herself toward the showers and vowed *no more*. She was strong enough to resist any more nights with Brett. From now on, she would forget him. For Papa's sake, she would work harder. For Papa's sake, she would keep her mind and her energy completely focused on the business.

She buried herself in work, rushing from one task to the next. She did anything and everything to avoid dwelling on the fact that her future couldn't include Brett. But work proved a poor distraction. Her thoughts kept wandering to him, causing her chest to ache and tears to flood her eyes. She wished for another phone call and one last chance to hear the sound of his voice.

Late the next afternoon, Greg was demonstrating the features of the completed Web site to her in her office, and he suddenly looked up. "Hey, Uncle Brett. Are you here to tell Marina about your award?"

Her head spun toward the doorway. Her heart surged with happiness, and she smiled despite the protests of her brain.

Brett smiled at her then looked toward Greg, shook his head, and rolled his eyes. "Can't a man have any secrets around here?"

"What kind of award?" Marina asked.

"It's for his work with kids who have cancer," Greg said. "He's going to Miami to this big meeting of doctors, and he's going to talk in front of the whole group. Then they're going to give him the award and set up a special scholarship in his name at a medical school."

"Whoa," Brett said, holding up one hand like a traffic cop. "That's enough. Let me tell my story, my way. You're making this sound like a big thing."

"It sounds to me like this is a big thing," Marina said.

“Everyone likes to have their work recognized, but they give an award every year. There’s nothing special about them giving one to me.”

“Yes there is,” Greg insisted. “You’re somebody we know.”

Brett’s eyes glowed with pride, and Marina felt a flush of happiness knowing other people recognized him as a talented man with a heart of gold.

She wanted to throw her arms around his neck and give him a congratulatory kiss. But she hesitated because Greg was there, and during those few seconds, she remembered her resolution to keep her distance.

Finally, she took a deep breath, stood, and offered him a handshake. “Well, congratulations.”

He took her hand and held on to it. “Can I talk to you alone?”

Her mouth went dry from having him so near. She couldn’t form words, so she moistened her lips and nodded.

He maintained his grip on her hand as she led him through the shop and into the pool area.

“I have to go to the conference in Miami to get the award,” he said. “I can bring a guest, and I was hoping you would come with me.”

She swallowed hard. Her heart thumped wildly. A trip to Miami with Brett would be heaven, and she’d love to be there and share his big moment. Did she dare go? What would a trip with him mean to their relationship? After all, she’d spent the last two days trying to scrub their lovemaking from her mind. And failed miserably.

Reality leaped out and struck her. She couldn’t leave the shop. What she wanted was irrelevant. Sadness crept into her bones.

“I’ll reserve separate rooms, if that’s bothering you,” he added in an uncertain voice.

Although her heart felt empty, she gave a soft laugh at his suggestion. “That would be best, if I could go. But I don’t see how I can. I have the shop to run.”

“You could leave Trish and Greg in charge for a couple days. They’re a pretty good team. The bulk of the conference activities are scheduled for Thursday and Friday, so you could skip the last day and be back for Saturday morning.” He squeezed her hand. “Come with me, Marina. Having you there would mean a lot.”

And being there would mean a lot to her. The electricity of his touch made refusing more painful. “I don’t know.”

“Are you still upset about the other night at my house?”

Her pulse rate doubled. “Upset?”

“I assume that’s why you’re avoiding me again.”

She cleared her throat. “Am I avoiding you?”

“Aren’t you?”

She fiddled with the top button on her blouse and pretended interest in a scratch in the floor tiles. But denial was pointless. “I guess I’m not very good at handling relationships.”

“What’s the problem?”

Marina considered bringing up his remarks about uncomplicated fun and explaining that making love had moved their relationship out of *her* uncomplicated fun category. But if she did, would he think she was in love with him?

She was tempted to confess her guilt about jumping into a casual sexual affair. But would that sound like she was trying to coerce him into a commitment?

She thought about admitting she feared getting her heart broken. But it was best he didn’t know he made her feel weak and vulnerable.

She debated whether she should tell him she was afraid wanting him could make her lose the shop, destroy Papa’s dreams, and crush the entire framework of her familiar world.

Finally, she shrugged off the idea of revealing any of those feelings and raked the fingers of both hands through her hair.

“I’m just confused. Everything is happening too fast. I have the shop to run, and Papa.”

“I thought we were just getting to know each other better.” He paused as if unsure what to do next. Then he took a deep breath and said, “I need to tell you this sooner or later, so here it is. I’ve been thinking about our relationship, and earlier today, I had one of those light bulb moments.”

“You mean a eureka type of thing?”

“Yes, it’s a long story, but I’ll give you the condensed version. I’ve always been a loner. In high school, I kept to myself and studied. When I went to college, I tried out for football because I wanted the thrill of the competition. I made starting quarterback because Coach said I played with intense determination. But off the field, I avoided close friendships with my teammates and never went to the parties or rallies. I spent all my time hitting the books and did a minimum of socializing. In a word, my life was dull.”

“It makes sense that you would have to choose studying over parties in order to become a doctor,” she said.

“I’m not complaining. I’m happy with my life.” His shoulders stiffened, and he averted his eyes. “Or at least I was until my brother-in-law’s death.”

He fell silent. The muscles in his jaw clenched.

She waited, sensing he was about to share something very personal.

“I’ve seen death before, far too many times. But his death was different. It opened my eyes and made me realize how vulnerable I am. It could happen to me.” His voice was so low she had to strain to hear it. “That epiphany shook my foundation. Not because I’m afraid to die, but because I suddenly saw that I’d spent my whole life postponing the things I wanted to do. I’d been focusing only on work and telling

myself I would get around to everything else next month, next year, or at some nebulous time in the future.”

Marina remembered quitting college to help Papa run the shop after Ricki drowned. She’d planned to someday return and graduate, but then Papa had his stroke. Somehow, years had slipped past. Would she ever have time to go back? Brett’s message resonated in her soul.

“I decided to reinvent my world,” he continued, speaking faster, as if he suddenly needed to conclude his story. “I bought a new car and a hundred new books for my library. I rearranged my schedule so I could take SCUBA lessons. I’ve been rushing to make up for lost time.” He met her eyes. “But I forgot some things need to blossom slowly. I realized today that I’ve tried to move our relationship too fast and, in doing that, I’ve made you uncomfortable.”

Marina moistened her lips, not sure what to say. She wanted to thank him for considering how she felt, but before she could find the right words, he flashed the devastating smile that always turned her knees to jelly.

“So from now on, I promise not to push you,” he said. “I’m going to hate myself for saying this, but if you’re more comfortable right now with a non-physical relationship, we can go to Miami as friends and sleep in separate rooms.”

Her heart screamed *Do it, go to Miami. He just bared his soul to you. Don’t kick him while his emotions are exposed. He should have someone at his side to help him celebrate such an important occasion.*

She smiled slowly. Excitement trickled into her chest.

“I really would like to see you get the award. When is the conference?”

“Next weekend, the eighteenth and nineteenth, and if you can stay, half a day on the twentieth.”

She wondered if she could find a way to go. “Let me talk to Trish and Greg. Maybe one of my divemasters can help out. I might be able to get a friend who instructs part-time to cover my Friday night class. I’ll see what I can arrange and let you know in a couple days.”

His whole face lit up. “Great. I usually dread conferences. But if you’ll come with me, I’ll look forward to this one.”

The sparkle in his eyes sent pure gaiety through her heart. Reaching her hand out toward him, she said, “Want to have dinner together after closing time, and you can tell me all about the award?”

He took her hand, leaned over, and brushed her mouth with the lightest of kisses. “Only as much as a man in the desert craves a drink of water.”

Marina sat in her office and contemplated going to the medical conference with Brett. She hummed a cheerful tune and made a list of items to get out of storage. She’d need clothes for traveling, a suit for

attending the awards ceremony, and a dress for the formal dinner-dance. Something new for the dance would be heavenly, but definitely out of the question. Thanks to hard work, frugality, the Web site and her new ad campaign, business was slowly improving and the threat of bankruptcy was shrinking. But she still couldn't afford to be frivolous.

In her mind's eye, she sorted through the dresses stored with her furniture, weighing the pros and cons of each. Even though almost three years old and with a neckline less than daring, she decided the emerald-green, tea-length bridesmaid's gown would be most appropriate. She'd wear her dangly pearl earrings and bring the tiny bottle of White Diamonds perfume she'd been hoarding for a special occasion. She'd dab a little behind each ear, and maybe in a few other places. She imagined the searing warmth of Brett's lips hot on the trail of the scent.

She sank back in her chair and closed her eyes. She was going to be with him for two days and two nights. He'd hold her in his arms, and they'd float over the dance floor. His movements would be graceful yet strong, and his company would be intoxicating. They'd fit together perfectly, and she'd lay her head against his shoulder like she had that night in the moonlight on his patio.

A wave of desire passed through her and left her feeling needy and alone. She sat up abruptly and warned herself against getting carried away. They were going as friends.

When Trish and Greg came in that afternoon, she asked, "Would either of you be willing to mind the shop for two days so I could go to Miami with Brett and be there when he gets his award?"

"We were sort of hoping you'd go," Trish said. "We already talked about it."

"You what?"

"Well, you and Uncle Brett seemed to be getting pretty friendly," Greg said. "We figured he might invite you."

Marina's cheeks heated as a humiliating thought entered her mind. "Did you suggest it to him?"

Trish shrugged. "No. But we were thinking about it."

"Butt out," Marina said firmly but affectionately.

"He's already asked you," Greg said, "so there's no problem. We both think it will be fun to watch the shop. I can arrange my studies so I can be here in the mornings. Trish can come in after school. I'll come back and help her both nights."

"I'll leave you a phone number where you can reach me. Just in case."

Greg rolled his eyes and exchanged a look with Trish. "It figures you're going to worry. But relax. We can handle it."

"Before I go, I'll show you how to sign up a new student and how to fill out the forms to special order equipment. If anyone asks about travel, get a phone number and tell them I'll call with particulars. Oh, and I'll show you where I keep the spare fuses and the emergency number for the pool pump repairman."

Greg put his hands over his ears and blew out a long breath in mock disgust, then said to Trish, “Maybe we made a mistake agreeing to this. I think we’ve created a worry-wart monster.”

Marina closed her mouth, and smiled. Greg and Trish were both intelligent and reliable. She’d only be gone for two days. How much could possibly go wrong?

Chapter Seventeen

Wednesday afternoon, Marina returned from her storage locker with her peach linen suit, emerald gown, two appropriate pairs of shoes, an evening bag, a garment bag, and an overnight case. She checked the clock and smiled. In less than sixteen hours, Brett would pick her up, and they would leave for Miami. She sighed and wished he would appear, right here and right now.

Humming along with a lively melody on the radio, she hung the suit carefully in the tiny office closet. She hesitated before hanging the gown. Holding it against her waist, she sang along with the song's infectious chorus and spun in a series of small circles. Closing her eyes, she pictured a brightly lit ballroom. She was spinning securely in Brett's arms. She could smell the heady scent of his after-shave and feel the warmth of his embrace. She could feel the tingle of—

The phone rang simultaneously on her desk and out in the shop. She hung the dress on the closet door.

"He wants to talk to you, Marina," Trish called to her.

Maybe Brett really can read my mind.

Sitting down behind her desk, she picked up the receiver and breathed a seductive greeting into the phone, "Hello there."

"Hello. Miss Hernandez?"

The unfamiliar voice jolted her back to reality. "Uh, yes. This is Marina."

"My name is Dwight Wallace, Miss Hernandez. I'm with Northern Diving Centers."

Her mouth went dry. Was the student-referral partnership alive again? Papa would be ecstatic. She sat up straight and her palms grew clammy.

"Good morning, Mr. Wallace." She struggled to keep her voice steady and professional. "Please, call me Marina. What can I do for you?"

"Well, Marina, I'm going to be in town for a couple days. I was hoping I could stop by while I'm here, and take a look at your facilities."

"You're here, in West Palm Beach?"

"Yes. I'm staying at the Surfside."

"Of course you're welcome to visit." Her mind raced. The shop did the most business on weekends. That would be the best time to impress him. "How about Saturday afternoon?"

"I'll be flying out Friday evening. I apologize for the short notice. Do you mind if I drop by after lunch tomorrow?"

“Tomorrow?” A leaden weight settled on her chest. Her heart could hardly beat under the crushing load. Not tomorrow! She wanted to be with Brett tomorrow.

But this is my big chance to show Papa I'm a competent businesswoman.

Mr. Wallace said, “We were impressed with the information you sent us. But I’d like a few photos to add to our file.”

She couldn’t say no. She had to tell him to come, and she had to be there when he arrived. Papa would want to hear all the details. And she needed to be absolutely certain nothing went wrong. Her shoulders slumped. All the oxygen seemed to have been sucked out of the room.

She closed her eyes and forced out, “I suppose, if it has to be tomorrow, I’ll be here.”

“I’d like to meet you, but if you’ll be tied up, I’ll be fine wandering on my own.”

Mortification flooded her veins. Had she sounded unenthusiastic? “It’s no problem to rearrange my schedule. I’ll look forward to showing you around.”

“Thank you, then. I’d appreciate a tour.”

She wet her lips and asked hopefully, “Has there been any progress on your end? The last time I spoke to anyone at your corporate headquarters, the plans seemed to be rather sketchy.”

“There’s been definite progress, and we’re still very interested.”

She glanced at the evening dress hanging in her closet.

Her vision of dancing with Brett returned, but the music was scratchy as the band stumbled to a halt. Her heart sank. She’d have to tell Brett he’d be going alone. Another thought hit, and the bottom dropped out of her world. If the deal went through, she’d be so busy she might never have time to go anywhere else with him either.

“Hello? Miss Hernandez?”

Jolted, she swallowed the lump in her throat and forced a welcoming tone into her voice. “What time should I expect you?”

“Around one-thirty would be convenient.”

The same time Brett will be getting his award.

“Marina? Are you still there?”

“Ah...yes. That will be fine, Mr. Wallace. I’ll look forward to seeing you then.”

She hung up the phone and stared blindly into space. Her eyelids stung. If this was such wonderful news, why did she feel like crying? She caught her bottom lip between her teeth. What would Brett say? How could she tell him?

She moistened her lips and tried to think of appropriate words. Maybe if she occupied her hands and straightened some merchandise her subconscious would supply the right phrasing. She straightened for fifteen minutes. Nada. None of the explanations she came up with seemed good enough. She inspected the

shop floor for dust-bunnies. No answers there. She looked for fingerprints on the glass shelves. No hints. How could she tell Brett about her change of plans?

Papa's ship's clock chimed four and broke her spell of procrastination. She'd just have to hope for inspiration when he answered the phone. She needed to tell him. *Now*.

Pulling in a massive breath, she squared her shoulders, forced herself to go back into her office, lifted the phone, and started punching in his cell number. She stopped after the third digit. The phone was the wrong way. She owed him the courtesy of breaking the news face to face.

"I'm sorry, but he's busy with a patient." Brett's receptionist said.

"Would you tell him Marina is here?"

"I'll tell the nurse, and she can give him the message." The receptionist mumbled into the phone and waited. A minute later, she smiled and arched an eyebrow at Marina. "He'll be out in a minute. He said to make sure you wait."

Marina sat in a red leather chair next to a chest overflowing with toys. A toddler investigating the toys looked up and grinned at her. He was a beautiful child with shiny, blond hair and huge, hazel eyes framed by curly lashes. She flashed a tender smile back at him. The boy clamped a fuzzy bear between his left hand and the cast on his right arm. He stood on short, pudgy legs and offered her his prize.

"Thank you," she said.

A young woman with the same golden hair walked over and took the boy's hand. "Don't bother the lady, Shawn. Come play over here."

"That's okay. He's not bothering me."

The boy wiggled his hand free from his mother's. Then he climbed up on the chair beside Marina. With a giggle, he plopped down into her lap.

The woman shook her head, smiled, and reached out to lift him.

Marina ruffled his silky hair. "He's okay here. That's a big cast for such a small person. What happened to his arm?"

The woman sat. "He just started walking, and he's still pretty unsteady on his feet. When he heard my husband coming home after work, he tried to get down a flight of stairs and fell."

Marina gasped. "Yikes. He could have broken a lot more than his arm."

"I know. I never should have let him out of my sight for even one second. I thought I'd die when I saw him starting to fall. I grabbed for him and almost fell head-first on top of him." The woman shook her head and shuddered. "It's been a nightmare. But at least he's healing nicely now, and Dr. Sutherland has helped us out. He knows my husband's job is unconventional and we don't have insurance. So, he's not charging us his full fee."

“What does your husband do?”

“He’s an Elvis impersonator.”

Marina fought to keep a straight face. “An Elvis impersonator?”

“It’s all right. Go ahead and laugh, everybody does. I know it sounds strange, but it’s a steady job. He gets exposure for his singing talent, and he can stay home with us in the daytime. He even brings Shawn in for checkups when I have to work.”

The boy cuddled against Marina, laid his head on her breast, and her heart melted. “I’m surprised there’s anywhere for him to work here,” she said. “I thought shows like that were just in Las Vegas. I mean, Elvis has been dead for so long. You’d think most people would have forgotten him by now.”

“There’s no chance of that. Death has made Elvis bigger than in life. He’s an icon now.”

Shawn slid to the floor and his mother steadied him before he toddled off to play.

Marina stared at the beautiful little boy with the horrid cast and her heart twisted. Then she realized Brett saw children in pain every day. She stared at the catastrophic result of a parent’s moment of carelessness and had a deeper understanding of his remark about a child being the top priority in a parent’s life. A man and woman who brought a precious baby into this world needed do everything humanly possible to nurture, love, and protect that child.

Brett stuck his head through a doorway.

She turned, and their eyes met. The lines next to his eyes crinkled and a full smile crossed his face. Feeling a pang of guilt about her mission, her mouth went dry.

“Marina, what a wonderful surprise. Come in for a minute.”

He wagged his fingers toward Shawn and said to the nurse standing near the desk, “Maggie, would you get Shawn ready in room four, please?”

Brett ushered Marina into an office decorated with blue wainscoting and cartoon character wallpaper. He closed the door and immediately slipped his arms around her waist and pulled her close.

“I’ve been thinking about you all day,” he said. “It must be true that you can mentally will another person to appear.” He tilted his head and slanted his mouth over hers.

She melted into his warmth and breathed in his scent. Her pulse accelerated to a frantic pace. Her skin tingled, and she lost herself in heavenly sensations. Sliding her palms over his back, she wished they could sneak out and run away. Fantasies of the two of them escaping to a deserted island heated her embrace.

He broke the kiss and leaned his forehead against hers. “I want to tell you something I’ve never said to a woman before, because I’ve never felt this way about a woman before.” He pulled in a deep breath. “I love you, Marina.”

Her heart stumbled and skipped a beat. Bubbles of joy filled her chest.

He loved her!

She opened her mouth to tell him how she felt and admit she loved him too. Should she say those words? Should she leap over the huge crevasse into that unfamiliar world? Would it make the pain of eventually losing him worse? Her mind snapped back to the reason she was here. A shiver ran down her spine. She stiffened.

“I need to talk to you, Brett.”

He blinked and cringed like he’d been expecting her to reciprocate his feelings and instead she’d just slapped his face. “About what?”

She splayed her fingers on his chest and pushed him gently away. “Tomorrow.”

His words tiptoed into the air. “What about tomorrow?”

Despite all her searching, there was no best way to tell him. She bit down on her bottom lip then blurted, “I can’t go with you.”

He drew back, cupped his hands on her shoulders, and frowned. “Tell me you didn’t just say that.”

She blew out her breath and nodded. “I’m sorry. But it’s true. Something has come up, and I have to be here tomorrow.”

Deep furrows creased his brow. “What is it? Has something happened to your father?”

“No. No, he’s fine.”

“Then what? What’s so important it can’t wait until you get back?”

“Remember the travel deal I told you about?”

He stared at her and nodded slowly. “Yes.”

“The representative of Northern Diving called this morning. He’s in town, only for tomorrow, and wants to see the shop and take some pictures.”

“Is this make or break for the survival of the business?”

“No. Things are doing better, and I can survive without it. But a deal with them would be like adding frosting to a cake.”

“Is he bringing a contract?”

“No, but he said they’re still very interested.”

He held up a hand and cut her off. “You mean this is about someone walking through the shop and taking pictures? You’re going to trash our plans to be a tour guide?”

“He wants to check Paradise out.”

Brett shrugged. “So let him. Trish and Greg will be there. They can give him a royal tour.”

Her mouth dropped open in shock. “What? No, you can’t be serious. I have to do it myself. This is too important.”

His expression soured. “And what about our plans? They’re not important?”

“Papa wants this deal so much.”

He crossed his arms. “What about what you and I want?”

“Please, Brett. I have to do this.”

“To prove to your father you’re as good a businessperson as your brother would have been?”

She gasped. Were all her secrets so blatantly obvious to him?

“It’s not just that,” she said. “You have to understand. This could mean the deal is going through.”

“I understand.” His voice turned low and gruff. “I understand perfectly. The business comes first. Whatever crumb is left, I can have.”

She planted her fists on her hips. “Do you expect me to just forget about the business?”

“I’m not asking you to forget it. I’m asking you to think of your own life. I want you to start living for yourself. I want you to do what makes you happy instead of wasting your life trying to please your father.”

“That’s not the way it is.”

His jaw muscles flexed. “Yes it is. You’ve enslaved yourself to that shop and your father. And if I want to be with you, you’re expecting me to accept those terms. Well, I refuse to do that.”

“I’d go if I could. I planned to go. But this isn’t about just an average day at work. Showing Mr. Wallace around the shop is important.”

“For God’s sake, Marina. We’re not talking about a life or death situation here. We’re talking about pictures, a possible business deal and the potential to make some extra money. People, health, love, those things are important. Not money! If what we have is important to you, if I’m important to you, you’re going to have to rein in your obsession with work.”

She narrowed her eyes. “That’s easy for you to say. You have success and money.”

A vein pulsed in his temple. “Yes. I’ve attained my professional goals. But along the way, I’ve discovered prestige and money are hollow companions. They don’t provide love or happiness. Running on a treadmill chasing your father’s approval isn’t going to bring you happiness either. You have to face the truth and stop pushing yourself so hard.”

“I have to be at the shop tomorrow. I have to do everything I can to ensure it stays profitable in the future.”

“Then stay,” he shot back. “But I’m warning you, don’t expect me to put my feelings on hold. My life is too short, and my time on this earth is too precious to waste.”

“It’s only one day.”

“No, it’s more than that,” he said, his eyes fierce. “It’s our future. If you choose to stay with the shop, that’s your choice. But I won’t settle for a part-time, second-fiddle relationship.”

She bit on her bottom lip and looked away. Her words came out in a strangled plea. “There’s nothing else I can do.”

“Yes there is. If you’d thought this through realistically, you’d see you have some perfectly good options.”

Marina felt hot tears welling in her eyes. “You have to understand. Closing this deal will show Papa I’m not an empty-headed little girl. This will make him see I’m qualified to run the shop. Once he changes his beliefs about women being unsuited for business, we’ll be partners like he was planning to be with Ricki. Our whole relationship will change for the better.”

Hurt flooded into his face and his shoulders stiffened. “It’s your choice.”

“I’m sorry, Brett. I just can’t go.”

He turned his back to her.

A barrier fell between them. She reached out and touched his shoulder.

He flinched and stepped away.

His rejection was like a physical blow to her chest. She turned on her heels and staggered from the room.

Outside his office, she covered her mouth with a hand and broke into a run. Her breath came in gasps, and pain tore at her heart. Tears blurred her eyes. She fisted her other hand tightly and kept rushing toward her car. Maybe if she put more distance between them, she’d be better able to fight the smothering sadness. Maybe distance would prevent her from turning and going back.

It has to be this way.

Driving away, she swiped at a fat tear rolling down her cheek and caught her bottom lip between her teeth. Why couldn’t Brett understand? She only wanted Papa to see her as a valuable person. She needed him to acknowledge he was wrong so she could erase all her self-doubts.

How could Brett expect her to turn her back on an opportunity to prove her competence once and for all when it was so close? Couldn’t he see he was asking for too much?

She clenched her teeth to stop her chin from quivering. Maybe she’d be better off without him. Her life was just fine. She didn’t need him or any other man interfering. She scarcely had time to breathe, much less have a relationship.

So what if I love him?

Chapter Eighteen

Brett pulled a garment bag from the closet and threw it onto the bed.

I don't need her with me to have a good time. If she can't take time out for me, then the hell with her. I got along without her fine before, and I'll do it again.

He yanked open the top drawer of the bureau, grabbed a fistful of underwear, and slammed the drawer shut. He pitched the briefs into the suitcase then marched back to the bureau and ripped open another drawer.

He stood for a minute, staring at the neatly folded socks.

Did he need two pairs of socks or three? Why was she so obstinate? Had he already packed his black tie with his suit? Was that business deal *really* the reason she didn't want to go? Why didn't she reciprocate when he'd said he loved her? Why had he been so stupid and said it first?

Damn, he couldn't even think.

He blew out his breath, stomped downstairs to the bar, poured an inch of brandy into a snifter, and then walked to the patio doors. The water in the pool shimmered in the afternoon light, and his mind sped back to the boat trip just two short weeks ago.

He thought about the dolphins leaping from the sea but immediately pictured Marina in her swimsuit, looking like an Aztec goddess.

He remembered Greg swimming after the school of snapper then suddenly Marina's dark, luminous eyes were smiling at him through the lens of her mask.

He tried to turn his thoughts to the fish and the striking colors of the coral formations, but his mind conjured up images of Marina gliding through the water like a captivating mermaid.

The bittersweet memories filled his chest with crushing sadness. He'd been foolish for believing Marina was the woman to trust with his soul.

Gulping the brandy, he walked back to the bar, splashed another round into his glass and downed it. His throat burned from the strong liquor. He winced and shook his head. What now? How did he go back to living without her?

He hurled the brandy snifter into the trash.

I chose the wrong woman. I stupidly believed I could convince her to change. Well now it's time to face the truth: no amount of love or determination is going to make her into the woman I want. Our relationship is over.

He slammed the bar shut, strode to the foyer, snatched up his briefcase, and then stomped up the stairs to finish packing. Looking at the bed where he'd made love to her, his blood heated with anger. How could he have deluded himself for so long? He clenched his teeth and vowed to learn from his mistakes. From now on, his attitude toward women would be different.

With his suit halfway into the garment bag, he stopped short as an idea took shape. He pulled his PDA out of his briefcase, flipped it open and scanned the telephone listings for the name and number of the nurse who'd worked in maternity. She'd been very bold and unambiguous with her invitations. And after she'd changed jobs and moved to Miami, she'd made sure he had her new phone number.

Brett stared at the nurse's number for a few seconds. There were other mermaids in the sea.

He went to the telephone. Maybe the airline would swap tomorrow's early morning flight for one leaving this afternoon.

Clutching the battered Toyota's steering wheel and staring straight ahead, Marina followed the highway out of town. Pain and anger and shock and confusion churned in her brain until her thoughts were jumbled and she felt ready to explode. Highway lane lines blurred. Salty tears ran to the corners of her mouth. She had no destination in mind, but pressed down harder on the accelerator to get farther away. Away from the shop. And far away from Brett.

After several miles, she controlled her sniffing and her tears dried. But her throat felt raw, and a hollow ache clawed at her chest.

Suddenly, a horn blared, and a car cut across in front of her.

Her heart stumbled. She stomped on the brake pedal. Tires screeched. The Toyota lurched and came to a halt.

She shook her head to focus her senses, blinked twice, and looked around to see who the fool was who had almost killed her. Checking the rearview mirror, she saw she'd just sped through a red light.

Marina's stomach turned over. She was the fool.

She pulled onto the shoulder of the road. With her blood pressure returning to normal, she took her bearings. The beige stucco apartment building on the right pinpointed her location at less than a mile from the nursing home.

A sudden urge to tell Papa about tomorrow's visit by the Northern representative jumped her mind's eye into his room. She envisioned herself walking in and making the triumphant announcement. She imagined how he would smile broadly and praise her management skills then enfold her in his arms and hug her tightly. He would say he was proud to have her for a daughter.

She squared her shoulders and raised her chin.

Now Papa would have to admit women were as intelligent as men and could do more than scrub stinky laundry, wash dirty dishes and have babies. Now he'd see she was just as capable as Ricki.

Thinking of Ricki made the words of the woman in Brett's office flash into her mind: *Death has made Elvis bigger than in life....*

She recalled Ricki's high school grades were barely good enough to graduate. After he finally got into the local community college, he'd failed his first semester of accounting. But Papa never considered his son's shortcomings; Ricki was always on a pedestal. As each day passed since his death, Ricki's image grew in stature. In Papa's eyes, Ricki's death had made him bigger than in life.

She lifted her head and stared down the roadway that led to the nursing home. Even if she signed a fabulous agreement with the Northern chain, Papa would still lash her with how Ricki would have handled it better or sooner or more profitably.

Marina closed her eyes, rested her forehead on the steering wheel, and sucked in a deep breath. After Ricki drowned, she'd let herself believe she could take his place in Papa's heart. All he had left was one child. Surely her sex wouldn't matter.

But she'd been wrong. Papa would never consider her anything but a trivial female. He grew up in México. Early in life, his father taught him the same message he'd been taught: sons were a treasure, daughters were a nuisance, and men were superior to women. His beliefs were too deeply rooted to change.

Papa will never consider me an equal to Ricki. I can't compete with centuries of machismo beliefs or an iconic image of a fallen brother. I need to grow up, accept the truth and move on.

Tears burned her eyelids. She clenched her fists and glared in the direction of the nursing home. "Daughters are just as important as sons, Papa. I'm much more than you'll ever be able to see."

She realized she'd been letting his beliefs control her life. And she'd be a fool to continue her self-destructive behavior because of his old-world upbringing and stubborn refusal to change. Brett was right. Running on a treadmill chasing Papa's approval wasn't going to bring her happiness.

Fresh tears welled in her eyes.

I love Brett. When I'm with him, I'm happy.

Emptiness gnawed at her heart, and she covered her mouth with her hands.

Brett loved her. He'd said so.

Her heart bubbled with happiness just remembering his words. But just as quickly, the bubble burst. She'd destroyed any chance they might have had for a future together.

A car sped by.

She glanced into the rearview mirror. Behind her was emptiness.

She shifted her gaze forward through the windshield and saw the possibilities ahead. Suddenly, she knew exactly what she needed to do.

At the edge of town, Marina pulled out her cell phone and called Brett's office.

His answering service picked up. "I'm sorry, Dr. Sutherland is out-of-town. Would you like to speak to the doctor covering his practice?"

"No...thank you."

She punched in his home number, and the phone rang five times. His answering machine clicked on, and his voice instructed her to call his office.

A cold lump settled in her stomach.

Speculating he was busy packing, she decided to drive to his house.

Eighteen minutes ticked away on her dashboard clock before she pulled into his driveway. She sat in the car and stared at the front door with her emotions bouncing between hope and dread. Would he still be angry? Would he send her away? Or would he take her into his arms?

Tiny lanterns dimly illuminated small circles on the sidewalk, but the house was dark and looked deserted. She drew in a deep fortifying breath, got out of the car, and rang the doorbell.

Biting on the inside of her cheek, she waited.

A calico cat slinked across the front yard, climbed the steps, and rubbed against her legs. Crickets resumed their shrill chirps. Somewhere down the block, laughter echoed then stopped. Starkly aware of her loneliness, she shivered.

She rang the bell again.

The chimes sounded on the other side of the door. But no one answered.

Minutes passed. She sighed and admitted Brett wasn't home. Suddenly weary, she trudged to her car, glancing back at the house every few seconds, hoping to see a light. None appeared. She buckled herself into the driver's seat and drove slowly away.

At the end of the street, she stopped on the shoulder of the road and rummaged in her purse for her electronic address book. She found it, located the number she needed, and punched it into her cell phone.

Greg answered on the third ring.

"Hi, Greg. This is Marina. Listen, by any chance have you seen your Uncle Brett this afternoon?"

"No. But he called and told Mom he wouldn't be stopping over after dinner because he changed his plane reservation and was leaving for Miami tonight."

More sadness permeated her bones. She sagged back into the seat.

"How come you're not with him?"

"Ah, because of...a little mix up."

"Are you meeting him there?"

"Meeting him?"

"In Miami."

“Yes,” she said more to herself than to Greg. “I’m going to meet him there. I’m going down tonight too, just on a later flight.”

I’m going to find out if he’s as old fashioned and stubborn as my father, or if he can love me unconditionally and accept me as I am.

“Okay, well, see you when you get back. Don’t worry about anything at the shop. Trish and I will have everything under control.”

Her breath caught. “Oh my gosh, speaking of that, I almost forgot. A man named Dwight Wallace from Northern Diving Centers will be coming by the shop tomorrow at one. Do you think you could give him a deluxe tour?”

“Sure, no problem.”

“We’ve been discussing a training partnership arrangement, and it could mean a lot of new business if he’s impressed with the facilities.”

He chuckled. “I won’t show him our Tarzan swing, then. But I’ll make sure he sees everything else.”

“Thanks, Greg.”

“You’re welcome. Have fun.”

A lump formed in her throat. “I’ll try. Good night.”

Her pulse sped up as she formulated a plan. Fly, or drive? If traffic was light, she could be there in two hours. But could her wreck of a car go the distance? Weighing the possibility of breaking down halfway to Miami against the cost of a commuter flight, she rushed to the shop to get her luggage. If the ticket was reasonably priced, and if she had enough credit left on her charge card, the twenty-five minute flight might be best.

Brett slid his briefcase under the seat in front of him, clicked his lap belt together, and watched the line of passengers shuffling onto the commuter flight bound for Miami. He recognized a few as local doctors and guessed they were all going to the same conference.

Fellow pediatrician Rashad Turiyan stopped in the aisle.

“That was close. I almost missed the flight,” Rashad said. “A last minute case of chicken pox.”

“Who’s covering for you?” he asked. “You should have let them take it.”

Rashad put a small case into the overhead compartment then slid into the neighboring seat. “My new partner was covering, but he was over at the hospital.”

“Every emergency seems to happen at five o’clock or on a weekend.”

“You can say that again. I need a strong drink and a long vacation.” Rashad rummaged in a leather satchel. “Want a piece of today’s paper?”

The prospect of spending the next thirty minutes making polite conversation was more than Brett could bear. "Sure. Thanks."

He took the newspaper, opened it wide, and buried his face between pages twenty-two and twenty-three.

The small plane backed away from the terminal, and the stewardess recited the emergency procedures he knew by heart. He stared at the newsprint in front of him as the plane left the ground and headed eastward over the Atlantic, banked right in a wide arc, then leveled off and headed for Miami. He glanced out the window and watched Miami get closer and Marina get farther away.

The seat belt sign flashed yellow. Cool air blew into his face from the overhead vent. The turboprop engines droned outside the windows.

Deciding that actually reading the newspaper might distract him from haunting memories of Marina, he focused on the newsprint, scanned a couple columns and turned the page. A bold headline caught his eye: *Former Postal Employee Shoots Three in Missoula Spree.*

He recalled a night as an ER intern. He'd treated two gunshot victims, but despite three hours of intensive work by a team of six doctors and nurses, both victims died of head trauma. Wondering about the fate of the three victims in Montana, he read the beginning of the article:

Three people were hospitalized with life-threatening bullet wounds this morning after a terminated postal employee opened fire in the downtown Missoula federal building.

Armand Marshall, a twenty-three-year veteran of the postal service, was laid off earlier this week. Vowing revenge against his former supervisor, he went on a rampage at seven forty this morning. After shooting three clerks with a Saturday night special, and discovering the supervisor was home ill, he turned the handgun on himself. All three victims are expected to survive. Marshall was declared dead at the scene.

Brett blew out his breath. How could a man shoot three innocent people and kill himself over a job?

A line from a med school psychology textbook popped into his mind: *What we do is a large part of who we are.* The explanation became clear. The man's sense of identity had been taken away when he was laid off.

A person's work is important to them. It's part of their identity, whether they're a postal worker or a doctor.

Or a dive instructor.

Brett lowered the paper, rested his head against the seatback, and let out a sigh.

Marina's profession was part of her identity. She might be trying to please her father, but she had other reasons for working. He remembered the glow on her face when Greg completed his dives. She was proud of her teaching accomplishments and took satisfaction from sharing her love of diving.

He squirmed in the seat. Expecting her to give up her profession had been foolish. It was tantamount to asking her to sacrifice her identity. Dammit, why hadn't he realized that all along and walked away before getting into a relationship that was doomed?

Regret brought a sour taste to his mouth.

The *Fasten Seat Belts* sign dinged and lit up.

He landed in Miami a million miles from Marina.

Marina jiggled her foot and tapped her fingers on the armrest while she waited to board her flight. The voice of a salesman on his cell phone checking in with his office reminded her of the Northern Diving Center representative. She realized she owed him the courtesy of a call.

She pulled out her phone, got the number of the Surfside from information, dialed, and asked the desk clerk to connect her with Dwight Wallace's room.

Three rings then, "Dwight Wallace."

"Good evening, Mr. Wallace. It's Marina Hernandez from Paradise Dive Center."

"Yes, Marina. What can I do for you?"

"I want to let you know I'm sorry, I won't be able to make our appointment tomorrow. But I've arranged for an employee to give you a complete tour. Greg Erikson will be waiting for you and be able to answer any and all of your questions."

"Is that the boy in the wheelchair?"

She blinked. "Yes. Do you know him?"

"Only from your Web site. I went to your site this afternoon to do some more research on your shop. I'm very impressed with your inventive programs for the disabled. And what you've done for this boy, Greg."

The photos of Greg swinging out over the pool flashed into her mind's eye. *Ay caramba!* Would Northern disapprove? Was the deal dead? She scoured her brain for an appropriate response.

"I was hoping to meet him and congratulate him on earning his certification," Mr. Wallace said.

She shifted in her seat, re-crossing her legs. "I'm sure he'll appreciate that. Greg's been a wonderful student and employee. His determination and enthusiasm are my inspiration for turning to the disabled-student niche market." The gate attendant announced the beginning of boarding for flight forty-seven. Marina rushed to end the call. "As I said, I'm sorry I can't be there, but I'm confident he can show you anything you need to see."

"Sounds good. For your information, I'll just be verifying your shop physically exists and the building condition matches the photos on your Web site. The personal inspection is a technicality, but something we do annually with all our affiliate shops."

Our affiliate shops. Her heart jumped with joy at the implication of his words. “Are you saying the deal is moving ahead?”

“Definitely. Our lawyers will contact you sometime next week.”

Exhilaration filled her chest. Then she noticed the dwindling line of passengers filing toward the jetway. A jolt of panic that she could miss her flight had her jumping to her feet and grabbing for her bag. “Thank you for the information, Mr. Wallace. I’m thrilled, and I’ll be looking forward to hearing from them.”

Quickly saying good-bye, she shut off her phone, put business out of her mind, and dashed to board the plane that would take her to Brett.

Chapter Nineteen

Brett hung his garment bag, then flopped onto the hotel bed and stared at the stark white ceiling. The smothering quiet made him think of a tomb. Deciding he'd go mad if he barricaded himself in this bleak room and dwelt on being here alone, he pushed back to his feet.

He rubbed the back of his neck and huffed out his breath. But what to do? The idea of a date with the flirtatious nurse had lost its appeal. He cringed at the thought of going to the restaurant or lobby and running into someone he knew. Maybe a walk on the busy street where he could get lost in a mass of strangers.

Once outside the hotel, he turned right. Within a few blocks, the sidewalk was crowded with shoppers. He tried to let his mind go blank. *One foot in front of the other. Don't think beyond the moment. Just navigate between the pedestrians.*

Faceless people streamed by. Exhaust fumes burned his throat. He lost track of time. Then his feet started to throb, protesting the hike in dress shoes. Slowing and looking around, he pushed open the door to a chain bookstore, went in, and wandered the aisles. He stopped in the mystery section and stared vacuously at titles and spines.

A youngster's cries and the sounds of commotion pierced his stupor, and he turned.

In the children's section, a pre-school aged boy was sprawled facedown on the floor. He beat his fists on the carpeting, vigorously kicked his feet, and screamed, "I want the biggest one. The biggest one. The biggest one. You promised."

A panicky-looking woman knelt beside him and rubbed the back of his head. "Please, stop, sweetheart. It's okay. If you want that one, that's what we'll get. Stop now and get up, okay? Please."

Brett pursed his lips. By giving in to the tantrum the woman was reinforcing the child's bad behavior. He'd learn tantrums were effective and his demands would escalate.

The boy quieted. Then he jumped to his feet, ran to a rack, and with triumph clear on his face, snatched up an oversized book.

Meanwhile, an older boy and a man entered the section. The boy bumped into a small girl and swore at her.

The man grabbed his arm and growled, "What just came out of your mouth?"

The boy faced him defiantly. "Shit."

"Where did you learn to talk like that?"

“From Bobby Brozinski. He says it all the time.”

The father dragged the boy toward the door. “Well, you just blew your book, buddy. I’m not buying no rewards for a kid with a foul mouth.”

Brett wondered if punishment alone was the proper solution to the problem. If the father wanted to prevent it from happening again, maybe he should explain why swearing was unacceptable.

He stepped toward the man intending to make the suggestion, but stopped himself abruptly. Who was he to second-guess a parent? He had no children of his own.

Huffing in exasperation, he raked a hand through his hair and turned away.

His gaze landed on a sign above a nearby section: *Parenting*. He scanned the six-foot-high, eight-foot-wide rack and saw hundreds of books on the subject. Each probably touted a different approach, or else only one book would be necessary. Obviously there was no ultimate expert or no one perfect method.

He pondered the thought and suddenly realized parenting was an imprecise art. Every parent had to find their own way, choose what worked for them. A mother or father could only do his or her best. His mouth tightened. Every method might not be one he would personally choose or approve of, but that didn’t mean the children would fail to flourish or grow to be misguided adults.

His mind jumped to his birthday-party conversation with Claudia. She’d experienced their parents’ methods from a completely different perspective than he had, yet they’d both turned into reasonably good adults. From her point of view, their mother had been a hero. Not so from his. But who could really say whether their parents’ methods had been right or wrong? How could he presume to judge them based solely on the slanted and mistaken view he’d developed as a young child? Maybe they deserved more credit than he’d allowed.

He recalled the nursing home visit with Marina’s father. Obviously the man would never win a prize for Father of the Year, but still Marina had grown into a smart, wonderful, caring adult. She’d spent most of her life in a negative environment, but she’d turned out better than okay.

A miracle actually. Her father’s beliefs were so outmoded and unfair.

But weren’t his own beliefs unfair too?

He froze in the middle of the aisle. During their first dinner at Rosa’s, he’d told Marina SCUBA lessons were part of a plan to change his life. But changing his life required more than a change of behavior. He also needed to reexamine his old ways of thinking and modify his beliefs.

All his beliefs.

Asking Marina to give up her career was asking her to give up her identity. Insisting she agree to stay at home with children was a naïve approach to parenting. Finding his so-called perfect wife was no guarantee of a perfect marriage or a perfect family.

What mattered wasn't whether parents were home twenty-four hours a day or away at work striving to put food on the table or give their children a better future. What mattered was the parents cared and did their best. Love was the key.

He considered Marina's devotion to her father. She was a loving person. She would value a family whether she worked outside the home or not. In fact, she'd once told him family was everything.

I should accept that life might not match my flawed fantasies. I should cherish Marina for who she is instead of demanding she change. Love can only flourish when both partners are equals. And family happiness is only possible when everyone in it feels valued and fulfilled.

His chest ached. He realized that when he'd turned his back on her he'd overlooked a simple fact: his life was richer with her than it had ever been before. Sharing her with her father and her work would have been better than not having her at all.

Struck by the irony of his situation, he gave a tired sigh and headed for the store exit. Knowing what he knew now, he could love her unconditionally. But his love and his new insights might be moot points. She'd made it quite clear he wasn't important to her. She didn't reciprocate and say she loved him. Convincing her they were meant to be together and working out their differences was going to be the most important challenge of his life.

Marina ground her teeth for over an hour as her flight waited in line on the taxiway. By the time the commuter plane finally touched down in Miami, her head was throbbing and her neck muscles were twisted into painful knots.

The plane taxied to the terminal then stopped. She grabbed her bags and hurried into the crowd pushing toward the door.

"Ambassador Hotel, please," she instructed the cabby.

At the hotel, she dragged her bags around the huge, glass merry-go-round door and into the lobby. The heels on her sandals thumped loudly on the marble floor as she rushed to the long reception desk.

"Hi, I'm Marina Hernandez. I have a reservation."

The desk clerk typed on a computer keyboard, studied his monitor, pursed his lips, and shook his head slowly.

"I'm sorry, Miss Hernandez, I don't see anything here. Do you have a confirmation number?"

She sighed. "Doctor Brett Sutherland made the reservation. But it was for the conference starting tomorrow and might not include tonight."

The clerk's fingers flew over his keyboard again. "Here it is. Yes, you're right. Your reservation is for tomorrow. Unfortunately, that room is occupied tonight. With the medical conference starting in the morning, many of the doctors arrived this afternoon."

“Is anything else available?”

“The penthouse.”

He leaned over the desk and peered down his nose at her battered overnight bag then arched one eyebrow.

Pride stiffened her spine. She shook her hair back from her face and asked, “How much is that?”

“Nine hundred and eighty dollars a night.”

Her shoulders slumped. “Oh. Well, I guess I’ll have to find another hotel.”

“The room you reserved will be ready for you tomorrow after eleven a.m.”

“Can you tell me if Dr. Sutherland has checked in yet?”

“Yes, he took an alternate room for tonight. He arrived just in time to get our last vacancy.”

“Do you know if he’s in his room?”

The clerk picked up a phone. “I can call him for you.”

She stared at the floor and chewed her bottom lip. Her heart beat a staccato rhythm. What if Brett wouldn’t forgive her?

Please Heavenly Father, could you just do this one little thing for me? Let him hear me out and understand.

The clerk put down the phone. “I’m sorry, Dr. Sutherland’s not answering.”

“Are you sure? Could you try his room again?”

The man gave her a withering look. “He’s not answering. And it *is* dinnertime.”

She sighed. “All right. I’ll wait in the lobby until he gets back. Is there somewhere I could leave my bags for a while?”

He let out an exasperated breath. “I suppose you could put them behind the desk until the end of my shift. But when I go off duty at eleven, you’ll have to leave.”

She moistened her lips and moved the bags.

“Thank you. I’m sure I’ll be gone long before eleven.”

Chapter Twenty

At nine-thirty, Marina went back to the desk. She fought to keep tears from spilling down her cheeks. “Could you ring Dr. Sutherland’s room once more?”

“I checked a few minutes ago. I’m sure no one has come in since then.”

“Is there another door? Maybe he came in, and you were too busy to notice.”

“All our guests are required to use the front entrance after nine p.m.”

Worry gnawed at her chest. Brett should have been back from dinner long ago, unless maybe he’d been in an accident, or been mugged or hurt. Why else would he be out so late?

She squared her shoulders. The clerk was probably mistaken. She’d have to take control of the situation and check Brett’s room herself.

“What room is Dr. Sutherland in?”

He hesitated.

She felt a surge of panic.

“Please?” She begged silently with her eyes.

His eyes darted toward every corner of the lobby. After a few seconds he whispered. “I could get in trouble for this. But it’s three twenty-four.”

She returned to her seat. But the next time the clerk was distracted, she rushed across the lobby to the elevators. No one questioned her, and the elevator door closed behind her. She breathed a sigh of relief.

On the third floor, she found Brett’s room. Her palms grew moist. She stared at the outside of the plain white door and chewed on her bottom lip. Then, pulling in a deep breath, she raised her hand and knocked.

She listened to her heart beating wildly and waited. One minute, then two. Her blood pounded at the base of her skull, and her neck muscles knotted in tension. He must be in the shower. She knocked again, harder.

“Brett. It’s me, Marina. Please open the door.” She pressed her ear against the door and strained to hear anything.

Silence.

The long empty corridor stretched in both directions. She leaned backwards against the door and sagged onto the maroon carpeting. Sitting and hugging her knees to her chest, she rested her head against the cold, unopened door.

Seconds turned into minutes, minutes stretched to an hour. Her runaway imagination created images of car accidents, muggings, doctors in a chaotic emergency room watching the tracing on a heartbeat monitor and frantically trying to save Brett's life. She pushed those scenes away. Her mind's eye saw him having an intimate dinner with a beautiful, sexy woman. Her worry turned into dejection.

A few minutes before eleven, a security guard pushed out of the stairway. He scowled as he strutted down the hallway and stopped by Marina's feet.

"Are you a registered guest here, Miss?"

"No. I'm waiting for Dr. Sutherland. We were supposed to travel together and got separated."

"You can't loiter up here."

"I'm not loitering, I'm waiting. He'll be back soon, I know it."

He gripped her arm and pulled her to her feet. "Look, lady, I've heard all the stories before. We get you hot Cuban hookers up here all the time. Now, don't give me no trouble, or I'll have to call the cops."

He half-dragged her toward the elevator.

She tried to pull away. "Let go of my arm. You're hurting me."

He rang for the elevator. "I ain't letting go until you're outta here."

Her heart rate surged. "Please. I have to see him. You have to understand."

"I understand everything I need to."

The bell rang signaling the arrival of the elevator. She gritted her teeth and pried at his fingers. Desperate to stay, she planted her feet firmly on the floor.

"I'm not bothering anybody. I've got to see him." She searched for a reasonable explanation that would change the guard's mind.

The guard tightened his grip, growled, and dragged her closer to the elevator doors. "Come on."

"No." If she could get away, maybe she could dash into the stairwell and hide. She twisted and slammed her fist against his wrist at the same time.

The elevator doors rumbled apart.

"Marina!" Brett stood in the center of the open doors.

Her heart knocked, and relief washed over her.

His bewildered gaze shifted to the security guard. "What's going on here?"

"I was waiting for you." She wiggled, but the guard held her fast. "This *simplón* was trying to make me leave."

"Do you know this woman, sir?"

"Yes. Yes, of course."

The guard's grip relaxed slightly.

She heard irritation in Brett's voice, and her stomach turned to lead. Was he angry with the guard or still angry with her? Was he annoyed she'd come?

The guard released her arm, puffed out his chest, and straightened his shoulders. “Can I see your room keycard, sir? Just to verify you’re a registered guest.”

Brett blocked the closing elevator doors. Keeping his eyes locked on hers, he held up a room card for inspection.

“Everything looks okay, then. Sorry for the inconvenience, sir. But we gotta be careful you know.” He sounded less than apologetic.

Marina kneaded the sore spot on her forearm and wished he’d just leave so she could have Brett to herself.

Brett frowned at the guard. “Instead of hassling a respectable women, you ought to be in the bar. I’m sure the hotel management would rather have you down there dealing with the redhead who’s soliciting.”

“A redhead? I toss her out at least once a week.”

“She’s back.”

Brett stepped away from the elevator.

The guard struck an authoritative pose and strode through the closing doors.

A terrible quiet hung in the hallway. Too scared to breathe, Marina stared into Brett’s eyes for an eternity.

His hands seemed to come from nowhere and settle on each side of her face.

“You’re trembling,” he whispered sensuously.

“I was terrified you wouldn’t want to see me.”

He lowered his lips to hers. She closed her eyes. Intoxicated by the scent of his cologne and deafened by the pounding of her heart, she leaned in and clung to him. Time and place faded. All that mattered was the silken texture of his hair, the security of his embrace, and the tingling in her extremities.

He placed kisses lightly over her face and murmured in her ear. “Oh, darling. I’m so glad you’re here.”

“Do you still want me?”

“I’m miserable without you.”

“When I got here, I tried to find you—”

He placed a finger on her lips. “Shhh.”

“I was worried. If anything had happened to you—”

“I went for a long walk then hung out in the bar. I called the dive shop and your cell phone about three hundred times. You had me frantic.”

“I turned my cell off when I got on the plane. I forgot to turn it back on.”

“Just now, I was on my way up here to pack my things. I decided to call the chairman of the organizing committee and tell him I was leaving. It’s late, but he could still find someone to read my speech.”

“You can’t cancel your presentation tomorrow. You’re getting an award.”

“I had to go home and find you. You’re more important. We’re more important.”

“I’m here now, and I’m staying to hear your speech. I’m sorry I almost ruined your trip.” She gazed into his fabulous blue eyes. “I’m so sorry I ever even considered not coming to Miami with you.”

He drew her close and warmed her with a secure hug. “What matters is you’re in my arms.”

“I’ll never let you down again. I promise.”

“You never let me down; I let me down,” he said, glancing away like a guilty man. “I lashed out at you. I asked for too much. I’ve been acting like a stubborn, spoiled child.”

The bell rang for the elevator, the doors slid open, and two men excused themselves as they stepped off and went by.

“We’d better get out of the hallway, or your friend the security guard will be throwing us out for causing a public disturbance.” Brett’s arm slipped around her waist and he steered her toward his door.

“He may still want to throw you out for having an *unregistered* woman in your room.”

“Should we go to your room instead of mine?”

She chuckled. “Either way, my reputation would be shot. But we have no choice; I’m a vagrant. There were no rooms available by the time I arrived.”

He pushed his keycard into the slot and opened the door.

Inside, she faced him and felt a welcome and familiar whirlpool pulling her into the velvet depths of his eyes.

“Marina, I’ve been a fool. But I’ve finally come to my senses. I understand now that loving you requires consideration of your needs as well as my own.” He paused and brushed his fingers over her hair. “I love you, and if you have to be at your shop, I accept that. I’ll be happy we’re together the rest of the time.”

Delight coursed through her. “I love you, Brett. Even while I’m teaching or diving, you’re always in my heart. I’m with you every minute of every day.”

His fingers brushed over her hair. “Do you love me enough to marry me?”

“Yes. Oh, yes!” She laughed with gay abandon and slipped her arms around his neck. Her soul sang as she gazed up into his eyes, adoring his long lashes and the slight crinkle of his skin.

“When?” he asked.

“Anytime. Soon. I believe in short engagements.”

He took her hand, raised it to his sensual mouth, and kissed her fingertips. “When we get home, we’ll make the arrangements.”

“Greg and Trish have helped me out a lot. Their help is the reason I can be here right now. Maybe I’ll ask Trish to be a bridesmaid.”

“Greg will definitely be my best man.”

“We can have a candlelight ceremony at St. Peter’s, the church by the shop.”

He trailed a finger along her bottom lip, and his voice stroked warmth along her spine. “We’ll honeymoon at a plush dive resort in the Caribbean.”

She closed her eyes and grinned. “I know just the place.”

“This Sunday, we can go visit your father together and see if he wants to give away the bride. Do you think he’ll approve?”

“He’ll grumble a little at first, maybe complain I’m deserting him.” She shook her head and rolled her eyes in amusement. “But watch him very carefully. He may look frail on the outside, but inside he’s sharp as a stainless spear. The second he realizes how much he stands to gain from having a son-in-law, he’ll be grinning like a barracuda.”

“Maybe he’ll start to like doctors.”

“I’m sure he’ll appreciate having a man to talk to.”

“Not if he thinks I’m causing you to neglect the dive shop.”

A smile tugged at her lips. “No problem. I’m going to be making some big changes there he’s going to love. The more Papa told me I couldn’t manage the shop, the more my pride kept me from admitting he might be right. But the truth is, I’ll never manage the shop as well as Papa did because I really don’t like managing the shop.”

“But you love to teach.”

“Yes, but the retailing end of the business and all the paperwork is sheer drudgery. My cousin Manuel has been talking about someday opening his own dive center. I called him earlier tonight and convinced him the best way to get into the business is to work for me permanently and be my manager for four or five years. He’ll be happy as a rabbit in a cabbage patch keeping the books, ordering equipment, and dealing with suppliers.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I’ll watch over Manuel’s shoulder, probably referee between him and Papa occasionally. But mostly, I’ll do what I love to do: concentrate on teaching. I’m going to modify the pool with a ramp, and replace the Tarzan swing with an official lift, and specialize in classes and dive trips for the physically challenged. Greg’s shown me there are a lot of people who want to dive despite their disabilities. But right now, most schools won’t go the extra mile to teach them and most group trips aren’t geared to accommodate their special needs.”

His forehead creased. “That’s a big move. Are you sure?”

“Positive.”

“And you think your father will accept all this?”

“Absolutely. Hiring Manuel was his idea to start with, so the fact that he’s coming will feed Papa’s machismo. He’ll take credit for solving all my problems, feel like a vital part of the business, and be overjoyed to have a male family member running the shop again.”

She ran her fingers through his hair. “I want to spend all the time I can with you. As long as you’re willing to compromise and have a wife with a career, I’ll make sure separating the managing from the teaching works out.” She rubbed against him, and her breath stumbled. “When we decide to start a family, I can bring in other instructors to do the pool work for a while, sit back in a rocking chair on our patio, and nurse Brett Junior until his heart’s content.”

Their eyes collided. In the depths of his, she saw a reflection of her own desire.

He flashed her a boyishly disarming grin. “Hmmm, Brett Junior. Now there’s a pleasant thought. We’ll have to make time to work on him and a little Marina, or Mónica, or Marta, too.” His hands slid over her back.

She gave him a meaningful look. “I have a lifetime available for you.”

About the Author

Kathleen Mix earned a B.S. in Computer Science and Engineering from the University of Connecticut. But as a licensed charter captain and avid sailor, she has spent many years roaming the U.S. coastline, exploring the Bahamas and diving the tropical waters of the Caribbean and the coastal countries of South America.

Currently, Kathleen's boat is docked in Virginia, and she sails on Chesapeake Bay with her husband and a Sheltie named Eve. To read about her sailing adventures and see photos of her boat, please visit www.kathleenmix.com. She'd love to hear from you. Send an email to kathleen@kathleenmix.com or visit her on MySpace.

The best doesn't come cheap...and this time it could cost him his heart.

No Matter What

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Adam Steele is good. Good at using his money to get his way. Money always works—until he realizes he can't buy his daughter's way out of her new wheelchair. Three private physical therapists later, he's almost given up on Emily walking again. Then he meets Dr. Jaden Monroe. And his match.

Jaden doesn't know the meaning of the word "quit". But she knows a lot about "fired" after a public blowout with her ex jeopardizes the donation her hospital was counting on. Now the most tempting man she's ever met has made her just the offer she needs to save the new children's rehab wing—one million dollars to rehabilitate his daughter. In return she finds herself making Adam rash promises: that his daughter will walk in time to take the lead in the school play. And that he won't entice her into his bed. No matter what.

But Jaden didn't anticipate a teen whose injuries are more than physical. Or a man so passionate and devoted—and as tenacious as she is. As Adam wears down her defenses with kiss after kiss, the only thing harder than keeping her promise will be keeping a hold on her heart.

Warning: Contains heated arguments that erupt only slightly more often than hot kissing, a new perspective on kitchen appliances, and sizzling sex occurring everywhere BUT the bedroom (though they eventually make it there).

Enjoy the following excerpt for No Matter What:

"That's not what happened and you know it." He swam to where she was grasping the side.

"Oh? Then what happened?"

"I scared you." He said it matter-of-factly.

"Scared me? What are you talking about?"

"I almost kissed you, you panicked and ducked, I lost my balance and we fell in."

She opened her mouth to reply, then quickly snapped it shut again. Was she more shocked that he thought he made her nervous...or that he was right? She began shaking her head.

He nodded his head in response. "Yes. You panicked when you realized I was going to kiss you. You're scared of me."

"I knew that you were pretty full of yourself the first time we met, but this is way over the top," she declared, but her voice lacked conviction.

She moved to pull herself out of the water and he quickly grasped her upper arm. "I don't think so."

She sucked in a quick breath, but she held still, even as she realized that was probably a bad idea.

“Look me in the eye and tell me that you didn’t know I was going to kiss you.”

She struggled to swallow as she looked into his eyes. But no words came out. Her gaze dropped to his collarbone and she said, “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

He smiled and moved an inch closer. She stiffened but didn’t move away. “Jaden, just so you know, I had every intention of kissing you a few minutes ago. I don’t want there to be any confusion about that.”

Hot and cold, numb and tingling all at once. She was amazed what a few simple words could do. Though she also realized that it was the tone of voice, not the actual words, that affected her so profoundly. Several seconds passed before she found her voice and said quietly, “I’m not scared of you.”

One corner of his mouth tipped up. “No?”

She shook her head and pressed her lips firmly together, telling herself she did *not* want to know what kissing him would be like.

“You’re not nervous at all about my attraction to you and your equal attraction to me? You’re not even a little anxious about me kissing you and where that might lead?”

She shook her head again and managed to pry her lips apart. “Even if you did kiss me—and I’m not saying that I think that’s a good idea—it wouldn’t lead anywhere. I think you should know that up front.”

“You’re certainly entitled to your opinion, Jaden,” he said soothingly, rubbing his palm up and down her arm where he still held her. “But I think that *you* should know up front that I’m very certain, eventually, I *will* kiss you and it *will* lead to something.”

He moved in a little closer, making her press her back against the rough side of the pool. “But because you’re skittish about this, today I’ll settle for this.”

He slid his hand down her arm slowly, creating goosebumps in the wake of his touch. Then he took her hand and lifted it to his lips, pressing a firm but gentle kiss to the center of her palm. A shiver went through her and she knew that it did not escape his attention.

He pulled himself out of the pool and shook water from his hair. He stood on the side and shrugged out of his jacket, tossed it onto the chair, pulled his shirt from the waist of his pants and began unbuttoning it. He peeled it off, wadded it into a ball and squeezed water from it. Jaden watched every move, unable to tear her eyes away even when he turned and saw her studying him. He kicked his shoes off, watching her the whole time. She didn’t move. But when his hands went to his belt, she shook herself from her daze.

“You’re not undressing right here!”

He looked around. “I can’t go dripping water through the whole house.”

She pulled herself from the pool and stomped to the chair where there was another dry towel. She tossed it toward him. “And I’m *not* skittish.”

He began toweling off. "That will make seducing you much easier."

She spun toward him in the midst of pulling on a long T-shirt, only one arm poking through the sleeve. "*Seducing me?*" Her voice was almost a shriek.

Shrugging, he asked, "What did you think all the kissing would lead to?"

"We're not kissing."

"Not right now," he agreed. "But that will change soon."

"This is nuts. Is this the real reason Kathy and Cindy quit?" she asked, naming two of the three therapists who had come and gone from the Steele estate. "Because you were trying to get them into bed?"

Adam frowned at that. "The thought of taking either of them to bed didn't even occur to me." The resoluteness in his statement left no room for doubt.

Jaden stuck her left arm forcibly through the T-shirt and finally pulled it over her head and down to cover her body. She crossed her arms and regarded him with narrowed eyes. "But it's occurred to you with me, after only one day?"

Adam stopped drying off and walked toward her, stopping only when he was close enough that she could see the gold flecks in his eyes. He put one finger under her chin and tipped her head up to look into her eyes.

"Taking you to bed occurred to me the first moment I saw you."

He *had* to stop doing that. If she lost her ability to breathe and think every time he said something like that, she was afraid she would quickly lose her professional credibility with him. If she hadn't already. Finally, she spoke. "Maybe that should have come up when we were discussing the job with Emily."

He dropped his gaze to her lips. "I have every confidence that you can do both very, very well, but if you're concerned, maybe you would be more comfortable *not* being Emily's therapist."

Anger welled up in her so quickly she wasn't quite sure what to do with it. "You want me to concentrate on *you* rather than Emily?" Then she took a deep breath and forced herself to calm down. She shrugged. "Sure, that's a great idea. You can bring in another therapist to work on her rehab while I have sex with you all day long. In fact, thank you for thinking of it. I was just wondering how I was going to accomplish all of that by myself."

He lifted an eyebrow. "You would have an affair with me and let another therapist work with Emily?"

She took a step forward, her eyes narrowed, pink staining her cheeks. "You are unbelievable!"

Suddenly both of her hands were on his chest and before he could react, she shoved him as hard as she could.

Jaden stood at the edge of the pool, hands on her hips, glaring down at him when he came up for air. "Of course I will not have an affair with you and turn Emily's therapy over to someone else! My first and only priority is Emily. You're just going to have to find another...outlet...for your sexual energy."

“So you’re staying?”

“That’s what I said.”

“No matter what?”

“No matter what.” Then she marched to the heavy glass door and jerked it open, turning for only a moment to tell him, “And, just for the record, I’m also not kissing you...no matter what.”

A guy. A girl. A Chihuahua. Two of them will find the love of their lives.

Venus in Blue Jeans

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Coming off a broken engagement to a lying charmer, all bookstore owner Docia Kent wants is a fling, not a long-term romance. And for her fabulously wealthy and fabulously nosy parents to butt out of her life for a while. The Texas Hill Country town of Konigsburg looks like the perfect place to get both. Especially when she gets a look at long, tall country vet Cal Toleffson.

Cal has other plans for Docia. One glance at the six-foot version of Botticelli's Venus, and he knows he's looking at the woman of his dreams. Now if he can just fend off the eccentric characters of Konigsburg long enough to convince her romance isn't such a bad idea.

One night of mind-blowing sex isn't the only thing that leaves them both stunned. With Docia's bookstore under attack, Konigsburg suddenly doesn't seem so welcoming. Once again she finds her trust tested—and is left wondering if she was ever meant to have a happily ever, after all.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Venus in Blue Jeans:

Cal took a moment to look at her. Her copper curls floated around her face and shoulders. Her white silk blouse hung slightly open, so that he could see a sliver of peach-colored lace peeking out. Her deep green eyes met his, and her face was suddenly illuminated by their light.

Venus.

His gut tightened almost as much as his groin. *Oh, yeah. Nothing like a little performance anxiety to pep things up.* As he watched, Docia's lips edged up slightly, and another jolt hit his solar plexus. Whatever doubts might be assailing his mind, his body was definitely ready to go for it.

He reached for her, then slid his fingers into the silken softness of her hair, pulling her gently toward him, lowering his mouth to hers. Her lips had an echo of sweet wine. His tongue plunged deeper into her mouth, touching, exploring—teeth, tongue, warm, wet depths. She gave a small purr of pleasure as she turned her body against his, slipping her arms around his neck and pressing her soft breasts against his chest.

Cal moved his hands downward, sliding them beneath the edge of her blouse, touching, stroking. Smooth, satiny flesh. Silk warmed by Docia's body. His hand cupped her breast so that it filled his palm like a ripe peach. He flicked his thumb across her nipple, feeling it jut hard against his fingers.

"God, Cal," she murmured.

Her hands moved down from his neck. Then she pulled his shirt free and slid her hands underneath, brushing across his chest. One palm rested for a moment on his heart while a warm fingertip pressed against one nipple. Threads of heat flowed from where her fingers touched him.

He shifted his shoulders, pushing her back against the sofa cushions. The soft mounds of her breasts pressed against his chest again. His shaking hands fumbled at the top button of her blouse, trying to slip the small fabric-covered disk through its hole and failing. Then her cool fingers covered his, and the button slid free.

And the next and the next.

Cal looked down at peach-colored lace and silk outlined against the shimmering paleness of her skin underneath. His breath caught in his throat. “Docia, you’re so beautiful.”

Even as he said it, he knew how miserably inadequate the words were. *You’re exquisite. At this moment, you’re everything I’ve ever desired in a woman. I’ve never touched anyone like you before. Please God, don’t ask me to stop.*

When she spoke, her voice was a hoarse whisper against his ear. “Cal, we can’t do this here.”

For a moment, he was lost, trying to find his feet again. Had she suddenly developed second thoughts? And if so, why right now, in the name of heaven!

“What?” he murmured. “Why not?”

Docia giggled, a quick throaty sound against his chest. “We can’t both fit on this couch. Not two people our size. Gravity alone is going to do us in before we get much further.”

“I’m glad one of us thinks this is funny,” Cal muttered and then snickered. In another moment, they were both chuckling breathlessly, their foreheads pressed together.

Docia pushed against his shoulders. “Come with me, Doc. I have the greatest oversized bed you’ve ever seen. I promise we’ll both fit into it with plenty of room left over.”

The bed was big enough for the two of them, plus three or four other average-sized citizens of Konigsburg. Not that Cal was eager for a sextet at that particular moment. A stack of red and blue pillows covered one end of the bed. Tall posts supported some kind of white canopy overhead.

Cal wasn’t really noticing the details right then—he had too much he needed to do, like breathe.

And he couldn’t seem to stop touching her.

Even as he reached for the remaining buttons on her blouse, he couldn’t help grazing his fingers along the smooth white skin of her collarbone, his thumb sinking into the small indentation at the base of her throat.

Docia laughed softly, emerald eyes shimmering in the semi-dark, then pulled the blouse from her shoulders and dropped it behind her. “Your turn.”

He took hold of the bottom of his shirt and pulled it over his head, wishing he’d worn something with buttons too, so that he could have taken it more slowly, let her see a little bit of him at a time. Clothes made him look more normal. Without them, she’d see him the way he really was.

One of his girlfriends in Kansas City—Karen, was it? Maybe Janice—had referred to him as her “great, hairy beast”. She’d meant it affectionately. Cal hadn’t felt the love. But the image had always stuck in his mind after that.

King Kong was about to enter the bedroom.

Docia caught her breath as he dropped his shirt to the floor beside her blouse.

She’d never seen a chest that broad before. His pectorals curved down to his flat stomach muscles. A thick pelt of dark hair covered the surface, arrowing down to the waistband of his pants. He looked primal, like a warrior, like someone who’d lurched out of the forest seeking a mate.

Not that he’d have to do much seeking from what she could see. He could probably just crook his finger and a dozen potential mates would come tripping through the woods without further ado.

She forced herself to breathe in and out while she sorted through appropriate adjectives. Magnificent. Glorious. Spectacular.

“Wow.”

Oh, very good, Docia. Four years of college English and that’s the best you can do?

Cal raised his eyebrows, questioning.

Docia couldn’t stop herself. She reached toward his chest, burying her fingers in the dark, crinkling hair, touching the point of one brown nipple with her pinky. She heard his quick inhale.

His eyes looked slightly glazed. “Now you,” he gasped.

Docia’s fingers dropped to the button at the waistband of her pants, and suddenly her shoulders stiffened. Right then, she could remember every one of Allie’s scones she’d consumed over the last month, not to mention all those plates of tapas Lee had fed her, laden with cheese and olive oil. And then, of course, she also remembered Donnie’s cracks about her love handles.

Oh well, maybe some men like doughy hips. And she couldn’t do much about spot reducing at the moment. She was who she was, after all. She’d learned that much over the last couple of years.

Docia pushed her pants down to the floor and stepped out of them defiantly. At least she had on some of her better underwear.

Cal watched her for a heartbeat or two, his eyes hooded. Then he stepped toward her, raising his hands to cup her breasts. Docia closed her eyes, feeling the warmth spread outward as the rough calluses of his palms rubbed across her skin. Heat stretched over her body and down to her thighs. His fingers moved and the catch at the front of her bra opened. Her breasts slipped loose as he pushed the straps from her shoulders.

And she stood in front of him, wearing only a scrap of peach-colored silk at her crotch.

Cal stared, his pulse racketing in his ears. There she was again—Botticelli’s Venus with her wild red curls drifting around her face and shoulders. Perfect breasts, high and full. Waist narrowing to a gently rounded stomach. Long, creamy thighs stretching to muscular calves.

Oh God, oh God, oh God. If he was dreaming, this was when he’d wake up, hard and aching.

“Your turn,” she whispered.

He came down to earth with a thump. This was it. The point at which some of his past sexual encounters had come to an abrupt halt. The time when he’d need to get enough blood back into his brain to soothe, to reassure, to explain that, after all, size was relative and bodies did adapt to each other.

But he might as well get it over with.

He unzipped, pushing his slacks and underwear down together, feeling himself spring free. No point in delaying the moment—he wouldn’t get any smaller.

At least he profoundly hoped he wouldn’t.

Docia’s gaze was riveted on his groin. She stared at his cock, as he’d known she would. His throat was dry with wanting her. Somehow he had to figure out how to say all the things he needed to say to get past this moment. All the encouragement and reminders about how well they’d fit. How they were made to fit together. How if she lost her nerve now he’d probably go jump off a cliff somewhere.

She reached for him suddenly, before he realized what she was doing. Cool fingers wrapped around his shaft, measuring him, sliding lightly down the length of him.

“You’re very big.” Her voice sounded husky.

Cal swallowed, nodding. Even if he tried to speak, he figured his voice wouldn’t be more than a croak. And he wasn’t sure he could speak at all as long as her hand stayed where it was currently.

And then she grinned, eyes sparkling. “Fortunately, so am I.”

Sometimes what you're looking for is closer than you think.

Because of You

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Jessie's life is a mess. In the eight hellish months since her husband died in a freak accident, she's been mugged, her house has been trashed, and now she's receiving frightening pranks calls. She resists a friend's offer of a weekend getaway—her grief is still too fresh to consider meeting anyone new.

Then again, since it's a party for gay men, there won't be any pressure, right?

ER doctor Caleb James feels perfectly at ease among his gay brother's friends, but one look at Jessie sparks a sexual tension that's impossible to ignore. A few drinks and a few hours of conversation later, things move a lot faster than either of them expect. Jessie is left confused and Caleb aches with regret—and love for a woman who is still guarding her heart.

Pressure is the last thing she needs. But as it becomes apparent that her string of misfortunes trace back to her husband's death, help is what she's going to get. Caleb's help...ready or not.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Because of You:

"Husband?" he asked and she saw his eyes dart to her ring finger. She'd given up wearing her diamond engagement ring, but she couldn't seem to part from the actual white gold wedding band.

She sucked in a breath at his question. She'd carefully avoided talking about Tommy all night. She'd wanted a night to forget, a night to pretend that her life was normal and happy and that she hadn't had her heart ripped out of her chest eight months earlier.

"I'm a widow," she said and the sound of that simple word released the flow of ice cold water throughout her body once again. For a few hours, she'd been warm. Hell, between Caleb and the alcohol, she spent more than a few moments on fire and it had felt so damn good.

"I'm sorry," he said, rising and crossing the room to take her icy hands in his. She didn't realize until his touch that she was shaking. In just one evening, he'd diminished the shadow of fear that constantly hovered over her. He'd rejuvenated her, made her feel alive.

She shook her head, desperately willing away the chill, the sadness. Dammit, she didn't want to be cold anymore. She was tired of being afraid. "It's been eight months and I'm afraid I sometimes tend to talk about Tommy in the present tense, like he's still here."

"Had he been ill?" he asked and she smiled sadly. He sounded very much like a doctor.

"Freak accident. He slipped on a patch of ice and hit his head on a car door. It was late and brutally cold and he was the last person leaving work that night. It was several hours before I found him and by then—"

“You found him?” he asked, pulling her gently to a chair in the kitchen. He pushed her down before sitting next to her. He never released his grip on her hands and she knew he felt the coldness in them as he began to rub them with his own as if to warm them.

“I was concerned when he didn’t come home and didn’t answer his cell. He was an accountant and it was audit season, so he worked late occasionally, but it wasn’t like him not to call and check in. Finally, I worried myself into a frenzy and decided to drive by his office, fully prepared to give him holy hell for scaring me so.”

He nodded. “I’m sorry it was you who found him.”

She shrugged and closed her eyes. She was a master at controlling her tears, yet here with Caleb it seemed harder to do. She’d managed to push her pain deep inside her and she even found it easier of late to discuss Tommy’s death. Tonight, whether it was the alcohol or her tiredness or Caleb’s compassion, the emotions were threatening to bubble over and she refused to let that happen.

“Well, I suppose I managed to bring tonight’s fun level down. That’s me—the official ruination of all parties,” she tried to joke. She pulled her hands out of his comforting grip and went back to the counter. “Do you like cream and sugar in your coffee?”

“No, I drink it black, and, Jessie, you didn’t ruin anything. You’re going through a damn hard time right now, dealing with something no one should ever have to deal with. Don’t be so hard on yourself. I wish I could give you an easy fix, but I’m afraid nothing except time will cure this.”

She grinned over her shoulder, determined to return to the easy banter they’d enjoyed all night. “That’s quite a bedside manner you have, Dr. Caleb.” The flirtatious line felt rusty and foreign as it fell from her lips, but Caleb didn’t seem to notice.

He gave a short, brief laugh. “Oh yeah, I’m a master at bedside—” He paused mid-sentence and she was surprised when he walked over to her and placed his hands on her cheeks. “Christ, Jess. I want to kiss you so badly it hurts.”

“So kiss me,” she whispered, uncertain where the words had come from, his and hers. From the second he touched her face, she wanted him with a passion she’d thought long gone.

He leaned down and took her lips gently, sweetly, but she refused to be patronized, treated with kid gloves. She was a living, breathing woman and she wanted him. Wanted him beyond reason, beyond care.

She reached up, gripping his hair in her fingers roughly, pulling his face more firmly to her. She opened her mouth and welcomed his tongue, before pushing it out of her way to explore his lips, his teeth with her own.

He moved his hands down to her waist, his grip stronger, more certain, more controlling. She was giving him everything her broken shell of a body had left to give and she sensed he was more than ready to take her up on the offer.

His lips slid from hers, gliding along her cheek to her earlobe, down her neck. The whole time he worshipped her with his mouth, his hands roamed, finding their way beneath her T-shirt to her breasts. She groaned at the hot touch of his hands against her taut nipples and he ground his hard erection into her pussy.

“God,” she gasped, his touches, his lips, his body pushing hers rapidly into overdrive. “More,” she demanded. “Please, Caleb. More.”


He continued his sensual assault and she fought to keep up. She shoved his hands off her body for a moment so that she could pull his T-shirt over his head. The image of his bare, sculpted chest was a visual treat, but she couldn't make herself take the time to enjoy it. She was on fire and her body was demanding that she take everything he had to give immediately. She leaned down, nipping at his small, hard nipples and he hissed with delight. His hands began working at the button and zipper of her jean shorts, shoving them and her panties over her hips, leaving her bare from the waist down.

Somewhere in the recesses of her mind, she wondered what the hell she was doing, but that thought was quickly squelched by a single touch of his fingers against her clit.

“Yes,” she whispered hoarsely. His hand delved farther and soon she found herself roughly pushing her hips toward him, forcing the two fingers he plunged inside her deeper, harder, faster. She was cresting on the edge of an orgasm within moments, but she refused to come alone. Caleb had given her so much tonight. Without realizing it, he'd offered her an escape, a refuge from the mourning, and she wanted to give him back some small part of the incredible pleasure he was building inside her.

“You,” she demanded. “I want you.”



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