

Redemption



Judith Rochelle

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by Judith Rochelle

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She shook herself at the sound of Josh's voice.

Lisa looked at the man across from her. She'd seen him a few times, in very brief situations, but this was the first time she'd had the chance to study him.

At thirty-eight he looked at least ten years older. He had thick black hair peppered with grey, worn long enough that he tied it back with a leather thong. His beard looked more like the result of not shaving rather than a deliberate plan, and dissolution had added extra flesh around the jaw line and pouches under his eyes. His skin was an unhealthy, ruddy color, probably from the amount of alcohol she heard he drank with regularity. Although he carried a few extra pounds, she bet that in his best days, he was lean and mean.

If this were, as the fairy tales said, once upon a time—before Charles had killed any interest she had in men and before Ethan Caine had destroyed himself—she could see herself being drawn to him. Now he just offended her, and she resented any latent spark of attraction he ignited in her.

But then she saw his eyes and something stabbed at her. Although they were alert, studying both the Taylors and his surroundings at the same time, they were a bottomless black filled with so much pain it hurt to look at them. What had this man seen and done that caused that much personal misery? Was this the kind of man she could trust to find her son?

"Lisa?"

She shook herself at the sound of Josh's voice. "I'm sorry. My mind tends to wander these days." She pasted what she

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was sure was a grotesque mockery of a smile on her face.

"Thank you very much for coming, Mr. Caine."

"Ethan. Don't thank me yet." His voice was deep but not smooth, more like the scraping sound of gravel falling on cement. "Right now we're just having lunch."

"That's true." She nodded, willing her hands to stop their incessant tremors.

"So, why don't we order and you can tell me what this little meet and greet is all about."

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

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Dedication

To our son Steven, without whom this book would never have happened.

And to Bill, the real inspiration for Ethan Caine.

Prologue

Of course it was raining. How fitting, Lisa Taylor Mallory thought, that the weather should be miserable. She shifted on the folding chair provided by the cemetery, careful not to move out from under the umbrella held by the funeral home attendant. Next to her, four-year-old Jamie snuggled closer to her, needing the assurance of his mother's warmth.

Under his own umbrella, Pastor Howard Devol of Mangrove Baptist Church intoned passages from the Bible. He had already eulogized Charles Mallory to the point of sainthood. Lisa clenched her fists and swallowed the nausea that insisted on rising at the back of her throat as she listened to the words.

If you only knew. Just let this be over. Please, please, let us get this over with.

She let her gaze travel over the crowd of mourners. The abundance of black umbrellas nearly formed a canopy over the assemblage. Tampa society's 'A' List as well as the giants of the financial world were gathered in their best funeral attire to mourn a man whose sins had been swept away in fire at the foot of a mountain. *Keeping up the myth*, Josh Taylor had told his sister.

This is for Jamie, she reminded herself. He was so frightened by the circus surrounding the death of his father. Lisa wanted him to have closure on what had become an outrageous situation. Despite the devil's trap her marriage had become, Charles Mallory had always been good to his

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son. So much so that Lisa had lived in constant fear Charles would one day disappear with him and leave her behind.

She felt Josh, sitting on her other side, squeeze her arm, a signal that this farce would soon be over and everything would be okay. Not exactly the word she'd have chosen to describe the current state of her life. She clenched one gloved hand in her lap. No, *okay* wasn't even in the ball park.

At last, the interminable ceremony ended. Josh rose and nudged her to stand with Jamie. The pastor signaled her to come forward. With Josh's arm supporting her, she stepped over to the casket and took the white rose the pastor held out. She stared at the casket for a long moment, then dropped the rose on its mahogany surface.

In a voice so low only her brother heard it, she said, "Rot in hell, you son of a bitch."

Chapter One

Four years later

"I will not ask Ethan Caine for anything." Lisa nearly shouted the words. "There has to be some other way."

Josh Taylor watched his sister through narrowed eyes. The air in the room was thick with the same tension that had wrapped itself around them for months. Lisa had barely survived a destructive marriage and the scandal that followed her husband's murder. After four devastating years, she'd finally gotten her life and her son's back on track.

Then came the terror of Jamie's kidnapping three months ago, the shooting at the ransom drop and not a word about Jamie since then. Her condition had deteriorated rapidly after that. She lost weight she could ill afford and her skin was so pale it was almost translucent. Dark shadows under haunted eyes, like purple bruises, were a testament to her lack of sleep.

With the passing of each week, he saw the degree of desperation rise. As each agency, each private investigator, came up empty-handed, he saw her defenses crumble. He could almost smell the fear that clung to her, sure it wouldn't be much longer before she snapped altogether.

Josh was convinced Ethan Caine was their only hope, and wondered why he had let her talk him out of contacting him long before this. Despite her low opinion of Ethan and her disdain for his so-called reputation, he should have simply swept over her objections.

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He'd dreaded today—Jamie's birthday—knowing it would be a disaster, and he was right. The tenuous hold on self-control Lisa had maintained all these months seemed to evaporate. When he got to the house he'd found her in the kitchen, staring at the wall calendar and hugging Jamie's picture to her heart, tears streaming in silent torrents down her cheeks. Since then she'd alternated between rage and hysteria.

At the moment she was pacing back and forth in her living room, hugging herself as if chilled even though a fire blazed at the hearth, Jamie's picture tight within the circle of her arms. The February day—grey, windy, the sky filled with thudding clouds—insinuated itself into the house. The warm peach and blue of the comfortable living room did little to dispel the miasma of gloom hanging in the air.

Josh watched her with a feeling of desperation. "Lisa, honey, come sit down, please. I know this is a tough day for you, but you're making yourself sick."

She stopped her pacing, her face drawn tight, her too thin body vibrating with unexploded rage. "I'm already sick, Josh. Since the day they took my baby I've been sick. And now you want to bring in a ... a ... a thug." She flailed at the air.

"Listen to me. I've said this before. There's something weird about this whole kidnapping thing. You've heard nothing since the ransom was paid. The FBI hasn't been able to find even the smallest trace of him, nor have any of the private agencies we've hired. We've exhausted every other option we have. Don't you think it's time to put aside your

animosity toward Ethan and ask him for help? After all, you did say you'd do whatever it took to get Jamie back."

"Somehow I don't share your belief that Caine's the answer." Lisa shoved her hands in the pockets of her slacks to conceal their trembling and swallowed hard. "If only I knew why they didn't return him. I refuse to believe he'd dead. I just can't, Josh. I can't."

"I think he's alive, too, kiddo, and I want to find him while that's still true. That's why we need Ethan." He sighed. "What I don't understand is why you're so adamant? You said you'd leave no stone unturned, no option unexplored to find Jamie. Because of his background Ethan's the most logical choice. Can't you stop fighting me on this?"

Lisa might think Ethan Caine was lower than dirt, but digging in that dirt might just find Jamie for them. And he wasn't going to let her stonewall him any longer. Not now, when they had no place else to turn.

Lisa shook her head. "I don't know how you even stand to be around him."

"He's been a very good friend, Lisa," Josh said softly.

The story of how they met—the burnt-out warrior and the icon of the middle class—remained private between the two men. But they'd formed the kind of friendship people seldom found. When Josh wanted to leave TechnoSoftware to open his own company, Ethan Caine bankrolled the entire venture. With cash.

"But think of it. The man is ... is..." She threw up her hands again, unable to find the word to describe her feelings.

"A bum?" Josh grinned, knowing her opinion of his friend. "False advertising, believe me."

"Oh, please." She tucked her hair behind her ears. "He's barely more than a criminal."

Josh's smile disappeared. "Ethan Caine is a lot of things, Lisa, but a criminal isn't one of them."

Lisa whirled on him, the anxiety rolling off her in waves, her eyes wide and glittering. "Why would I even want a man like him going after Jamie? I've heard all the whispers about him, you know."

"Whispers," Josh said carefully.

Lisa's voice took on a sing-song tone. "He's worked black ops for the CIA. Or was it the NSA? Or maybe the DEA. No, he was really a mercenary. He took drugs. No, he didn't. He's been in prison. No, that was a cover story." She shook her head. "Give me a break. That many stories floating around is always an orchestrated cover-up for the real person underneath, an excuse for doing illegal things."

"Lisa—"

She held up a hand. "The rumor mill says he's drunk more whiskey than a distillery could put out in a week, and slept with more women than most men meet in a lifetime."

"You of all people should know about rumors," Josh pointed out. He was fighting anger, trying to keep his sister's state of mind in focus. Ethan's reputation and outward appearance were camouflage for what Josh knew was the real person underneath, a person very few people ever got to see. But how to convince his sister? "He likes people to think those things about him. It keeps them away."

"Was it camouflage when he threw that birthday party for you at Ruth's Chris? This is an ultra classy, very high end restaurant. Almost like a private club. Everyone else came dressed to the teeth. He showed up in sweat pants, a dress shirt and Nikes. With his money stuck in the waistband of his pants."

"How he dresses has nothing to do with the kind of person he is." Josh gritted his teeth. "And what does it matter, anyway, if he gets the job done?"

She rolled her eyes in a 'give me a break' look. "You're asking me to trust my son's life to him just on your word." She looked at the large framed picture of Jamie she held and tears trickled down her cheeks. "The real reason I haven't wanted you to ask him is I'm frightened that he'll just do something to make matters worse."

Josh blew out a long breath, reached out and put his arms around her, picture and all. She felt so thin to him he was afraid a strong wind would snap her in two.

"My word's always been good before, kiddo. I'm telling you, don't believe everything you hear about Ethan Caine. Or even what you assume." He studied her face. "Jamie's part of my life, too. I would never do anything to endanger him. But Lisa, there's something definitely wrong here. Whoever took Jamie is way out of the mainstream or we wouldn't be having this conversation. Ethan is exactly the kind of person we need to look into this."

She pulled a tissue from the ever-present box on the little side table and blew her nose. "I just wish I knew what went wrong, why in all these months they haven't returned him. Or

contacted us again. Or at least..." Her voice broke and she took a breath to steady herself. "...at least sent us his body. They got the money. I made the drop just as they asked."

"And nearly got yourself killed because you wouldn't let the Feds handle it. How much good would you have been to Jamie then?" He studied her face. "Lisa, something's way off here. That's why we need Ethan. He lives in the shadows, so who better to dig through them?"

Lisa swiped at tears again. "I don't know why I'm arguing so hard. You're probably right; I'm out of choices. Damn Charles, anyway. I know this has something to do with him."

"I know, kiddo." Josh's mouth thinned at the mention of his late brother-in-law.

* * * *

Charles Mallory.

Lisa blew her nose and cursed the day she'd ever met him. Seven years ago Aaron Burke, senior partner in the law firm where she was an up and coming associate, introduced her to his new client. The man with the financial golden touch and the blinding good looks zeroed in on her like a long range sniper, and hit the mark.

Have lunch with me, Lisa. I've seldom met a woman with your mind.

Let's go to dinner, Lisa. In Paris. The plane is waiting.

Come to the Keys with me. I'll teach you to scuba dive.

God, Lisa, I never thought I'd meet a woman with your passion. Being inside you is like sliding into a flame.

I want you in my life, Lisa.

Marry me and I'll give you the moon.

She'd been so uncharacteristically besotted with him she walked away from a growing reputation as a hotshot corporate lawyer to become a wife and mother because that's what Charles wanted her to do.

Plenty of time to practice law again later on, he told her.

Later on. She never knew exactly what that meant, and while she tried to figure it out, the nightmare began. Hell would have been a relief. Even Josh hadn't been able to help her.

"Let me get you out of this," he begged over and over, whenever she was able to see him.

"I can't leave," she cried. "He'll take Jamie away from me. He swore it. Josh, he has the money and power to do it."

And then, like a cross-eyed blessing, Charles was killed. Was it any wonder she rejoiced at his death?

"Lisa." Josh's voice cut into her thoughts. "Are you listening to me?"

She shook herself out of her dark reverie. "What? What did you say?"

"I said, I wish the papers hadn't made such a big deal out of the ten million dollar life insurance policy. Or that it was left in trust for Jamie's welfare. Coverage like that gives every nutcase ideas."

"When the policy surfaced the police were so sure I'd killed Charles for the money," she reminded him. "If Aaron Burke hadn't produced the change of beneficiary form I'd still be sitting in jail."

"Burke." Josh said his name like it was a bad word. "It frosts my ass that Charles made him the trustee and not you." He made a rude noise. "That old bastard. I never trusted him and I still don't."

Lisa stared at the pictures of her son again. "At least he turned over the money for the ransom without arguing." She fought back the tears that were ready to spill again. "And now someone's got both Jamie *and* the money."

She pulled in a deep, shuddering breath.

I have got to get hold of myself. Falling apart isn't helping anything.

Josh put his hands on her shoulders and squeezed gently, his lifelong sign of reassurance. "We'll get him back, I promise. But not unless we have the right person doing it."

"And you're convinced that person is Ethan Caine."

"Yes, kiddo, I am. I believe he's our best and only choice."

Caine. A man women romanticized about—the dark hero, the smart, good-looking, mysterious man now gone to seed with a shady reputation and no social skills at all. How had things gotten so bad, she wondered, that her only savior was a man she could hardly stand to be around?

"How will I pay him? Jamie and I..." She stopped and swallowed, fighting for control "...I get along okay but I've heard men like him charge enormous fees. And you can't keep paying the freight."

"Would I balk at anything if it might get Jamie back?" he asked in a soft voice. "Anyway, he doesn't need the money. That's something he's got in abundance."

She stared at him, trying to find some assurance in his face. "You don't even know if he'll do it."

"He'll do it. He'll do anything for his friends."

Lisa began pacing again. "This is a lot more than just writing a check for someone, Josh. And you don't even know what kind of shape he's in right now."

He smiled. "Ethan can always pull himself together. I'm not worried. But let's go and find out."

"You mean, just walk in on him?" She shook her head. "He'll refuse to talk to us. I'm little more than a stranger to him, and his social graces don't run to welcoming impromptu visitors."

"Actually," Josh grinned, "I thought we'd invite him to lunch."

Lisa stopped pacing and stared at him. "Lunch? Better make it the back yard the way he dresses."

Josh took her hands in his. "If Ethan brings Jamie back, you won't care how he dresses, or if he wears anything at all."

"God. That's a sight I don't want to contemplate. But you're right." Her heart pinched at the thought of what might be happening to her son right now. Or might have already happened. She balled her hands into fists to control the rising tide of anguish. "If he gets Jamie, I'll forgive him all his sins. And I'm sure they're quite numerous."

* * * *

The ringing of the phone pierced Ethan Caine's brain like a heated arrow. He pulled a pillow over his head and tried to

bury himself under it. When the ringing stopped, he removed the pillow, but the abrasive sound began again almost at once.

"Damn it!" This time he struck out with his hand at the offending instrument on the floor beside him, knocking the receiver off the cradle. "Go away," he shouted at it. "I don't live here anymore."

"Ethan? Get your ass off what passes for your bed and pick up the phone."

The voice penetrated the blurry state of Caine's mind, and he blinked. He picked up the receiver and held it to his ear, rubbing his eyes. "Josh?"

"Yeah, old man. It's me. Where the hell you been?"

"Out of this world." Caine rubbed his hand over his face, grimacing as he felt the tangling in his beard. When the hell had it gotten so long?

"Get up, we need to talk to you."

"Jesus, Josh. I look and smell like something the dog left on the porch, I don't even know what day it is, and you want to talk?"

"Ethan, this is serious. I need a big favor." Josh's usually cheerful voice held a somber tone.

Caine lay back down on the mattress. He'd never gotten around to buying an actual bed for himself, and by now he'd decided he didn't need one. "Okay. Sure. How much do you need?"

"It's not money. How soon can you meet us at The Club?"

"Try next week." He ran his tongue over his teeth, wondering when he'd last brushed them. "Damn, Josh, I'm in

no shape to go anywhere right now, let alone a fancy restaurant." He paused as a word captured his attention.

"What do you mean *us*? Is someone coming with you?"

"My sister, Lisa."

"Jesus Christ and all the angels. Isn't she afraid I'll infect her with some disease?"

There was a long pause at the other end of the line. "This is really important, Ethan. I wouldn't ask you otherwise. Please."

Please? Josh never said please.

Caine groaned. "What kind of trouble are you people in, anyway?"

"The worst kind. *Now* will you get moving?"

"Okay, okay. Give me an hour. And don't expect too much."

He dropped the receiver back in the cradle, shoving the whole instrument to the side. What in the hell was going on? Josh was a straight-up guy, never even got a parking ticket. But his sister had had her share of troubles, and if Josh was bringing her along, sure as shit she was the one in the devil's spotlight.

Hell. He hated meals like this. If he didn't like Joshua Taylor so much, think of him as better than family, he wouldn't even be doing this. The few times he'd been around Lisa Mallory, she acted as if he wasn't even fit to wipe her shoes on.

He stood up and looked around. If Josh wanted to talk, meeting someplace else was the best option. He sure as hell couldn't invite anyone out here. The dilapidated state of the

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rambling farmhouse that had been in his mother's family for generations suited him just fine, but it wasn't meant for company.

The house matched both his physical condition and his state of mind. He cleaned—in a manner of speaking—only when he was in the mood. The weeds and native grasses growing wild in the ten acres that remained of the family property were constant reminders of the untended state of his life. A state he'd become comfortable with.

In the bathroom he stripped off the sweat pants he'd slept in, then turned on the shower full force. While the water heated, he stared at the face in the mirror over the sink and wondered who the hell he was anymore. He'd seen things that made Hell look like Heaven, and done things that robbed better men than he was of their sanity. His body was covered with the scars from his many battles. How he'd survived was still a mystery.

Sighing heavily, he stepped into the shower, wishing the hot water could wash away the blackness in his soul.

He pulled on his usual manner of dress—another pair of sweat pants, Nikes and a t-shirt that hadn't seen the inside of a washer in at least a couple of weeks. He didn't dress up for anyone, not even Miss High and Mighty Lisa Mallory. If she wanted to turn up her nose at him again, big deal. He wasn't the one who called for this chummy little gathering.

Chapter Two

The Club wasn't actually a private club but a restaurant designed to look like one. High-backed booths, many small rooms rather than one large one, thick carpeting, dim lighting even in the middle of the day. The owners catered to people who came there to have privacy with their meals.

"He won't show." Lisa huddled in the corner of their booth, twisting her hands in front of her and wondering when she'd stopped being strong and started falling apart. Well, that was easy to answer. Exactly three months and three days ago.

"Yes, he will." Josh reached across the table and put his hand over hers. "When Ethan says he'll do something, he always does it. Even if it's just lunch. Besides, if he changed his mind, he'd call me. He wouldn't leave me hanging. Not after I told him how important this was."

"I must be crazy to even agree to this."

"Drink your wine and calm down. Please. We've discussed this over and over. He's our best—and I believe our only—option. Okay?"

Lisa took a deep breath, held it and slowly let it out. "Okay. All right." She obediently picked up her wine goblet and sipped at the amber liquid.

Josh looked up. "See? Here he is now."

Lisa looked up at the man the waiter was ushering to their booth. "I'm glad to see he dressed up for us. Which homeless shelter kicked him out?"

"Cool it," Josh warned. He moved over to make room for Caine and held out his hand. "Thanks for coming, buddy."

"Sure. Can't turn down a free meal, right?" He slid in next to Josh and turned his eyes to Lisa.

"Ethan, you remember Lisa, right?"

They didn't shake hands, just nodded at each other.

Lisa looked at the man across from her. She'd seen him a few times, in very brief situations, but this was the first time she'd had the chance to study him.

At thirty-eight he looked at least ten years older. He had thick black hair peppered with grey, worn long enough that he tied it back with a leather thong. His beard looked more like the result of not shaving rather than a deliberate plan, and dissolution had added extra flesh around the jaw line and pouches under his eyes. His skin was an unhealthy, ruddy color, probably from the amount of alcohol she heard he drank with regularity. Although he carried a few extra pounds, she bet that in his best days, he was lean and mean.

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But then she saw his eyes and something stabbed at her. Although they were alert, studying both the Taylors and his surroundings at the same time, they were a bottomless black filled with so much pain it hurt to look at them. What had this man seen and done that caused that much personal misery? Was this the kind of man she could trust to find her son?

"Lisa?"

She shook herself at the sound of Josh's voice. "I'm sorry. My mind tends to wander these days." She pasted what she was sure was a grotesque mockery of a smile on her face. "Than you very much for coming, Mr. Caine."

"Ethan. Don't thank me yet." His voice was deep but not smooth, more like the scraping sound of gravel falling on cement. "Right now we're just having lunch."

"That's true." She nodded, willing her hands to stop their incessant tremors.

"So, why don't we order and you can tell me what this little meet and greet is all about."

Josh signaled the waiter who was hovering a discreet distance away. The men ordered the lunch steaks, Lisa ordered a salad which she knew she wouldn't eat, and Caine added a double Jack Daniels on the rocks along with iced tea. Lisa couldn't help the way her mouth twisted in distaste.

He noted her look. "Should I disapprove of the wine you're drinking? Don't worry, Mrs. Mallory." His scorn for her was evident. "It would take a lot more than this drink to put me under the table. Anyway, a little hair of the dog that bit you helps the brain function better."

"If you say so."

The waiter brought their orders, and Caine immediately dug into his food.

Lisa raised an eyebrow. "Shall we wait until you're finished before we discuss why we're here?"

"I can eat, talk and listen at the same time," Caine told her, already chewing. "So let's have it. What's got you in such a bind you're willing to break bread with someone like me?"

She set her fork down on the table with precise care. "Believe me, if I had any other choice, I wouldn't be here. But I'm in a desperate situation, and my brother has a lot of faith in what he thinks you can do."

"Then why don't you give me the details and we'll see if his faith is misplaced or not?"

"Here's the deal," Josh began.

Ethan shook his head. "Are you the one with the problem? No? I didn't think so. I want to hear it from the lady herself."

Lisa took a long swallow of her wine.

I'd love to pick up this steak knife and stick it in his throat.

She put the glass down carefully. "I'm sure you're aware of everything that happened in the past year. My husband's death and the subsequent scandal. The media had a field day."

"I know his little empire crumbled, he was in hock to his eyeballs, and somebody offed him. The cops tried to pin it on you but they didn't have any evidence."

"That's because I didn't do it." Her tone was fierce, anger scraping her throat. "I hope you believe me."

"Hey." He waved his fork. "You say you didn't do it? Okay. Personally, I don't care one way or the other. I will say you had more than a damn good reason."

Not the ringing endorsement she'd hoped for, but better than a condemnation. "He left me in an incredible financial mess. I sold everything. Even my jewelry."

Caine drained his glass of iced tea and waved to the waiter for a refill. "Sorry about that."

She slapped a palm on the table, wishing she could slap the arrogant man across from her instead. "I'm not asking for sympathy. The damned jewelry meant nothing to me. I'm just trying to give you some background."

He shrugged, drank half the glass of tea, and kept on eating. "Whatever."

Lisa cast an angry glance at Josh, then plunged ahead. "I had to rebuild a life for my son and myself. I was a practicing attorney when I met Charles. Corporate law. After the ... afterwards, I went back to work, but now I handle only family law. I have a small practice with two other people." She looked away. "Although I haven't been there much the last three months."

Caine sopped up the last of his steak sauce with a piece of French bread, then downed the rest of his drink. He raised an eyebrow at Josh, who motioned to the waiter. "Can we get to the main course here? I'm not much on appetizers."

Lisa curled her hands into fists to keep from actually striking him. "I need to do this in my own way, if you don't mind."

Those soulless black eyes looked at her as if they could see into the very heart of her. "Whatever."

"Go on, Lisa." Josh gave her an encouraging smile.

"My son is my life, Mr. Caine." She was determined to keep things formal. "I live and breathe for him." When Caine opened his mouth, she said, "And I think I've had enough of your smart remarks." She took a careful swallow of her wine.

"Three months ago Jamie was kidnapped. We paid the ransom but we never got him back."

Caine picked up the fresh drink placed in front of him and looked at Lisa over the rim as he sipped from it. "Yes, I guess all that coverage about the insurance money would be bait for anyone."

Josh leaned forward. "The ten million went into a trust to be used for Jamie's health and well being."

Caine nodded. "Ransom would definitely fall into that category. So what happened? Did the Feebs get into it?"

"Yes," Josh told him. "They coordinated everything."

"Even the drop?" The sudden silence spoke louder than words. "Okay, give."

Lisa sat up, her spine rigid, her hands so tightly wrapped around the stem of her wine glass she was afraid she'd shatter it. "The kidnappers told me to make the drop myself. No FBI, no cops, no anyone. Or I wouldn't get Jamie back."

"And of course you believed them."

"He's my son," she almost shouted. "I wasn't about to risk his life."

"Okay." Josh looked from his sister to his friend. "Let's everyone take a deep breath here and go on."

Caine took another drink of his whiskey. "So what happened?"

"The FBI wanted to put people in place ahead of time, and have a look-alike make the drop."

He watched her, expressionless, his eyes hooded. "And what did you do, Mrs. Mallory?"

"I'll tell you," Josh broke in. "She sneaked out of the house and went to the drop site herself. They shot her, took the money, and we haven't seen Jamie since."

"Shot?" Caine raised his eyebrows. "Since when do kidnappers shoot the mark?"

"My sentiments exactly." Josh looked at his sister. "We've talked about this, Lisa. There's something out of whack here." He turned back to Caine. "Here's the deal. Whoever took Jamie has disappeared off the face of the earth with him. The Feds tried, we hired private investigators, the works. Nada. Not a trace anywhere. And you know how easy it is to hide an eight year old boy in plain sight. He could be anywhere."

"That's why we asked you to meet with us." Lisa finished her wine and began shredding the tiny cocktail napkin. "We're ... *I'm* asking you if you'll help us."

"Help you? Do what?" He drained his glass of iced tea.

Lisa watched him in amazement, a strange thought crossing her mind. *I've never met anyone who could drink such copious amounts of fluid and never have to go to the bathroom!*

"And why today, all of a sudden?" he went on. "Mrs. Mallory, I know what you think of me, so I'm damn sure you didn't wake up with my name on your lips this morning. And it's been three months since the kidnapping. If it were my kid, I'd be banging on the door of anyone in the world who could help, no matter who it was."

"Ethan." Josh's voice was calm. "We've let the Feds have their shot and hired one private agency after the other. I'm sure Lisa would have approached you on her own, but this

was my suggestion. Today is Jamie's eighth birthday and I think we've wasted enough time. You're the only person I know who can reach out to people we've never even heard of and ask questions."

"So." He put his glass down. "You want me to step back into the muck and slime I'm still trying to wash away for a kid that's probably already dead?"

Lisa crushed the stem of her wine glass so hard it snapped, slicing into her skin.

"God, Lisa. Here. Give me your hand." Josh pulled out his handkerchief and wrapped it around her palm.

She stared at Ethan, then at Josh. "I told you this was a waste of time. Let's get out of here." As she started to slide out of the booth, Ethan reached over and grabbed her arm.

"Don't you even want to hear my answer?"

"I think you've already given it," she snapped. "Josh, let's go."

"I want to hear what Ethan has to say."

"Then say it and be done." She cradled her injured hand in her other palm.

"I'm assuming you have no money to pay, since your late husband wiped everything out." He held up his hand as she opened her mouth. "Josh would do it but I don't need to go that route. Money's not a problem. That's one thing I don't have to worry about." He finished the last of his drink. "I don't know you from Adam, but I know Josh. I trust him and I owe him a lot."

Lisa looked at Josh, her eyebrows raised.

He shrugged but said nothing.

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"So here's the deal," Caine continued. "This afternoon Josh is gonna come out to my house—a place, by the way, I'm sure you'd never set foot in—and we're gonna talk about this. I'll give him my answer." He reached under his t-shirt to the waistband of his sweat pants, drew out a wad of cash as thick as his wrist and dropped a handful of bills on the table.

"Lunch is on me. See you in a little while, Josh."

Lisa stared after him, the pain in her hand nearly forgotten in her shock at the abrupt termination of the conversation.

"That man is a pig," she told her brother.

"Ethan Caine is what he is. He's also the only man who can help us."

"If he decides to grace us with his assistance."

"Lisa, he didn't say no. With Ethan that means we're halfway there."

Chapter Three

Caine parked his car in a garage that was in nearly the same neglected condition as the rest of the property and trudged into the house. Tossing his keys on the kitchen table, he opened the refrigerator, pulled out a Coors, and drank half of it in two long swallows.

Fuck.

He should have told Josh to bag it this morning and gone back to sleep. One look at Lisa Taylor Mallory and he knew he was about to do something that he'd hate himself for. The lady pissed him off with her mine-doesn't-stink attitude, but a long time had passed since he'd seen agony like that in someone's eyes.

She looked like hell. The shadows under her eyes were a good indication of how little sleep she'd been getting. Her body looked like she'd been starved to death yet she ate almost nothing of her lunch. She twisted her fingers together constantly, a gesture of someone whose nerves were raw to the point of bleeding.

Damn Joshua anyway. Ethan's one weak spot—his *only* weak spot—was his friends. He had very few, deliberately, but the ones he had he prized. He would do anything for them, and Josh knew that.

Carrying the half-empty bottle of beer with him into his bedroom, he toed off his Nikes, pulled the wad of money from his waistband and threw it on the dresser, and went to a battered roll-top desk in the corner of the room. Besides his

car, there were two pieces of machinery Ethan kept in perfect shape—his high definition plasma television and his computer.

His computer was his contact with the world at large—how he communicated, and how he read extensively about whatever spiked his curiosity on a given day. On nights when he couldn't sleep, it amused him to surf the web and see if he could find traces of people in his old line of work. The fact that he couldn't was reassuring. It meant that no one could find *him*, either.

Today he was using it to fill in the blanks. Hitching his chair closer to the desk, he took a long pull on the beer, set the bottle down and typed 'Lisa Taylor Mallory' into the Google search box. He was only somewhat startled to discover there were more than a thousand sites that were in some way related to her. She had, after all, had more than her fifteen minutes of fame. Methodically, he began to scroll through them one at a time. At the end of an hour, he sat back, trying to wash away the distaste that had formed in his mouth with the last of the now lukewarm beer.

He had a pretty clear picture of Charles Mallory and it turned his stomach. And of Lisa, a stunningly brilliant young attorney, unaware of the animal living behind Mallory's façade until it was too late.

He knew from Josh what his sister's life was like after her marriage. She'd been a virtual prisoner at the huge estate where they lived, guarded by men only a step above thugs, while the golden boy stayed away from home more and more. His absences became extended, his behavior at home increasingly erratic, and the velvet noose pulled even tighter.

No, she couldn't return to work, she was a wife and mother. No, she didn't need her own car; Carlos would drive her wherever she wanted to go. No, she didn't need outside activities. He provided everything she needed at the estate.

Mallory's obsession with her, his psychotic jealousy, his growing unpredictable behavior had worried Josh a lot, but he'd been powerless to do anything about it.

And when Charles Mallory's car went over an embankment, instead of finally being set free Lisa was plunged into a greater nightmare. His death had opened a can of worms that turned into snakes.

The media covered almost every moment of the widow's life from the moment her husband's car rolled down a mountainside. They hadn't even left her in peace as she struggled to get past the nightmare and create some kind of life for herself and Jamie.

Eventually, though, with no more tidbits to fan the flame, the media gave up and the stories ended. Lisa disappeared from the newspapers altogether.

Until the kidnapping.

Every newspaper had run the story, the reporters almost gleefully reporting on the further misfortunes of the tarnished widow. It sickened Ethan that they would treat the kidnapping of a child this way. Jamie Mallory's face looked out at him from the computer screen, a typical eight-year-old, with curly hair and huge eyes.

He stopped reading there, preferring to hear any other details from Josh.

He was in the kitchen opening his second beer when he heard tires crunching on the gravel in front of the house, then footsteps on the porch.

"Ethan?"

"Come on in, Josh. It's open."

Josh's gaze scanned the disheveled appearance of the room. "I see the maid didn't make it in again."

"Since when did my living conditions become a matter of interest to you?" Ethan opened the door to the fridge again. "Beer?"

Josh shook his head. "Jesus, Ethan, I don't know how you aren't permanently pickled."

"If you're through commenting on my lifestyle, let's go sit on the porch. We can talk there without my interior decorating bothering you."

Josh shook his head and followed the other man outside. They lowered themselves into two ancient rockers, Caine took a swallow of his beer, and looked at Josh. "So. You haven't had any word or sign of the kid in three months?"

Josh shook his head. "Nada. Lisa's about to lose her mind. Jamie and I are all she has."

"Tell me about your sister." Caine began rocking slowly. "How did she end up with a piece of slime like Mallory in the first place?"

"Not a new story." Josh studied his hands. "She was the bright light at Rivas, Burke and Doyle. Youngest ever to be fast-tracked for partnership. She ate opposing counsel for breakfast."

"And?" Ethan prodded, when Josh stopped.

"And one day Aaron Burke brought in his hot new client, the wizard of the financial world."

"Charles Mallory." He couldn't disguise the contempt in his voice.

"He had Lisa squarely in his sights. She looked to be unattainable, and Mallory always wanted what he didn't think he could get."

Caine raised an eyebrow. "Yeah, but what did Lisa see in him?"

"Come on, Ethan. She was twenty-eight years old." He flung out his hands in a gesture of frustration. "For all her unbelievable knowledge of the law, she'd spent most of her life buried in it and was far less sophisticated than people thought. Charles offered her the moon and happily ever after and she bought it."

"It must have come as quite a shock to her when she found out he was in hock up to his eye teeth and then some."

"Only as it affected her and Jamie. The mess he left threatened to strangle her, especially when she was arrested for his murder."

"Ugly picture. She's got guts to come through all of this." Ethan finished his beer. "Want a Coke?"

Josh chuckled. "I didn't think anything nonalcoholic was allowed here."

"I keep it for my clean-cut friends like you. Be right back."

In the kitchen, Ethan leaned against the refrigerator door, the Coke in one hand and another beer in the other. He could feel himself being sucked into the whole Lisa situation and it fried his ass to realize it. *Shit, shit, shit.*

He walked back out to the porch, still cursing silently. "Okay." He handed Josh the Coke. "What happened after the trial that never was?"

Josh popped the top on the can and took a swallow before answering. "The financial mess was like quicksand. Lisa was being hounded by everyone except Santa Claus." He rotated the can in his hands. "The estate was mortgaged to the hilt, and the IRS appropriated it to satisfy the tax debt."

"What about all the other creditors? I can't believe they just said so sad, too bad, have a nice life."

Josh twisted his lips into an evil grin. "The only good thing Charles did was make sure everything was in his name alone. Even the bank accounts. Lisa couldn't be touched because she wasn't personally liable for most of the stuff. She packed her suitcases and Jamie's and walked away clean."

"If she was left with nothing, how did she take care of herself and the kid?" Ethan shook his head. "She managed to buy a place to live in, or did you front that for her?"

"I'm a lot less trusting than Lisa. Before she married Mallory, I talked her into putting all her investments and cash into a joint account with me. An account Charles couldn't touch. Just as protection." He shook his head. "She gave me a hard time about it, but finally did it. That and the sale of her jewelry gave her enough to support herself and Jamie, and buy a small house for the two of them."

Caine rocked for a long time, letting his mind absorb the information. "How did the snatch happen?"

Josh unfolded himself from the rocker and leaned against the porch railing, staring ahead at the unkempt landscape.

"Jamie and Lisa were having lunch at Monkeyshines, near the Lowry Park Zoo. It's one of Jamie's favorite places. He went to the men's room and never came back."

Not a new story. "She didn't go with him?"

"He was almost eight years old, for Christ sake. Old enough to pee by himself."

"Apparently not." He watched Josh's nervous pacing. "How did they get him away without him yelling for her, anyway?"

Josh twirled his drink slowly in his hand. "The restrooms are in a short hallway you can't see from the tables. There's an exit door at the end of the hall. We figured someone was waiting, got him alone, gave him something to knock him out and whipped him out the door."

"Rough." Ethan studied his beer. "And Aaron Burke gave her no trouble about the money?"

"Nope. Just handed it over."

Ethan drained the last of his beer. "So what happened when she made the drop?"

Josh gave him chapter and verse—Lisa leaving the duffel with the cash at the drop site late at night, going on her own because she believed they would kill Jamie if she didn't. And how, as she walked away she was shot with a long range rifle. The bullet hit a rib and splintered.

Josh blew out a slow breath. "It was touch and go for a while. I don't know how she survived."

"Why kill her if she left the money?" Ethan frowned. "Unless killing her was part of the original plan." He shook his head. "That doesn't make much sense."

Josh nodded. "I know. I keep coming back to that. But *that* doesn't make sense, either." He stopped speaking, his face tight with emotion, and ran his fingers through his hair in a gesture of frustration. "How does an eight-year-old boy get taken and disappear off the face of the earth? We tried all the child-selling schemes, the cults, you name it. Not a smell."

Ethan said nothing and silence draped itself around them. Josh began to pace again, sliding glances at Ethan from the corner of his eye.

"Damn it, sit down, will you?" Ethan snapped. "I can't think with you dancing around in front of me."

Josh dropped into the empty rocker and picked up his Coke, nervously rotating the can with his fingers.

Ethan stared straight ahead, letting his mind sort through what he'd learned on the web and fit it with what Josh told him.

Shit, hell and damnation.

If nothing had turned up in three months, there was a wrinkle here no one had found yet. That being so, the Taylor family had bigger trouble than they thought.

At last he leaned back in the rocker and stretched his legs out to rest his feet on the porch railing. "We don't even have a starting point here. And I'm way out of touch these days."

Josh looked up at him. His face was carefully expressionless but his eyes were filled with an emotion Ethan wished he could ignore. "Ethan, I..."

"If it was anyone but you I wouldn't even be listening to this story. You know that. Let me think this through, and then I'll want to talk to your sister again."

"All right." He stood up to leave. "When can I expect to hear from you?"

"Soon. Now get out of here. I have stuff to do."

Ethan watched Josh's car disappear down the long driveway, then turned and went back into the house, stripping off his clothes as he went. The beer and whiskey were great, and dulled a lot of open sores, but right now he needed his head as clear as possible. If he found a smell of this kid, and thought he could go after him, alcohol was the last thing he'd need.

He didn't want to think about what might be ahead of him. Didn't want to picture what he'd face if he let his friendship with Josh push him into this. No matter how he'd distanced himself from things in the past, how hard he worked to bury horrific images in his mind, they were always there, hovering, like birds of death. Cries of pain, screams of agony, scenes of unbelievable cruelty.

And the memories of treachery. They all still had the power to sicken him. He'd sworn never to go back to that life. He struggled daily for peace, not wanting to give up his tenuous hold on it. But giving it up might offer the only path to finding Jamie Mallory.

And of course, there was Lisa. A complicated woman on the verge of a nervous breakdown, and who could blame her? The few contacts he'd had with her had always left an impression with him of great intelligence and banked fires. Before he'd let life destroy him, Lisa Mallory was a woman he could easily be attracted to. More than attracted.

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He made a noise of disgust. Forget that. Her life was ruined as much as his was, Why the hell had she ever married that shithead Mallory anyway?

He stood under the hot shower until the water ran cold, then let the icy drops beat on him. At last he stepped out and toweled himself off. Wearing the towel wrapped around his hips, he padded to the kitchen and put on a pot of coffee. While it was brewing, he dug through his desk for a small ragged notebook. He foresaw a long night ahead of him.

* * * *

Lisa paced as she waited for Josh, something she'd become quite good at. The time had crawled since he dropped her off, moving slower than honey dripping off a basting brush. She checked every clock in the house and even called the number for the correct time to make sure they were all set right.

Every day was gray since Jamie had been taken. Even when the sun was out, like today, she felt its warmth everywhere but on her. She almost hugged the aura of depression to herself, as if happiness and sunshine were forbidden until she got Jamie back.

Asshole! Asshole! Asshole!

In eight years her gutter vocabulary in reference to Charles had increased exponentially. She found herself using words she hadn't even known existed before. The only regret she had about his death was she hadn't had the pleasure of killing him herself. When the awful truth about Charles was laid bare—drug use, orgies, gambling—only Jamie's need for

her kept her centered. Now it was her need to find him that drove her.

Her hand throbbed, and she pressed it against her side. Josh had bandaged it before he left, telling her she didn't need stitches, but reminding her to keep antibiotic ointment on it.

She still had the picture in her mind, frozen like a snapshot, of Jamie the last time she saw him. His blue eyes were bright with the anticipation of their visit to the zoo, his cheeks flushed with excitement. He'd barely been able to eat his hot dog or drink the Coke float he loved.

"I have to go to the bathroom, Mommy," he told her, sliding from the booth.

He hurried off in his jeans and Tampa Bay Buccaneers t-shirt, waving as he rushed off to the hallway where the restrooms were. She didn't dare tell Josh how many times she'd gone back to Monkeyshines, sitting at the table right by the hallway, staring at the men's room door as if willing her son to reappear. Her brother already thought she was losing her mind, and he probably wasn't far from wrong.

Seeking something to distract her and ignoring the pain in her hand, she dusted every photo of Jamie displayed in the living room, rearranging them, then returning them to their original places. But that was no diversion. All it did was enhance the misery that gripped her since the day her son disappeared.

A dozen times she hurried to the window, sure she heard a car in the driveway.

The image of Ethan Caine still danced in her brain—arrogant, hard, a ruined survivor. Yet much as she hated to admit it, there was an electricity about him that penetrated her shell. God, she was really losing her mind if she was fantasizing about that man. Talk about desperation.

Charles, what have you brought down on us now? If you weren't already dead I'd kill you myself.

By the time Josh finally arrived she was ready to jump out of her skin. She was on him the minute he walked into her house, grabbing his arm with a grip like a steel claw, almost shaking him.

"What did he say?"

"Hey, hey, hey. Come on, Lisa, take a breath." He took her hand and led her to the couch, making her sit down. Then he dropped into the arm chair opposite her.

"He said no, didn't he? I knew it." She twisted her hands together to still their shaking. "God, he is the most unpleasant man I've met in a long time. I can't imagine how you're friends with him."

Josh leaned forward, taking her hands in his. "Stop. Focus. Listen to me. He didn't say no."

"So he said yes?" She was almost afraid to hope.

"He did what Ethan always does. He asked a lot of questions and processed everything through his mind. But I know he'll do it."

"Really?" She grabbed her hands away from him. "And exactly how do you know that? God, we're crazy to depend on a man who's let himself go to rot the way Ethan Caine has."

"Lisa—"

"This is Jamie we're talking about. How do you even know what that crazy man will do?" She sat forward, hands clasped tightly together, her heart clattering clattered against her ribs. She drew in a shuddering breath. "So what exactly did he say?"

"He said he'd call me, but I think—" Josh began

"He'll call you?" Her voice rose in pitch. "We're running out of time, Josh. Doesn't he know how desperate I am?"

Josh gave a short laugh. "I'm sure he knows you wouldn't ask for his help otherwise."

"So how long are we supposed to wait for him?" Her head began to throb, a signal that the headache she'd been fighting all day was about to kick in. She forced herself to take deep, slow breaths to ease the tension that constantly gripped her.

Relax, Lisa. Breathe.

Josh rubbed his hands over his face and let out a breath. "I know you're close to the edge, honey, and I promise you, Ethan knows it, too. He won't take forever to get back to us. But he won't agree to do it unless he thinks he has a chance of success. Right now I'm willing to bet he's doing some quiet digging around to see if his contacts are still active."

Lisa hugged herself again, sure she'd be cold for the rest of her life. "How do you know he even has these contacts? All this could be so much made-up stuff, for all you know. Just a bunch of lies to make himself out to be some mysterious character. Whip up his ego."

Josh held up a hand. "Let me tell you a little story. One night we were having dinner when he got a call on his cell

phone, then asked me to drive him to a parking lot at an abandoned factory."

In spite of herself, Lisa was curious. "So did you?"

"Yup. As soon as we got there, the biggest, blackest helicopter I've ever seen touched down, the door slid open, some guy all in black shook Ethan's hand and then they were gone. He sure didn't get it from Rent-A-Copter."

"But..."

He held up his hand to stop her again. "He knows plenty of people you wouldn't invite to your house, but whatever he did for the past twenty years, those are the people who helped him get his job done. He drinks like a fish but holds his liquor, does *not* use drugs of any kind except an occasional aspirin, despite the rumors. And, as he is fond of saying, the statute of limitations has run out on anything he may have done." He gave her a faint smile. "At least in this country."

Lisa couldn't quite see Ethan Caine as the dark hero Josh painted, but she was at the point where she'd join with the devil himself if it would get Jamie back. "Damn it, Josh. If we just had some idea who would do this, and why we haven't heard anything." Her voice shook with repressed fear and she gnawed on a fingernail.

"Lisa," he began.

A tear carved a track on one cheek. "I don't believe he's dead, Josh. I just know I'd feel it if he were."

"Honey, we have to be prepared for anything. You know that." He pushed himself out of the chair. "But I'm with you. I have this odd feeling Jamie's still alive. Now. How about a cup of tea?"

"How about a glass of wine?" she countered. At the look on his face, she added, "Don't worry. I'm not turning into an alcoholic." She forced a smile. "One glass, all right?"

"Okay. But just one." He found an open bottle of chardonnay in the refrigerator, snagged two glasses from the cupboard and filled them with the golden liquid. He handed one to Lisa and grinned. "Try not to break this one."

She sipped at it, watching him watching her. "What?"

"You ate almost nothing at lunch," he pointed out. "Why don't I fix us some steaks for dinner, with baked potatoes."

She waved his suggestion away. "I can hardly choke food down. I keep wondering if Jamie's getting enough to eat. How he's being treated. Does he think we've forgotten about him."

Josh put down his wine, took Lisa's glass and set it on the counter. He took her hands in his. "You won't do Jamie any good if you make yourself sick. When we find him—*when*, not *if*—he'll need you, and you'll have to be in good shape."

She shrugged off his touch. "I know this has to do with Charles in some way. We're missing something, but I just don't know what. Damn Charles to hell, anyway. And damn me for marrying him." She picked up her wine glass again.

"If you hadn't, you wouldn't have Jamie," Josh pointed out.

Jamie. The only clean thing to come out of the abomination that her life as Mrs. Charles Mallory had turned into.

She picked up her glass of wine, resisting the urge to chug down the contents, and looked at Josh, his face creased with worry. He'd been her rock and strength through all of this. If

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trying to eat would ease his mind, it was a small enough thing to do.

"Okay. Steak it is." She gave him a tight smile. "But your precious Ethan Caine better not be yanking my chain. It doesn't have many links left."

Chapter Four

The commuter flight from Tampa to Key West was ninety minutes in what Ethan described as a flying paper towel tube. The small plane shimmied and shuddered as it droned through the air, and the cramped condition of the cabin did nothing to increase anyone's comfort.

Ethan managed to get a window seat and hunched himself into the small space allotted. With a battered straw Panama tipped down to cover his face, he closed his eyes and let his mind ramble.

He'd taken the time to call Josh before he left and the phone call had been brief. "I'll be gone for a week."

"What?" Josh raised his voice. "You're going away *now*?"

"When I come back, I'll tell you if I can help or not."

"What am I supposed to tell Lisa?"

"Whatever you need to."

He'd hung up on Josh's angry voice. It couldn't be helped. He'd spent a long night thinking about his own past, narrowing everything down to the one person who could give him answers. If this visit didn't pan out, he had nothing to offer Lisa Mallory.

He hadn't seen Dino Brancuzzi for ten years, not since their last job together. While Ethan had removed himself completely from the world he'd lived in for so long, Dino still kept his fingers in the pie. He ran a charter service out of Key West, ostensibly for deep water fishing, but Ethan knew Dino

also did contract work for the government as well as some multinational corporations.

There were many nasty little jobs that were crucial to the country's safety and security but for which the government needed plausible deniability. So Blackwater Charters—a chuckle, since Blackwater was the code name for the last job they'd all done together—mixed covert ops with fishing for marlin.

Other members of their little band had also carried their military skills into civilian life, with businesses like a helicopter service, a gun club, and deepwater salvage. Like Dino, they often did off-the-book jobs for Uncle Sam.

Ethan could have reached out to any of them, but he and Dino had always been the closest. They'd been together long before the others were added to their little unit. Whatever he needed, if Dino could do it, he would.

The thought of dipping his toes in that water again made Ethan's stomach clench. He still wrestled with too many nightmares. But Joshua Taylor was a good friend, and Ethan always took care of his friends. And no matter what he thought of Josh's sister, with her son missing now for three months she had to be caught in a living hell. Well, if anyone could help him reconnect with his old contacts to tackle this, Dino would be the one.

The sun blazed white fire when the plane landed in Key West. Ethan pulled his sunglasses from the pocket of his rumpled shirt and slid them on before stepping out onto the tarmac, protecting his eyes from the glare. The heavy, humid air made his shirt stick to his body in just the few minutes it

took to walk to the terminal. Well, what did he expect at the southernmost tip of the United States? Polar bears?

A few years back, the terminal building had undergone some renovations, and now was more eye-catching for the tourists. Ethan, however, missed the chipped floors and cracks in the glass doors before the city council decided to spruce the place up.

He pushed through the tiny mobs of people with pale skin and Technicolor outfits. In the curve of the driveway outside the building, jaded taxi drivers waited outside their vehicles, laughing and joking, for the next wave of passengers.

The driver at the head of the line was leaning his arms on the roof of his car, watching the doors with an avaricious gaze. When he spotted Ethan, his Chamber of Commerce smile broke out, showing gleaming white teeth. "Where you goin'? I'm the best ride on the island."

"As long as you don't kill me getting there. You know Pelican Marina?"

"Oh, sure, oh, sure." He bobbed his head. "You fishin'?"

"You could say that." Ethan threw his carryall into the cab and folded himself into the back seat. "Let's do it."

He hadn't been in Key West in years, but the old fashioned cottages, brightly colored flowers and turquoise water of the Atlantic Ocean brought back every memory. Real estate titles dated back to the King of Spain and the price of a tiny patch of land was indeed a king's ransom. Fishing, water sports, and the legend of Ernest Hemingway, as well as the infamous Duval Crawl—a pub crawl down the main street—drew tourists by the thousands. The abundance of tourists had

always provided good cover for his activities, allowing him to blend invisibly into the crowd.

And the Keys were an ideal jumping off spot to head out into the Atlantic or the Gulf of Mexico if you had work to do that didn't bear media attention. The confluence of the two bodies of water had long provided access for drug smugglers and later on for terrorists.

That, however, was a long time ago for him. Except the kidnapping of Jamie Mallory, which poked at him like a hot iron, might just thrust him right back into the life he'd turned his back on.

As he drove, the driver kept up a running commentary of activities and events. Ethan pulled his hat down again and wished the man would shut up with the travelogue. He wasn't here for a vacation and he sure didn't expect to enjoy himself.

The cab stopped in a gravel parking lot next to an arched sign held up by two metal pelicans. A long wooden dock stretched out into the water, with colorful boats of all types bobbing in their slips on either side. Ethan's nose caught the familiar tangy scent of salt water, and the discordant symphony of the seagulls and pelicans wheeling and screeching overhead.

He hauled himself and his bag out of the back seat and thrust several bills at the driver.

"Have a good time, man." The driver grinned.

"That'll be a miracle," Ethan muttered, and trudged though the archway toward a small wooden building on the right. The faded sign over the door said Blackwater Charters. An innocuous name for a not-so-innocent business.

He opened the door and stepped into a small office full of arctic air. Sitting in a worn leather chair, feet up on the desk, a telephone to his ear, was a man tanned to a deep olive, with his salt-and-pepper hair tied back in a pony tail and a gold stud gleaming in one ear. He took one look at Ethan and sat up, dropping his feet from the desk.

"I'll have to call you back," he said into the phone and hung up. "Damnation! Ethan Caine in the flesh."

"I think that's the 'too, too, too awful flesh'," Caine quoted. "How are you, Dino?"

Brancuzzi stood and took the hand Ethan held out. "Shocked to see a walking ghost is how I am. How the hell are you?"

"Same as ever."

Barely moving his eyes, Ethan took in every detail of the office. A cracked leather couch and two plastic chairs were the only pieces of furniture other than the desk and chair. It looked like the typical, slightly shop-worn charter office, a place where people on a budget could hire a boat and fish among the rich and beautiful. But the desk held a sophisticated computer setup and a fancy array of communications equipment. Ethan suspected if his friend ran no legitimate charters at all, he'd still have no money worries. His boat went out and came back every day, he blended in with the locals, and no one paid any attention.

Ethan dropped his bag on the floor and sat in one of the plastic chairs. He frowned when it rocked slightly. "Nice furniture you've got."

Dino shrugged. "My clients don't require special interior decoration." He sat back down, propped his feet on the desk and stared at the man in front of him. "I never thought I'd see your face again."

"Yeah, well, I didn't think you would either. But, here I am." Ethan fought a grin. He knew the casual pose his friend affected was so much camouflage.

There wasn't a casual bone in Dino Brancuzzi's body. Every nerve would be on alert, every muscle tightly coiled should sudden movement be necessary. The grin on his face didn't quite reach his watchful, wary eyes.

"I won't ask what you've been doing, because I know the answer's nothing." Dino narrowed his eyes. "Not a whisper about you in ten years."

"Good. I'm tired of being whispered about. But I can't say the same for you, Slick."

"Don't believe everything you hear. You should know that." Dino studied Ethan's face. "So what brings you out of whatever hole you've been living in to sunny Key West?"

Ethan narrowed his gaze at Dino. "I think I need your help."

Dino's eyebrows climbed up through his hairline but he said nothing, just waited for Ethan to continue.

"Let me tell you a story." Shifting in the uncomfortable chair, Ethan gave him every detail of the Lisa Mallory situation, from her marriage to the kidnapping of her son.

Dino made no comment until the narrative was finished, then he leaned forward on the desk. "You're going to find the son." A statement, not a question.

Ethan heaved a sigh. "Yeah, well, Mrs. Mallory and I will never be social chums, but you know how I feel about kids. And it's damned interesting that since the snatch there hasn't been even one hint of what happened to him."

Dino nodded. "Kidnappers either return the goods or dump the body. If the package is dead, they can't get rid of it fast enough. So we assume the kid's alive?"

"Yeah. At least we hope he is."

"And you want me to sniff around," Dino guessed.

"What I want—need—is help with things I can't get my hands on any longer, but I figure you can." A corner of his mouth turned up. "Maybe from some of your 'fishing' buddies."

"Poke into some corners, you mean."

"Only if you're comfortable with this." Ethan lifted his hat and raked his fingers through his hair. "Truth to tell, my friend, there's no one else I would trust in this situation."

Dino nodded. "I hear you. What's your gut telling you?"

"That this still has something to do with the husband. A prime asshole."

Dino nodded. "I agree. This didn't just come out of nowhere. So." He began rolling a pencil between his fingers. "You said the IRS yanked all his records?"

"Uh huh." Ethan leaned forward. "I could file an Open Records Request with the IRS, but I know you and Uncle have a little, shall we say, ongoing relationship, so I'd say you have a better chance of getting the stuff ASAP."

Dino nodded. "I'll make a call. See if I can get what you need emailed to me, maybe even today."

"Okay." Ethan levered himself out of the rickety chair and picked up his bag. "I'll go find a room someplace and let you know where I am."

"The town is packed with conventions," Dino protested. "You can't get a room at any price. I've got an extra bed at my place you can use. Nothing fancy," he added, "but at least it's clean and you can make yourself invisible if you want."

"Thanks. I appreciate that."

"Come on. Today's quiet, so let me run you over to the house. Then I'll come back here and see what I can dig up."

* * * *

"He did what?" Lisa Mallory stood in front of her brother, hands fisted on her hips, fighting the rage gathering inside her.

"He left a message that he'd be gone for a week and he'd call when he got back."

Lisa began pacing. "What an ass. I'm sorry, Josh. I know he's your friend. But I'm in the biggest crisis of my life and he takes off someplace?"

Josh held out his hands in front of him, palms outward. "Hold on. I didn't say that." He blew out a breath. "My guess is he's gone to make contact with some people from his ... previous occupation. See what he can find out."

"Then why didn't he say so?" She pounded a fist against her thigh. "Doesn't he know I'm losing it here? What kind of man just takes off like that and leaves me twisting in the wind?"

"Lisa, hold onto this thought. If he was going to turn you down or walk away, he would have done so already."

She twisted her hands together, trying to still the anger that still bubbled through her system, the only emotion keeping her fear in check. Ethan Caine stuck in her craw, a man whose disdain for her was evident at their uncomfortable lunch. Nor did she trust him the way Josh did. But she had no place else to turn. He knew it and that left her at his mercy. She hated it.

"Every day we waste is another day Jamie's slipping away from me." She chewed on a thumbnail, a bad habit she'd picked up over the past few months.

"Sit." Josh put his hands on her shoulders and gently forced her into the chair behind her. "Just ... sit. Let me get you some tea. No wine," he added, when she opened her mouth to speak. "You need to lay off the wine before you become an alcoholic. Tea."

"Do you really think he's trying to find out something?" In her marriage to Charles, she'd felt like such a victim. Now she was determined not to be at anyone's mercy, including the unpredictable Ethan Caine.

"Yes. I do. He said one week, and I guarantee it won't be longer than that. Maybe less."

Lisa swiped her hair away from her face and tucked it behind her ears. "I've racked my brain again and again to see if I've missed anything, but I haven't. The police said drug dealers would have let me know that's what this was about. They'd want their so-called honor back. But who else could do this and make a little boy disappear so completely?"

Redemption
by Judith Rochelle

"You don't know what other enemies Charles had," Josh reminded her. "Here." He set a mug of hot tea on the little table beside her. Drink this. It'll settle your nerves."

"I can't handle any more of this, Josh." Her eyes burned with tears she forcibly held back. "I can't sleep because I have nightmares about Jamie. I can hardly focus on one thing at a time. A nervous breakdown would be almost a welcome relief."

Josh knelt before her and took her hands. "Lisa, you've managed to hold it together this long, though God alone knows how. Please try to hold on a little longer. I know in my gut Ethan will do this, and he'll find Jamie. Alive. Can you just trust me on this?"

"All right." She gripped the hands holding hers. "But he'd better have some good news for us when he returns."

Chapter Five

"Help yourself to whatever you find." Dino waved his hand around the small house. "The extra bedroom's not much but the bed has a good mattress. And there's beer in the fridge. I'll head back to the office and make some calls. Be back around seven and we can catch some dinner."

Ethan hoped his friend didn't mean that literally. Fishing had never been an activity that appealed to him. He'd spent so much of his professional life sitting absolutely still in one place, when he was on his own time he wanted to be able to move and make noise if the urge struck him.

Alone, Ethan changed from the clothes he'd worn on the plane to shorts and a t-shirt that had seen far better days, and slipped his feet into tattered Nikes.

"Buy yourself some decent clothes, for God's sake," Josh always ragged at him.

But he had no need for anything except what he had, and shopping was an experience more stressful than he needed.

"If my manner of dress offends people, they can just shove it up their collective asses," he always said.

Now, in his ragtag clothes, he looked around the compact bungalow Dino called home. Tile floors picked up the tropical theme of the islands, and a huge window in the living room look out to the end of the street and the beach beyond. Even on this side street, tourists in every manner of garish dress were bumping along on the sidewalk, laughing and shrieking, carrying colorful bags from the island's overpriced shops.

Redemption
by Judith Rochelle

He opened the fridge and reached for a beer, thinking to plant himself on the front porch rocker, drinking and watching the world go by while he waited. But before he could snag a bottle, he slammed the door shut. He'd taken a good look at himself in the bathroom that morning, an action that brought home some painful truths to him. He was way out of shape. If he was required to do anything to get Jamie Mallory back more strenuous than lifting a telephone receiver, he had some serious work to do. And he needed to start now.

Locking the front door and pocketing the key Dino had left with him, he walked to the end of the block and onto the beach. In years past he'd run five miles every morning on beaches like this, or similar places. Now he was having trouble with an old man's stroll.

Swallowing a sigh, he made his way to the hard-packed sand at the water's edge and eased himself into a slow jog. By the time he'd covered a mile, he was sure he'd have a heart attack. He was leaning over, hands on his thighs, dragging air into his lungs, when a group of teenagers flew by him, waving and hooting.

"Damnation."

He straightened, waited another minute for his pulse to slow a little more, then began the jog back. By the time he reached the bungalow, he was ready to call an ambulance, but he dragged himself up onto the porch and collapsed in the rocker.

He was still sitting there when Dino pulled into the narrow driveway just before seven.

"Did someone leave a dead body on my porch," Dino joked, "or are you still breathing?" He was careful to make sure Ethan knew he was there before he approached him. He'd seen men less cautious with broken necks.

Ethan flapped a hand at him. "Ha ha. That's a great sense of humor you've got."

Dino punched him lightly on the arm, then leaned a hip against the porch rail, studying his friend. ""What did you do to yourself? I only left you a few hours ago. I didn't think you'd get into trouble so quickly."

"It's the new Ethan Caine self-improvement program."

"Put on a t-shirt that doesn't stink quite so much and we'll get some food. I have things to tell you."

* * * *

Dino had brought printouts of two emails with him. Each contained pages of records that he and Ethan spread out on his kitchen table, a record of Charles Mallory's life for the five years prior to his murder.

For hours they sorted through copies of phone records, credit card receipts, travel records, client lists. By the end of the evening, a pattern had begun to emerge.

"Mexico." Dino tapped his pen on the pad where he'd been making notes.

"Yeah, I'd say so," Ethan agreed.

He'd drawn a big circle on the paper in front of him and made tick marks for phone calls to the same numbers, receipts for travel to the same places, clients with related

addresses. The grouping of marks formed three clusters within the circle, all of them overlapping.

"Cancun," Dino continued. "And Playa del Carmen. He shows money transfers for businesses in and out of there, businesses that I know are fronts for drug cartels. And don't ask me how, okay?"

"So what now?"

"Remember how we used to do this, *amigo*?" Dino grinned but there was no humor in it. He drew ten squares on a clean sheet of paper. "First we figure out who's operating in the area, who the most likely people are Charles might have been doing business with—and you can bet that's what took him there. *Nobody* takes that many vacations, and besides, it's a perfect spot for drug dealing and money laundering."

He plugged in his laptop and booted it up, his fingers dancing over the keys.

"Don't tell me you can now Google drug cartels and guerilla groups." Ethan's tone was dry.

Dino nodded. "In a manner of speaking." He turned the computer so both men could see the screen. "You'd be surprised what the government lists on its web sites these days. Especially if you say the secret word."

Ethan looked. "I've kept an eye on it, believe it or not. Just out of idle curiosity."

"Uh huh." Dino tapped the screen. "Well then, just bear with me. So here we have Uncle's list of known groups operating in the general area we're interested in. You can eliminate these six." He indicated them with a finger. They'd

never be involved in something like this." He highlighted them and hit the 'delete' key.

"And you know that because?" Ethan raised an eyebrow.

"Because in ten years we've gotten a pretty good sense of who'll commit what crimes and what's on the agenda of each group."

"Nice of these guys to have a code of conduct." Ethan helped himself to another bottle of water from the refrigerator, twisted off the cap and took a long swallow.

Dino looked at him, eyebrows raised. "Another part of the Caine Self-Improvement Program?"

"Don't ask."

"Okay." Dino turned back to the laptop. "The guerillas are the kidnapppers of choice. Almost everywhere. This is their business. They fund their activities with ransom money so we look at them first."

Ethan rubbed his forehead. "But how would they be connected to Charles? Isn't it a stretch from cartels to out and out nut cases?"

Dino shrugged. "Yet to be determined. But there's too many things here connecting to each other to ignore them. There's a link here somewhere." He shut down the computer. "Tomorrow I can tap into some other sources that I've run some ... fishing charters for. Pick up some more info."

Four more days passed while Dino did his thing, hunting information through his hidden contacts. Each morning Ethan pulled himself out of bed and began his routine—jogging, swimming, more jogging, pushing himself until he was exhausted at the end of each day. He hadn't had alcohol of

any kind since he stepped off the plane, instead drinking huge amounts of water and Gatorade.

Dino chuckled when they ate at night, as Ethan refused anything but lean meat, broiled fish and salads.

"You're really serious about this, aren't you?"

"Let's say the kid's still alive and I have to get him out. I can't afford to die halfway there."

By the fifth day, Dino had scraped all the information from his sources he could. "These are some badass people your lady's gotten herself hooked up with," he told Ethan.

Ethan made a face. "She's not my lady and she's not hooked up. I doubt if she even knows these people exist."

Dino opened the folder he was carrying and began spreading papers out on the table. "So much the worse. She'll have no idea what she's up against."

What he gave Ethan had more questions than answers. He'd been able to pinpoint one group as the most likely kidnappers. Their home base was in Cancun, although they sometimes operated out of Playa del Carmen.

"They call themselves Las Tormentas. The Storms. They say they sweep everything clean. People are afraid of them and say they are like a storm of devastation, leveling everything in their path. Shortly after Jamie was snatched, they got a new infusion of funds."

Ethan memorized everything, then burned the papers they'd been working with and flushed the ashes down the toilet. When he came back into the living room, he had his carry bag with him. "I took a chance earlier that we'd be

finished tonight. Made a reservation on the late flight to Tampa. But information isn't the only thing I'll need."

"Equipment, you mean."

"Yup. Hardware. Firepower. Night goggles. Stuff like that."

Dino nodded. "I figured."

"They'll have to be delivered to me when I get to the destination. I can't take them on planes."

Dino nodded again, and placed a cell phone on the table.

"When you're ready for delivery of whatever you need, just turn this on. Punch 'talk' and it will connect with me. You only want to use it once. Then dismantle it and destroy it."

"Got it."

"You'll also need some help." He held up his hand as Ethan began to protest. "Not up for discussion. You can't do this on your own. This isn't a one-man rescue operation, Ethan. Not if you want to come out alive. And if you find the kid, you'll need extraction capability and support."

Ethan shook his head. "I can't involve you in this."

"I already talked to the others. We're in, so just shut up. When you get your equipment delivery, there'll be a satellite phone in it. That's how you'll contact us."

For the first time in years, Ethan felt a surge of emotion. Some friendships never die, he realized.

They made one traditional stop on the way to the airport, a last drink—rum and Coke for Dino, plain Coke for Ethan—at Mallory's, the bar at Sunset Point.

"Can you believe people come here every evening just to celebrate the sun going down?" Ethan asked.

"Key West, my friend. It's a ritual." Dino tilted up his glass.

Redemption
by Judith Rochelle

They both stared at the blending of the Atlantic and the Gulf, knowing how many people had crossed that blurred line for reasons that would never come to light. Or how many were yet to come, including, very possibly, Ethan himself.

Dino finished his drink and gave Ethan a long look before he stood up. "Remember these aren't people who want to play nice. *Dios de protege*, my friend."

God protect you.

* * * *

Lisa was sleeping fitfully, tormented by disturbing dreams. Somewhere a bell was ringing, and she couldn't make it stop. She sat up abruptly, suddenly aware that it was the telephone and it was ringing insistently. She yanked the receiver from the cradle.

"H-Hello?" She pushed her hair from her face and tried to untangle the sheet from her body.

"Lisa? Wake up."

"Josh?" She squinted at her alarm clock. "Do you know what time it is?"

"Yeah. Six a.m. Get up. Ethan's back and he wants to talk to us." His voice was controlled but he couldn't hide the edge of excitement.

He doesn't want to get my hopes up.

She felt her breath catch. "Did he say anything?"

"No, but if he didn't have anything to tell us, he wouldn't have asked to see us."

"Okay, okay. I'm getting up." She kicked off the covers and headed for the bathroom. "Where?"

"Manny's Diner. It's a dive not far from downtown, but he feels comfortable there. I'll pick you up in twenty minutes."

She was waiting in the driveway, shifting impatiently from one foot to the other, long before Josh pulled up exactly twenty minutes later. She'd passed on makeup, just grabbing the jeans and sweatshirt she'd thrown on her chair the night before and tugging a ball cap over her pony-tailed hair.

"If the fashionistas could only see the famous Lisa Mallory now," Josh chuckled, then looked at his sister's face. "You have to ease up a little, sis. If Jamie's alive, you've gotta keep it together."

"I know, I know." The tension wouldn't let go of her body. Throughout the short drive, she jiggled one leg and chewed her thumbnail.

Josh reached over and pressed a hand on her rapidly moving thigh, but she shoved it away.

"Lisa, if you don't settle down, you'll implode."

"What if Jamie's dead?" Her voice cracked. "What if that's what Ethan wants to tell us?" She rubbed her hands nervously on her thighs.

Josh reached over and grabbed one of her hands, giving it a squeeze that said *don't panic yet*. "Even Ethan Caine isn't that insensitive. He'd handle that differently."

"So you say. I'm not convinced."

Josh wheeled the car into a gravel parking lot surrounding an old railroad dining car painted black. A chipped sign over the door read *Manny's* and under it *Come on in*.

"What is this place?" Lisa frowned. *A rundown restaurant for a rundown man.*

"Ethan feels comfortable here. I have a feeling he owns it."

Lisa grunted. "He should invest a little in decorating."

Inside one end was blocked off for the kitchen and bathroom. The rest of the interior was jammed with a row of cracked vinyl booths and a scarred counter.

Ethan was sitting in the end booth at the back, facing the door. His eyes met hers as she came towards him, but they gave nothing away.

Lisa's eyes widened as she took in his appearance. He'd shaved his beard and his face sported a hot-looking shade of red, thanks to a sunburn. The fleshiness around his chin and eyes had shrunk. His eyes seemed sharper, clearer. The plate in front of him held scrambled egg and tomato slices, with a mug of black coffee on the side.

Josh stared at him. "Where is Ethan Caine and what have you done with him?"

Ethan grunted. "That's some act. Maybe you should take it on the road." He gestured for Josh and Lisa to sit down across from him.

A heavy set man in jeans, t-shirt and not-so-spotless white apron approached with two glasses of water, two mugs and a carafe of coffee. "Menu's up on the wall," he told them, filling the mugs.

Josh and Lisa both shook their heads.

He shrugged. "Suit yourselves." He set the carafe on the table and walked away.

"What's with the new diet?" Josh squinted at the plate.

"Where's the truckload of food you usually eat?"

"You should try it some time. Eating right is eating healthy."

Josh burst out laughing. "Ethan Caine concerned about his diet and..."

"Stop!" Lisa curled her hands around her mug. "We aren't here to discuss eating habits. Or menus. Or make jokes." She turned hot eyes toward Ethan. "Where have you been?"

He took a swallow of his coffee, his eyes glued to her face. "I went to see a friend. Someone who could help me figure this out."

"And?" *I'll kill him if he doesn't tell me something soon.*
"No bullshit, Mr. Caine. Is Jamie alive or dead?"

Ethan took so long answering Lisa wanted to leap across the table and yank the words from his mouth.

He took another sip of coffee and set his mug down with a precise movement before looking up at her. "I don't know for sure but I'm guessing he's still alive."

"Guessing?" she cried, then swallowed and forced a calmness she didn't feel. "What do you mean *guessing*?"

"Lisa," Josh warned. "Let him talk."

"Here's what I learned." Ethan's voice was slow and heavy as he related everything he and Dino had discovered—the records of Charles's activities for five years prior to his death, narrowing the circle of possible kidnappers and zeroing in on a location.

"But that tells us nothing," Lisa protested.

"No, it tells us a lot. It tells us Charles spent a lot of time in the Yucatan and not just getting a tan. That a group down there makes its living kidnapping people. That if they

kidnapped Jamie and didn't return him, there's something here we don't know." He forked a bite of egg into his mouth and chased it with coffee.

"But what?" Tears of frustration pricked at her eyes.

"How much do you know about the Quintana Roo jungle in Mexico? Ever heard of it?"

Lisa frowned. "A little bit. Why? What does that have to do with Jamie?"

"Quintana Roo is a state on the Yucatan Peninsula. Ecotourism is the hot new market, it seems, and the Roo is cashing in on it." He made a face. "Playa del Carmen, just south of Cancun, is the jumping off place for tours into the interior. But more than one third of the state of Quintana Roo is a tropical forest—more like a jungle—with vast undeveloped areas that are difficult to reach."

"And?" She leaned forward, the tension in her body stretching her like a guy wire.

"I think one of those groups snatched Jamie and someone has him in the Roo. I don't know why, but all of Charles's visits there indicate that's where the impetus came from. If someone is hiding Jamie, what better place could they find than a plantation hidden away from civilization?"

"My God." Lisa sat back. "That means ... there's still a good chance he's alive. Jamie could be alive."

"Don't get too excited, Mrs. Mallory." His voice was flat. "We don't know anything for sure. Yet."

Lisa felt her stomach tighten again and bile rose up in her throat. "Someone could have him locked up all this time? Why? Why not give him back?"

Ethan's eyes never left Lisa's face as he answered her. "Could be someone wanted a child and decided yours fit the bill. Still, there's something here that's not quite right. If that's the case, they could have taken any child and not gotten involved with a messy ransom demand." He shook his head, reached for the carafe and refilled his mug. "Well, drink up. I have more preparations to make before I can get there and check it out."

"What do you mean? What kind of preparations? Why can't you just get on a plane and go?" Ethan Caine watched Lisa with his hooded eyes. Josh's hand closed over hers and she forced herself to take a deep breath. "All right. I'm sorry. What is it you have to do?"

He spoke to her as one might explain something to a child, his tone a mixture of frustration and forced patience. "The Quintana Roo is a very unfriendly place. And these thugs I'm looking for don't play nice in the sandbox. I know you want me to head for the airport now. But I've got to take a week to fix what I've done to myself over the last ten years. And after all this time, a few more days won't really matter."

She stared at him. "Let me get this straight. You can't go because you're a wreck?"

A muscle jumped in his cheek. "I have other arrangements to make, too."

"And after your week at a gym?" Her voice was filled with venom.

"I go to Mexico. Find the place where Las Tormentas hang out. Identify their leader, and a foot soldier I can turn for

information. Once I know for sure they're the ones who took him, I can squeeze for answers."

Lisa began drumming her fingers on the table. Why were they just sitting here talking instead of going to get Jamie? "So when do you start?"

Ethan pushed his coffee cup away and let his eyes rake over her face. "The minute I leave here."

Lisa swallowed some of her coffee, making a face at its cold, bitter taste and shoved the mug away. "What if they kill him before you can get there?"

"If they were going to kill him they'd have already done it. A week won't make a difference."

"But..."

Josh put his hand on her arm again and looked at Ethan. "What's the plan?"

He poured more coffee into his mug from the carafe on the table and added three packets of sweetener. "Fly into Cancun and scope out what cantina these thugs hang out in. Figure out which one to pay off for information so I can pinpoint Jamie's location. Head for Playa del Carmen and start to work."

"I'm going with you." Lisa had stopped drumming her fingers, her hands now curled into tight fists.

Ethan and Josh stared at her.

"Are you nuts?" Ethan's voice was like a sharp knife cutting the air. "Out of the question."

"He's my son. I'm going with you."

"Or what?" He raised an eyebrow. "You'll tell me to peddle my papers elsewhere?"

Lisa felt as if every nerve and muscle in her body was stretched to the breaking point. Gritting her teeth, she leaned forward. "Jamie is *my* son. I can't just sit on my hands and wait to see what happens. I'm going, with or without you, so it might as well be with."

"Lisa..." Josh's voice had a warning note that said *Don't argue with this man*.

She looked from one man to the other. "Mr. Caine. What's your ... what do you call it ... cover? Who will you be?"

"A gringo tourist bum looking for some night life." His lips curled in a mock smile. "I fit the part, don't you think?"

She took a deep breath and plunged ahead. "Wouldn't it look less suspicious if you're part of a couple?" She gave a short laugh. "Maybe honeymooners?"

"She's got a point there," Josh admitted with reluctance.

"Please," she begged. Then, to her utter humiliation, tears leaked from her eyes and flooded down her cheeks.

Josh tightened his arm around her and she leaned into him until the storm subsided. She grabbed napkins from the holder on the table and wiped her face.

"I apologize." She took a long drink from the water glass in front of her. "I don't usually fall apart like this in front of strangers."

"No problem." But Ethan's eyes looked at her as if she were a lab experiment. "But that's a good enough reason for you not to go. The jungle is rough, these people are rougher, and there's no place for emotion. Stay home where you belong."

"No!" She slammed her hand on the table. She was so ready to jump out of her skin she was shaking. "I belong on this trip. I'll do whatever you tell me, but I have to go with you." She drew in a deep, shuddering breath and let it out. "Don't let the tears put you off, Mr. Caine. I'm a lot tougher than I look. I had to be to survive all those years with Charles Mallory. I can think on my feet, I'm good in a crisis, and I'm a crack shot."

Ethan's eyebrows rose and he looked at Josh.

Josh nodded. "She's telling the truth. I'd say she's a natural with a weapon."

"I bought a gun the day after Charles was killed," she told him. "I went to a range and learned how to use it."

Ethan turned his gaze back to her. After a moment he sighed, a sound of resignation. "All right. I know in my bones I'll regret this but we'll go as the loving couple."

"Thank you..."

"Don't thank me yet. There are ground rules, and they're not negotiable. I won't have either the time or inclination to be your babysitter."

She nodded. "Whatever you say."

"That's the first one. Whatever I say goes. No arguing. I mean it. This is my playground, not yours. There's no room for amateur mistakes."

"Agreed."

"Like I said, I'll be leaving in a week. I have to get in shape and if you're going, so do you."

"W-What do you mean?" She frowned. "What kind of shape?"

He grimaced. "Mexico is hotter than hell. We might be hacking our way through a jungle, maybe sleeping under a tree. Doing God knows how much walking. Not to mention evading plenty of guys who would cut your throat like nothing. So that gives me one week to teach you the basics of survival. Self-defense. How to shoot a gun without killing yourself."

"I can shoot."

Ethan fiddled with his mug, then gave her his penetrating stare again. "Last thing. If we plan to accomplish all this in such a short period of time, you have to move into my house."

At that Josh burst out laughing. "You want her to come live at your house? You really are crazy. It's barely habitable for you."

Ethan glared at him. "This isn't a social visit. Like I said, we don't have much time. She's gotta be there twenty four/seven to make this work."

"I'll do it." The fierce determination in Lisa's voice startled them. "When do we start? No, Josh." She held up her hand as she saw him about to object. "This is my son and my decision. So forget whatever else you were going to say."

Ethan shrugged. "No time like the present to get started. Let's go by your house so you can pick up whatever you need. And remember, we'll be traveling light."

"I'll need my car, too."

"Not. You won't be leaving my house until we head for the airport. Leave it in your garage."

Redemption
by Judith Rochelle

Lisa took a deep breath and let it out, steadying herself. *So be it.* She'd wade through hell with the devil himself if it meant getting Jamie back. And maybe that was exactly what she'd be doing.

"Fine. Let's get going."

They all slid out of the booth and Ethan dumped some bills on the table. He waved to Manny as they filed out the door.

As Lisa turned to ask Josh a question, a sharp crack split the damp morning air and she heard the sound of glass splintering.

Chapter Six

Lisa suddenly felt herself slammed to the ground, gravel digging into her face, a heavy body on top of hers. She lay pressed against the rough ground of the parking lot, barely able to breathe with Ethan's heavy weight pressing her down. She tried to push herself up, only to find steel arms wrapped around her.

"Shut up and don't try to get up until I tell you to," Ethan's harsh voice commanded, his mouth close to her ear.

Keeping her in a tight grip, he rolled them until they were under the steps leading into the diner. The gravel scraped her face and stones pricked at her, even through her clothing. Ethan maneuvered one hand under her head to cushion it but she still felt as if someone was jack hammering her into the ground.

They lay in the shelter of the stairs for what seemed an interminable amount of time. With Ethan's big body holding her to the ground, Lisa's lungs were compressed until she was sure she'd never be able to draw a breath again.

Finally he lifted his head. "Josh? You okay?"

"Yeah," the voice came back. "Fine. We're clear, but we better get the hell out of here."

"Got your gun?" Ethan called.

"Right here." Josh came out from behind the dumpster at one side of the lot in a crouch and hurried over to where they were lying.

Lisa's jaw dropped. "Joshua. You carry a gun? What the hell for?"

"Protection. Questions later, please." He hunched into the opening with Lisa and Ethan. "You saw it? I spotted it the same time you did."

"Spotted what?" Lisa spit pebbles from her mouth, brushing her lips with her fingers. "That was a gunshot I heard, right?"

Ethan rolled off of her and held out a hand to help her up. "Right on the first try. If I was one second slower, at least one of us would be dead."

Tremors shook her body and she dug her nails into her palms to steady herself. "Who would be shooting at us?"

"Good question."

She followed his gaze to the diner door. Cracks radiated from a hole in the top pane of glass. "My God!"

Ethan's jaw tightened. "Damn. We need to get the hell out of here. Josh, get her in my car. I'll be right there."

He took a key ring from the pocket of his jacket and tossed it at Josh. Then he pulled his wad of bills from the waistband of his sweatpants and disappeared back into the diner.

Lisa was grateful for Josh's strong arm around her as he hurried her to the big Expedition and pressed the key to pop the locks. She leaned into his body, forcing her wobbly legs to support her.

"Someone shot at us," she told him, shock still gripping her.

"Uh huh. Thank God Ethan's reflexes are still good."

"My God," she repeated. For a moment she remembered the shooting at the ransom drop, the kick in her side and the searing, breath-stealing pain. A thin finger of ice traveled along her spine.

Josh opened the door of the SUV, guided her into the passenger seat and hunkered down beside her. He searched her face with worried eyes. "Let me go get you some coffee. You look like you're about to pass out."

"No." She nearly shouted the word. She wasn't sure she could hold a cup steady enough to drink. "I mean, I'm fine."

I'm not fine. Far from it. But I can't pass out. If I show I'm scared Ethan won't let me go with him. And I have to go.

"You don't look fine to me."

Then Ethan was back, carrying a large plastic cup which he held out to Lisa.

"No, thank you." She could hardly make her mouth work.

His face was like a granite mask but something fiery flickered in his eyes. "Coffee. Black. Drink it. Helps counteract the shock." He pressed the cup into her hands.

Josh nodded. "Like I said, you need it. Drink. Please."

"Fine." It occurred to her that coffee seemed to be her life-giving fluid at all the times of crisis in her life. She forced a steadiness in her hands as she popped off the lid and blew on the hot liquid before sipping it, welcoming the burn as it slid down her throat. She didn't want to think what would have happened if Ethan hadn't thrown them both to the ground. "How did you know they were going to shoot?"

"Too many years doing too many things." His eyes shifted, a look of anguish darkening them. "Noticing things."

Josh was still crouched against the open passenger door. "He saw the same thing I did, Lisa. Black car, black windows, trolling the street. Then the window rolling down just enough for a muzzle to poke out. Only it didn't register with me the way it did with Ethan."

She swallowed more coffee. Ethan was right. The shot of caffeine was helping her system settle down. "Who do you think they were shooting at?"

"Could have been you. They tried to get rid of you once and failed."

"But they could have come after me any time during the past few weeks," she protested. She gripped her hands around the coffee so tight she was afraid she'd crack the plastic cup. She could almost smell the fear on herself.

Ethan shrugged. "Could have been me, too. I made a lot of enemies over the years. Lately I've made myself a little more visible. And I've been poking into some uncomfortable places the past few days. When you put yourself out in the open, the wolves begin to hunt." He glanced over at her. "Or like I said, they could have been aiming at you."

Her eyes widened and she felt the blood drain from her face. She took a large gulp of the hot liquid to steady herself. If Ethan sensed her fear, he'd never take her with him. "But why now, after all this time?"

"To throw a scare into you. Keep you from keep looking for your son. They see more activity on your part and they want to stop it. Something stinks here. I can smell it." He turned the ignition key. "We'd better get going. Looks like we're already running out of time. And I don't want to hang around

here and give them another chance at us. That could have been just a warning. Or not."

"Josh?" Lisa looked at her brother. "Will you be okay? I don't want you getting shot over this."

"I'll be fine. I don't think anyone's after me, but I'll lay low, anyway." He closed the passenger door and tapped it twice. "If you want to call me, use one of Ethan's cell phones."

"Okay." She started to ask him about the gun, but Ethan was already pulling out of the parking lot.

Ethan was his usual silent self as he drove and Lisa was glad for the quiet. She was still shaken by the shooting and needed to get herself under control. Any sign of fear and she knew Ethan would take off without her.

On the drive to her house they followed a meandering, convoluted route.

"Where are you going?" she asked. "Do you need directions?"

"I need to make sure whoever shot at us—or their friends— isn't on my ass." His voice was a low growl. "They probably know where you live but I don't want to give them any extra advantage."

When he was satisfied they were clear, he turned onto her street and pulled into her driveway.

"Take only the bare essentials," he ordered. "We won't be heavy in the luggage department. You'll have to do without your fancy duds."

She glared at him. "You're a reverse snob, Mr. Caine. I wasn't born with a silver spoon in my mouth, and money's no

good if it destroys your life. I don't need anything but my son."

She started to climb out of the SUV but Caine stopped her. "Give me your keys. I want to check the house first."

Her eyes widened. "You think someone might be here?"

He shrugged. "I've learned not to take chances. Lock these doors until I come out. If I yell *Go*, start this thing and get the hell out of here."

He moved away silently, leaving her alone in the car.

Lisa fought back the panic that surged forward and chewed on her thumbnail until at last Ethan came out onto the porch and motioned for her.

"Looks clear, but I'll wait for you in the living room just to be on the safe side."

Packing took only a few minutes.

"All set," she told Ethan, hauling her suitcase into the living room.

They locked up the house and were on their way.

Again he drove in an apparently aimless manner until he was satisfied they were clear, then headed out of town. He said nothing, a silent presence, and Lisa occupied herself thinking of every curse word she knew to vilify Charles. Even in death the bastard was still destroying her life.

She leaned back against the headrest, remembering the awful trip to the morgue. The police insisted there wasn't enough of the body left to identify except through dental records, and Josh had tried hard to talk her out of it. She wanted to see for herself. She couldn't rest until she

convinced herself the lump of flesh they'd pulled from the burned car was Charles

The coffee Ethan had handed her earlier triggered a memory still branded in her brain.

* * * *

"Mrs. Mallory, this isn't a pleasant sight, Identifying a body is a horrible experience even for the very strong. Are you sure you want to put yourself through this?"

Lisa nodded her head. "Yes. Yes, I do. I'm fine. I'll be all right."

He made another attempt. "His car rolled off an embankment and the gas tank exploded. I don't think—"

"Please. I need to be able to put closure to this. For myself and my son." And to make sure that bastard can't come back and hurt us again.

The detective shrugged. "All right. Just be aware the body is badly burned. I'll have them set it up in the viewing window.

"No!" She almost shouted the word. "I don't want to see him through a glass or in a photograph. Take me into the morgue." She looked up at the man. "You can do that, right?"

"Lisa." Josh touched her arm.

She shook it off. "Can we stop arguing and get this over with?"

The morgue was ice cold, the air filled with the chemicals of death. Lisa was sure all the perfume in the world couldn't disguise the pervasive odor that hovered over everything. Two members of the medical examiner's staff, gowned and

gloved, stood by stainless steel tables, the remains on them hastily covered with canvas so her eyes wouldn't be offended.

She stood at the nearest autopsy table, flanked by Josh and the detective. A canvas similar to the others covered what lay on it. A stainless steel pan was attached at the side, and a scale hung from a pole hooked to one corner. For organs, Lisa thought, remembering all the television shows she'd seen. If there were any to remove, that is. Or to weigh.

She thought she was prepared for what she would see, that her hatred would shield her against the horror, but the reality was even worse than she imagined. What was stretched out on the autopsy table wasn't even the remnant of a human being.

Almost all the flesh had been burned away, but charred bits of it still clung to what was left of the bones, reminding her of spare ribs that had been expertly gnawed. The skull was a grinning monstrosity, the teeth like chipped enamel plugs protruding from what was left of the jaw. The skeleton wasn't even complete. Many of the bones had been partially destroyed by the fire.

"Compare it to a crematorium," the detective answered her unspoken question. "When the fire heats to a certain temperature, it disintegrates bone, leaving only a residue of ash."

Lisa felt the bile rush up into her throat and she swallowed hard against it. She forced herself to stare at what remained of Golden Boy Charles Mallory, the devil who had taken her to hell. Whatever she had expected to get from this wasn't there. This was just a charred, stinking lump of flesh and

bone fragments. And maybe that's all he'd ever been, under that golden exterior.

But she needed this to be him. Needed the man to be dead, so she could finally and forever have peace. And somewhere deep inside her, she knew the gruesome remains on that table were what was left of Charles.

She nodded once. "Yes. That's him." She turned and almost ran from the refrigerated environment. Josh caught up with her in the hallway.

"Lisa." He pulled her into his arms.

She was shaking so hard her teeth chattered.

"Here, Mrs. Mallory. This might help." The detective handed her a cup of coffee he'd procured from somewhere.

Josh took it and held it to her lips.

Lisa forced herself to take a sip, the liquid spreading its heat through her body. Too bad it couldn't reach her soul. She was sure she'd be cold there forever. But Charles was dead.

*"At least the nightmare is over." She leaned against Josh.
"Thank God."*

* * * *

"Mrs. Mallory?"

"Huh? What?" She shook herself from the ghastly reverie and realized they'd stopped moving.

"We're here."

She looked out the window at the rambling farmhouse showing visible signs of neglect, surrounded by weeds and

shrubbery gone wild. Her distaste must have been evident in her face.

Ethan sat unmoving in his seat, car keys dangling from his fingers. "You can change your mind any time you want. I'll just take you back to your house and get on with what I have to do."

"No. I don't care if you live in a hovel. Which, by the way, isn't so far from what this is. Let's just do what we have to do and get Jamie." She opened the door and got out.

She realized the house was an extension of the man—a once proud warrior now falling to seed and uncared-for. Life had been hard on both of them.

Ethan flipped open a panel on the wall in the entry hall and punched in a code. Instantly four green lights came on. He unlocked what looked to Lisa like a closet door. Instead it was a small room filled with more electronic equipment than she'd ever seen in one place. She watched, fascinated, as Ethan flipped switches, typed commands into computer keyboards, and a bank of monitors on the wall came to life.

"But this is unbelievable," she said, her eyes wide. "This place ... it's like a fortress."

Ethan nodded. "Of necessity. Especially now after that shooting. I have cameras and electronic sensors all over the property. That way no one sneaks up and surprises us."

"Oh." She shivered at the thought.

He led the way down a short hall. "There's a bedroom that's fairly clean and it's got its own bath." Opening a door, he walked across the room and raised the windows. At once a

breeze blew in and stirred the musty odor. "I'll just air it out a little."

Lisa looked around the room. A king-sized bed, a dresser, a night stand, and two doors. Dusty but not as bad as she expected. Unused for a long time.

Ethan pointed. "Closet. Bathroom. I'll get you sheets and blankets from the linen closet. The room hasn't been used in years, so I didn't see much sense in keeping the bed made up."

"This will be just fine."

She started to say something else but was interrupted by the doorbell. "Are you expecting company?" *Surely not. And what about the fancy security?*

Ethan was already moving out of the room. "Not to worry. I know what it is."

Still, Lisa noticed that a gun had appeared in his hand which he held against his thigh as he moved to the front hall.

She followed him to the hallway, stunned by the huge delivery truck in the driveway. What could he possibly have ordered? But at the end of an hour, she was even more amazed. Another bedroom, devoid of furniture, was now filled with a treadmill, free weights and what she'd seen on television advertised as a home gym. What surprised her the most was handholds on one of the walls that she recognized as a training wall for rock climbing.

"Are we starting a physical fitness program?" she asked. "Do we really have time for this?"

"We don't have time not to do it." He was busy arranging free weights on their stand. "We've got one week for both of

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us to get in shape for whatever happens in Mexico. I spent the past week trying to undo the damage I foisted on my body for the last ten years. But that's just a start."

"And what's with the wall?" She waved a hand at it. "Will we be mountain climbing?"

"You never know what you'll have to climb. That thing is left over from years ago. But I checked all the pegs and they're still sturdy. I wish we had a month to get ready."

"A month!" She couldn't imagine waiting another month to find Jamie.

"Yeah, but we don't have that luxury. Without this, I won't be much help rescuing Jamie. Neither will you." He straightened up and looked at her. "Go put on whatever you'll be comfortable in and come right back here. We start in five minutes."

Chapter Seven

Lisa was sure she'd drop dead by the end of the day. Every muscle in her body was on fire and even her bones hurt. The only thing that kept her going was the sure knowledge that if she quit, Ethan would never take her to Mexico with him. She could still go by herself, but she was smart enough to realize how ridiculous it was for her to run off to a foreign country with no resources, looking for a needle in a haystack.

So she sweated over stretches and the treadmill, gritting her teeth as much against the pain as to keep from swearing at the man pushing her, pushing her.

"Keep moving," Ethan ordered, while he worked out with free weights. "We'll be doing a lot of walking. Gotta strengthen those legs."

'Those legs' were trembling by the time he switched off the treadmill.

"Break time." Ethan tossed her a towel.

"Thanks." She mopped the sweat on her face and neck, then sat carefully on the weight bench, not wanting to let him see how shaky she was.

He disappeared for a moment, returning with two bottles of water and handing her one. "You need to drink a lot of fluid when you exercise. If your body gets dehydrated you can't keep up with the program."

"Don't worry." Her tone was flat. "I'll have no problem keeping up with it. No matter what you throw at me."

When they quit at the end of the day, however, she was afraid she'd have to eat her words. Only the image of Jamie constantly in her brain kept her going.

"I stopped at an all-night market last night. Steak and salad for dinner. Thirty minutes. Then we study." He turned to leave the room.

Study? Study what?

Lisa draped her towel over the handles of the treadmill and headed for her room. A long, hot shower helped ease the soreness of her aching muscles. She pulled on jeans and a t-shirt, gathered her hair into a pony tail and swallowed two Ibuprofen tablets. She was sure tonight she'd be able to sleep.

"Shake it, Mrs. Mallory." Ethan's voice boomed down the hallway. "Food's ready."

Ethan was already at the table. In front of each of them he'd placed a huge T-bone steak and a large salad.

"Eat." He poked a piece of steak in his mouth. "You'll need the protein."

Lisa slid into her chair. "How about we kill the formality for the duration. Anyway, I'd like to forget I was ever Mrs. Mallory. Except for Jamie," she amended quickly.

"Okay. Fine. Eat your steak, Lisa."

With Ethan's sharp eyes watching her, Lisa forced down every bite of food. Her stomach, ill-fed for so long, rebelled at first, but she managed to fight the spasms. When she pushed away her empty plate, Ethan nodded once in approval.

"Good."

"Not much of a conversationalist, are you?"

"Nothing to talk about." He scraped the plates and put them in the dishwasher, then filled two mugs with coffee and brought them to the table. "Decaf. Drink up."

"Why are you doing this?" She pushed the cup away, her face pinched as she caught his gaze. All the anxiety and uncertainty she'd felt since the first meeting with this man, her distaste for him, her anxiety over Jamie sat in her chest like a solid ball of steel. "It's obvious you don't like me. Why didn't you just tell Josh no?"

"My reasons."

Well, this was getting nowhere fast.

"This is my son we're talking about. I think I deserve to know why you're willing to go after him." She eyed him with speculation. "Josh says you're a good friend. How did the two of you meet?"

"Ask Josh."

He poured four packets of sweetener in his coffee and stirred it. At least the table wasn't covered with flying residue the way it had been at their lunch. And his table manners had improved.

"He won't say. He said to ask you."

Ethan's eyes pinned hers. "Then I guess it's just between him and me."

After another minute or two of silence, she asked, "Do you really think the shooting today had something to do with the kidnapping?"

"Don't know for sure." He got up and refilled his mug.

"But..."

He looked over at her. "Up until this week a lot of people weren't even sure I was still alive. Now I've poked the hornet's nest. The shooter could be any one of dozens of people. I didn't win any popularity contests."

"Aren't you even concerned?"

"I'd be a fool if I weren't. But people have tried to take me out for years. Whoever this is better be a real professional or he's dead meat." He lifted his coffee mug. "Okay. We're done with Twenty Questions."

Lisa couldn't help but let her gaze roam over the man sitting across from her. What an enigma. She'd never met anyone like him. And whatever he'd been doing to himself since she last saw him was having a major effect.

His tall frame now had more muscle definition, the skin was tighter, and she could better see the strong, powerful body. The t-shirt stretched to fit broad shoulders, and the sweatpants he was wearing rode low on lean hips. His hair was longer, but with the beard gone she could better see the planes and angles of his face.

Ethan Caine was a damned good-looking man in a rugged way. She bet he had been hell on wheels with women before he decided to hide from life. Not someone she would ever have fallen for, thank God. Especially since they would be joined at the hip for the next several days. And certainly after the nightmare with Charles, she doubted if she'd ever be interested in any many ever again.

But she could see how women would find him attractive.

"Homework time."

Ethan's voice jarred her out of her mental wanderings. He sat down in his chair, opened a folder, and began spreading the papers on the table.

"What's this?" She frowned. "What kind of homework?"

"Before we set foot out of this house, we have to memorize everything about these people. And about the geographic area, especially the jungle." He refilled her mug and returned the carafe to the counter. "We won't be carrying a briefcase with us. And these aren't the kind of questions you ask at the tourist bureau. So. Let's get started."

This was an unfamiliar Ethan. Sharp, focused, knowledgeable. In clear, concise sentences he fed her the information on Las Tormentas, pointing out what they'd be looking for and how they'd go about it. Then he pulled out two maps and gave her a geography lesson. He changed before her eyes from the disreputable hermit into a warrior preparing for a mission. She had a hard time reconciling the two. Maybe the rumors about him had been true after all.

About the time her head began to buzz, Ethan shuffled all the papers together and slid them back into the folder.

"That's enough for tonight. You'd better get to bed. You'll need your rest."

Lisa didn't move, just sat watching him. Finally she said, "You still haven't given me a real answer to my question."

"Oh?" He cocked an eyebrow. "And what question was that?"

"Why you're doing this."

He stared at her with his hooded gaze for a long time. "I owe Josh a great deal. There isn't much I wouldn't do for him."

"But I mean nothing to you. Nor does Jamie. And this is not just a walk to the corner drug store."

"No, it isn't. My reasons are my own." He emptied the rest of the coffee and rinsed out the carafe. "But you can count on the fact that if Jamie's alive, I'm the one who can get him out." He paused. "And that's all the answer you'll get. Good night. Lisa."

He was gone from the room before she could say another word.

As she made her way to her room, she caught glimpses of him checking doors and windows as well as the monitors in what she called the 'electronics closet'. Some people might call it paranoia, but Lisa was damned glad for it. For anything that kept them safe.

Breakfast was even more silent than dinner had been. Then they were back to what would become their routine. Treadmill. Weights. Self defense. Lunch. Start over again.

On the fourth day he asked to see her gun. Lisa dug the little Kahr 9mm out of her purse and gave it to him.

"Not bad." He released the clip, checked the gun, then slammed the clip back in and racked the slide. "Let's see what you can do with it."

Off to the side in the back yard was an old barn that looked like a strong wind would collapse it, with two targets pinned to the wall. Boxes of bullets were stacked on an old

wooden table. Ethan walked Lisa up to within ten feet of the targets and stopped.

"All right, hot shot. Let's see if your talent matches your mouth."

If I didn't need him, I'd shoot him instead.

Lisa took her stance, sited, drew in a breath, partially let it out as she'd been taught, and squeezed off six shots, counting them in her head. When she was finished, she lowered her hand and ejected the empty clip.

Ethan walked up to the target, traced her hits with a finger and shook his head.

Lisa knew she'd 'burned a circle' dead center. "Maybe you could help me focus a little better," she said with heavy sarcasm.

He turned to walk back to her. "Smartass. Let's see how you do from further away. The bad guys don't always oblige you by getting close."

Lisa pressed her lips together to keep any more smart remarks from slipping out, moved back five feet and repeated the sequence. Again she hit all six dead center. He had her shoot all the way back to thirty feet, moving in five foot increments. Then he had her do staggered rapid-fire.

He was relentless, changing her stance, changing the angle of the shot, changing the pacing. By the time they'd used up two boxes of bullets her shoulders ached and her arm was ready to drop. She was beginning to long for the torture chamber of the gym.

"Okay. Enough." He took the gun from her and placed it on the table. "Rest. It's my turn."

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She dropped into a wooden chair next to the table, massaging her hand, and watched Ethan go through his paces. It was like watching a machine, she decided. Smooth, functioning effortlessly. He was a dead shot from any distance and any angle. Watching him, a slight shiver skittered along her spine. Ethan Caine was a killing machine. His body showed no tension, no hesitation, as he emptied clip after clip into the target.

In the week she'd been at his house, she'd seen the emergence of the man Josh said he once had been. He was tougher, more focused, deadlier. And wasn't that what she wanted? Needed? A man with no fear, who'd be deterred by nothing?

When he turned and headed back to the table for the last time, his face held absolutely no expression. Lisa could easily see him in any dangerous scenario doing things most men would be afraid to discuss.

But worse than that, what she could see of his eyes showed flat, emotionless black. Not even the light of a soul. Josh was right. Whatever his life had been like, Ethan had seen and done things that almost destroyed his humanity.

Almost, because if it was gone completely, he wouldn't have agreed to go after Jamie. For the first time since the day Jamie disappeared, Lisa felt a small spark of hope stirring within her.

Chapter Eight

As Lisa headed to the kitchen for breakfast Friday morning, she ran into Ethan standing in the front hall with a man she'd never seen. Neither of them was smiling but their posture indicated business rather than antagonism. They spoke briefly in quiet tones. Then the man handed Ethan a thick envelope, they shook hands and the man left.

"A friend?" she asked.

"In a manner of speaking." His face was as blank as solid stone, hinting at nothing. "Let's eat breakfast."

He served them both bacon and eggs and mugs of coffee. His folder and a pad of yellow paper were on the table next to his place.

"Studying again?" She motioned to the papers.

"Checking facts again. We leave tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" Her eyes popped open. "It's hard to believe we've been doing this for a week."

A week unlike any other she'd spent. From daylight to dark they trained. With the equipment. On the mats. In the yard with the guns. By now Lisa was sure she could take almost anyone hands down, and shoot from any position and any angle. The whole thing had a surreal quality. She was going into a strange country with a man she hardly knew, armed to the teeth to rescue her son. Whatever happened to her nice, sane existence?

I met Charles Mallory and nothing's been normal since.

"I wish we had a month, but this will have to do." He looked down at the pad in front of him. "Our flight leaves from Tampa International...."

"I'm ready." She tried to sound more confident than she felt. Now that they were actually going to do this, her stomach twisted in knots and a sliver of fear raced through her.

"I'm glad one of us is." He gestured toward the envelope with a forkful of food. "We're Ed and Lily Cameron. Welcome to the honeymoon."

She raised her eyebrows at his comment. She hadn't given a thought to different identities. "We need fake names?"

"Do you know how many people would be waiting for us with heavy hardware if the name Ethan Caine appeared on a passenger manifest?"

"B-But, what do you do when you normally fly?"

"I don't. Let's just leave it at that. We leave on the ten am Continental flight, change planes in Houston and get into Cancun about two. Our reservations on the flight and at the hotel are for the Camerons."

"No direct flight?" Lisa bit off a tiny piece of toast, wondering why they were complicating the trip with a layover.

"Not for the hours I want." He stirred sweetener into his coffee. "Besides, this way I can tell if anyone's keeping an eye on us. It's hard to be invisible in a bunch of places."

She almost choked on her toast. "You think the people who shot at us will be following us?"

"Maybe. It's a good bet they've got eyes out looking for me. Eyes that might have nothing to do with you. Except they could screw up our trip if we're not careful."

"Then isn't it just adding to the danger if we don't take a direct flight?"

His lips thinned. "Can't be helped. I want to get there early enough in the day to scope out the situation. We'll just have to be on guard." He swallowed some coffee. "Nothing I haven't done before. And I don't think anyone will be looking for a loving couple."

"I hope you're right." She picked up her own coffee mug.

"I have all the ID we'll need in this envelope," Ethan went on. "After supper tonight, give me everything in your purse except cosmetics. I'll lock it up in the safe."

"All right."

"Your gun, too."

"My gun? What will I use?"

The look he gave her was part irritation, part impatience. "Don't you read the papers? You try to get on the plane with a gun, you won't see daylight for months."

Of course. How stupid. Now he'd think her a dumbass for sure.

Ethan swallowed a mouthful of food. "I have stuff being delivered to us after we land. Including a duplicate of your Kahr. I don't think you can handle anything larger."

Lisa watched him eating, cutting his food and chewing it carefully. Again, when he sweetened his coffee it was without the careless disregard he'd displayed at The Club. All week

she'd seen a totally different side of this man than he'd ever exposed.

"You fake it, don't you?" she asked without preamble.

He looked up, startled. "Excuse me?"

"You're a fraud, Ethan Caine. You've created an offensive persona to make sure the world doesn't ever see what's underneath. What are you afraid of?"

The mask snapped into place again. "You're nuts, you know that? What you see is what you get."

"But it depends on what you let people see. Doesn't it?"

He didn't answer and at last she went back to her plate of food. *Who is he, really? What troubles him so much he works hard at shoving people away?*

They spent the day refining the self defense moves Ethan had taught her. After dinner he shut everything down and brought her a zippered canvas tote. "Wear one tourist outfit. Take jeans, shorts and one t-shirt."

"I won't be a very well-dressed honeymooner. Won't they be suspicious?"

His grin held little humor. "We eloped. We're buying what we need in Mexico. Anyway, as a new husband I won't want my bride wearing too many clothes."

The thought of being naked with Ethan Caine sent a sudden rush of heat through her system.

In a pig's eye.

But she couldn't get the images out of her mind. The flex of his muscles as they exercised. The now-leaner body in jeans and t-shirt at the firing range, every move smooth and

fluid. The thick pelt of hair on his hard-muscled chest that lay like a shadow beneath a white shirt.

The feel of his hands on her body as he moved and guided her. like a living flame heating her skin wherever he touched her.

I'm going to be in big trouble if I don't get my mind back on the business at hand. Besides, Ethan Caine is the last man in the world to have fantasies about. As if fantasies ever came true, anyway.

She dumped the contents of her purse into a plastic baggie and handed it to Ethan along with her gun. After he locked everything in the safe, he handed her the new identification.

"I think we can treat ourselves to one beer. We've earned it. Okay with you?"

"Yes." She almost smiled. "That would be nice."

They sat on the ancient rockers on the front porch, each holding a cold bottle of Coors, watching the sun bathe the landscape with its last rays of the day. Neither of them said a word. Lisa had learned during the past week not to try to make conversation. Ethan Caine wasn't much for small talk. Finally he broke the silence.

"You did good." Each word sounded as if someone dragged it out of him.

Lisa laughed for the first time in weeks. "Thanks for the vote of confidence. I'm sure you were waiting for me to hang it up."

"Matter of fact, I was. You surprised me." He tipped the bottled back and drank two healthy swallows.

Lisa watched the movement of the muscles in his neck as he drank, then shook herself. She was getting entirely too fascinated by Ethan Caine and his body.

Must be years of abstinence. That last thing I need to think about right now is sex with anyone. Certainly not with Ethan Caine.

"Well." He drained his bottle. "Time to hit the sack. "We're outta here at eight am. Josh is taking us to the airport."

"Oh!" She'd just assumed they'd drive themselves.

"I'd rather not leave the beast in the parking garage. Don't know exactly how long we'll be gone. Anyway, we won't be coming back through TIA."

They stood at the same time and Lisa found herself so close to Ethan that a sheet of paper would barely have fit between them. She couldn't move. Her feet were frozen to the porch. Heat rolled off his body, wrapping itself around her. Something halfway between passion and lust flashed in his eyes. Then it was gone.

Ethan sidestepped, breaking the invisible thread holding them in place. "Good night. I'll wake you in the morning."

The screen door slammed behind him.

Lisa stared after him, mouth open. *What the hell just happened?* Nothing she wanted to deal with, that was for sure. She shook herself and went into the house, careful to lock the door behind her.

I'm losing my mind. That's what it is.

But her dreams that night were filled with images of a hard-looking man with no life in his eyes, except one flash of heat.

* * * *

Damn. Hell and damn.

Ethan slammed the door to his room and dropped onto his mattress. Raking his hands over his face, he muttered every curse he'd ever learned in every language he knew. This was not happening. This was just not happening.

Lisa Mallory had asked him early on the reason he was going into the jungles of Mexico to find her child. How could he tell her? If he could successfully return Jamie Mallory to his mother, he'd feel as if some part of his dark, damaged soul had been redeemed?

And now there was this other wrinkle, one he certainly didn't need. He couldn't remember the last time he'd actually been attracted to a woman. Not that he hadn't had sex, although he seemed to need it less and less as he buried himself in the agony of his nightmares. But the women he'd been with were merely vessels, as crude as that sounded. He couldn't even remember what they looked like.

And now here was this woman, skin and bones and the worst case of nerves he'd seen in a long time. Mouthy. Irritating. Carrying a load of shit with her. The last kind of woman he'd ever want to be with. So why was he sitting here with an erection so hard he couldn't bend over?

If he hadn't trained himself in rigid self-discipline, after that moment on the porch Mrs. Lisa Mallory would at this very moment be underneath him on this mattress. Naked. Engaged in some very hot, sweaty sex.

Against his better judgment, he was about to take her into a danger zone on a mission that no amount of training could fully prepare her for. In the humid tropics where danger upped the flow of adrenaline. Where anything could happen. And he was supposed to keep his mind on business while he pegged the bad guys, located her son and extracted him.

Shit. Hell and damnation.

* * * *

Ethan was monosyllabic and irritable when they climbed into Josh's car the next morning.

Lisa was tense and nervous, her body rigid, her hands pleating and unpleating the material of her skirt.

"Nice to have such pleasant companions," Josh said, trying to lighten the atmosphere.

Ethan grunted and Lisa chewed her thumb nail and looked out the passenger window.

"Well." Josh cleared his throat. "I'm happy to see you two got along so well. This should be a pleasant trip for you. Especially since it's your honeymoon." He glanced at Ethan.

"Mr. and Mrs. Cameron."

Ethan drew in a breath and exhaled. "Just drive, Josh. Okay?"

Josh frowned, sliding a glance at his friend. "Someone want to tell me what's going on? Otherwise no one's going anywhere. Especially the airport."

"Everything's fine." Lisa tried to make her voice even. "I think Ethan and I are just a little tired from intense preparation and uptight about what we're going into."

"I still wish you'd change your mind." The smile couldn't hide Josh's worry. "I don't care how much Ethan trained you. You shouldn't be in the middle of this."

"Either take me to TIA or I'll take myself. But I'm going."

"Fine. Fine." Josh shook his head. "Whatever."

Lisa noticed they drove the same kind of aimless route Ethan had used the other day. Up and down side streets, doubling back on themselves, heading one way on the Interstate then back the other way.

"What's the deal?" she asked.

"Josh is just making sure we don't have a tail." Ethan's gruff voice was like splintering wood.

Lisa had to force herself not to look out the rear window. "You still think someone's found us. Could follow us."

"I think anything's possible. That shooting the other day wasn't just idle target practice." He turned and looked into the back seat where Lisa was sitting. "I've stayed under the radar for years. Now I'm out there where people can take potshots at me. We'll have enough trouble selling ourselves as honeymooners. I don't want anyone blowing that cover too soon."

"Oh!." It hadn't occurred to her that he'd be putting himself at this kind of risk by agreeing to help her find her son. She quickly tamped down any feeling of regret. Jamie was the only important thing. She'd worry about everything else when he was safely home.

At last they reached the airport and pulled up to the departure entrance for Continental. Josh climbed out of the car, ignoring the airport guard trying to wave him on. He

shook hands with Ethan and Lisa saw some silent message pass between them. Then he turned to her and enveloped her in a tight hug.

"I hope you know what you're doing." His voice was gruff with emotion.

"I know I'm going to find Jamie." Her own voice was tight with unshed tears. "And you're going to make it happen. I feel it."

Josh visibly forced himself to let go of her, stepped back and waved to the two of them. "Have a nice honeymoon, Ed and Lily."

But Ethan already had a grip on Lisa's arm, hurrying her into the terminal.

Riding the electric tram that carried them from the main terminal to airside where all the gates were located, Ethan sat with his arm draped casually across Lisa's shoulders. At first she started to draw away, but his hand tightened on her and he leaned over to whisper in her ear.

"Honeymooners, remember? If you can't play the part, tell me now."

She gritted her teeth, turned her face to his and gave him a simpering smile. "I can do what I have to," she whispered back.

They passed through security without a hitch and Ethan stopped at a Starbucks to buy coffee for them.

"Would you like something to eat, sweetheart?"

The words sounded like they were being dragged from his throat, and Lisa had to smother a grin. "No thanks, honey.

I'm too excited to eat. And you know flying always makes me nervous."

Ethan handed her the coffee. He still had his sunglasses on so his eyes were impossible to see, but his face was a hard mask.

Some honeymoon, Lisa thought. She pasted a smile on her face, hitched the straps of her purse and her tote onto her shoulder and took a sip. "Ooh, just right," she cooed.

"Thanks, sweetie."

She linked her arm through his, nearly knocking his coffee out of his hand, and tugged him along the concourse, hips swaying.

"Aren't you going a little overboard?" Ethan spoke through clenched teeth.

"Just getting into the act." *And I can do it as well as you can. Asshole.*

When they sat down in the waiting area Ethan played his part of the typical newlywed husband. Hugging her. Kissing her cheek. Stroking her arm. She glanced at him once or twice and wondered if everyone else could tell they were playacting. Performing. Staging.

Whatever had flashed between them last night was still sharp in her mind, and every time he touched her she was reminded of it. Her skin tingled and her nipples hardened.

What was this, anyway?

Get yourself under control, Lisa. You won't be any good to Jamie and the mission if you're thinking about sex with Ethan Caine.

God, how had she let this happen? She was sure Ethan, too, was affected. The way his arm tensed as he placed it loosely across the back of her chair or around her shoulders. The way his body tightened whenever he leaned over to give her a stage kiss.

What would happen when they got to Mexico?

She forced her mind to Jamie, calling up the scene in the restaurant, the panic, the terrible night of the failed ransom drop. She dredged up every pain-filled night since then. By the time they boarded the plane, her focus was on Jamie only, her reaction to Ethan locked away in her mind.

I can do this. I know I can do this.

In spite of his big show as the new husband, Lisa sensed Ethan's eyes never stopped moving. His body next to hers was coiled like a steel band. He gave new meaning to the word hyper-alert. She wondered if anyone besides her thought it strange he kept his sunglasses on.

* * * *

This is a hell of a time for my body to decide to wake up.

For perhaps the one hundredth time Ethan reminded himself what a crazy idea it was to accept this mission. Only now there was something besides just the insanity of going back into the field again. The situation was like a bomb set to go off.

Since leaving 'the life' he'd been very careful to form no attachments to women. Those he used for sex knew it was merely a physical release and expected nothing from him. That was what he wanted. No, needed. Every emotion was

buried as deep as he could hide it. He was sure there wasn't a female alive who could accept what his past had been and what it had done to him. Or one he wanted to share it with.

Now here was this female, giving him an erection he had to constantly work to conceal. *Shit!* He couldn't afford to let anything distract him or they could all end up dead—he, Lisa Mallory, and worst of all, young Jamie.

He kept his sunglasses on to hide the constant movement of his eyes, hoping people would think he was hung over from his wedding. Or just hung over, period. A useless bum not worth a second look.

His restless eyes carefully catalogued each face they passed over, seeking one hint of familiarity. Of danger. So far, so good.

When they were called for boarding, Ethan tightened his grip on Lisa's shoulder. She knew it was a signal to sit tight until he felt they should move. Finally, when the line was almost at an end, he urged them forward and onto the plane.

"We're on our honeymoon," he told the flight attendant at the cabin door. "Are there two seats left in the back?"

"Newlyweds, huh?" She winked at them. "Lucky for you we have our little two-seat row empty. Usually no one wants to sit there because we stow a lot of junk opposite it."

"Suits us fine." Ethan kissed her cheek. "Right, sweet thing?"

* * * *

Lisa stretched her lips into a smile and nodded. His warm breath on her cheek was playing havoc with all her good intentions.

Jamie. Think about Jamie.

As they moved through the plane's cabin, she sensed Ethan again memorizing each face. She wondered how someone trained themselves to live like that.

At last they were at the end of the aisle, squeezing themselves into the two seats. Ethan tucked her tote and his duffle bag underneath them. He said very little during the flight to Houston, although he kept his arm around her and every so often leaned over and nuzzled her cheek.

"Play it up good," he told her in a soft voice. "I want everyone to remember the Camerons as a loving couple."

Play it up good? She'd be lucky if she didn't overplay it, the way heat was rushing through her and her body reacted to his nearness.

"Why did we board so late and ask for seats in the back?"

"Just checking out the passengers. And back here I can watch everyone else get off and see if someone looks a little off center."

"Do you always live like this? Suspicious of everyone?"

"It's how I stayed alive all those years."

And exactly what did you do all those years, Ethan Caine, to make people want to kill you? Were you really the black ops specialist everyone hints at or was it something else?

She couldn't get away from the questions that kept slamming into her.

Not wanting to make a mistake that could easily trip them up, she concentrated on playing her part and trying not to admit to herself that her responses to Ethan Caine were more than acting.

They had less than an hour for the Houston layover. Ethan steered them into a tiny open snack bar where he could watch everyone go by. By this time, Lisa's nerves were fraying and she was seeing shadows in every corner. She was happy to board the plane again, where they repeated the same routine as before.

The flight attendant handed out tourist cards for everyone to complete. Lisa copied her information from Ethan's, then put it in her purse.

"Don't lose this," he warned. "It could end up being your 'Get Out of Jail Free card'."

And finally they were in Cancun, walking into one of the busiest airports in the Caribbean. Concourse shops displayed colorful Mexican clothing and artifacts. Mariachis played in one corner as people strolled by. Tourists jostled each other as they hurried to departure gates.

A representative of Continental handed them a general information packet and herded them through immigration.

"I didn't think we had to do this in Mexico," Lisa whispered.

"Even though the United States is one of the countries where no visa is needed to enter Mexico," Ethan answered, also in a whisper, "the government makes it its business to check everyone's identification. Just act like it's no big deal

for the honeymooning Camerons. Birth certificate and photo ID," he added quietly.

She dug them out of her purse and handed them to the official with his hand out. When he asked the nature of their visit, Ethan said, "Honeymoon," and hugged Lisa to his side.

"Newlyweds?" He smiled and handed their papers back to them. "Your wife is *mucho linda*, *Senor Cameron*. *Bienvenido a Mexico*. Enjoy your stay."

"What did he say about me?" she asked.

"He said my wife was very beautiful."

She snorted. "Shows you how much he knows. I look like shit."

"If you packed about twenty pounds back on that skinny frame of yours, you'd be a knockout."

Lisa stopped and stared at him, open-mouthed.

Ethan pulled on her arm. "Don't let it go to your head. Come on. We have to get out of here."

He hustled her toward one of the rental car desks, where he signed and paid for Ed Cameron's reserved rental, a Toyota Camry.

"Do you need a map, *senor*?" the reservations clerk asked.

"Yeah, that would be great. And directions to the Holiday Inn Express." He planted what had to be the tenth kiss on Lisa's cheek. "Can't wait to get my sweetie in our room." He winked at the girl.

She laughed and handed him his papers. "Someone will bring your car to that exit over there." She pointed at the end of the baggage claim area.

"*Gracias.*" He took Lisa's arm and hustled her toward the exit. As they came through the doors, a grey Toyota Camry pulled up and a thin man in slacks and a shirt with a wild print got out. He nodded briefly to Ethan, their eyes exchanging a silent message, then jogged down the sidewalk area.

Minutes later, they were out of the airport and on the highway into town.

Lisa stared out the window at the scenery, absorbing it, remembering its geography from the map.

"Cancun is actually a barrier island," Ethan explained as he drove. "It's connected to the Mexican mainland by two bridges, one at the north end and one at the south." He honked at a van that cut in front of him. "Kukulcan Road, the only main thoroughfare, runs directly down the middle of the city."

"I've certainly seen enough advertising about this place," she commented, staring out the window.

"The Hotel Zone takes up most of the island," he went on, "not just with hotels but restaurants and shops, too, that cater to the constant stream of tourists. Downtown Cancun, or Cancun Centro, is where the locals live and play, shop and eat. Less expensive," he added.

"Is that where the Camerons are staying?"

"Nope. We're at the Holiday Inn Express. I spare no expense for my little honey."

Lisa didn't know whether to laugh or smack him.

"We'd be expected to stay there," he explained. "But the cantina I have to scope out is downtown. I'm hoping there are

some other tourists so we won't stick out like sore thumbs. No matter how I play it, a situation like this is always risky."

He was silent on the rest of the drive. Lisa took in the scenery as it flashed past, fascinated by the lush tropical foliage everywhere, the adobe houses with Spanish tile roofs, and the bright sun that lit everything up like a Technicolor movie.

The Holiday Inn Express bordered a residential section at the edge of downtown Cancun. Ethan pulled into a side street before entering the hotel parking lot, reached under his seat and retrieved a package.

Lisa watched in amazement as he broke the tape and pulled out two guns, two boxes of bullets and an envelope which he tucked into his jacket pocket.

He glanced up and caught her stare. "What? I told you someone would take care of the fire power."

"That man..."

"Doesn't work for the car rental place."

Lisa raised her eyebrows, hoping for more explanation, but that was all he would say.

He loaded both guns and leaned forward to stick one in his waistband at the small of his back. The other he gave to her.

"Put this in your purse. Now. And don't leave it anywhere."

She complied with hands that shook only slightly.

In the hotel parking lot, he locked the car and towed Lisa into the lobby.

"Reservations for Ed and Lily Cameron," he told the clerk, and grinned. "We're on our honeymoon so tell the maid I

might be leavin' the 'Do Not Disturb' sign on the door now and then."

"*Si*, Señor." The clerk smiled at him and handed over the plastic key card.

Up in their room, Ethan pulled the drapes shut, then spent fifteen minutes checking out every inch of the room, including lamp shades and furniture.

"Looking for gold?" Lisa asked.

He put his fingers to his lips and mouthed, "Making sure we aren't bugged."

She felt the blood leave her face but she stood silently while he finished his examination.

Finally he nodded his head. "We're clear."

.She wet her lips. "But-But no one we were coming. And who'd bug Lily and Ed Cameron's room?"

"I'll remind you again someone shot at us. I don't know if they were after me or you, but I don't plan on it happening again. People like this can find out anything they want to know if something alerts them. And you never know what that could be. I managed to stay alive all these years by being careful. I don't intend to stop now."

Lisa sat down in one of the big arm chairs, her legs suddenly weak. She kept forgetting just what kind of life Ethan Caine had lived and how dangerous this mission they were on could prove to be. For both of them. "So now what?"

"A little reconnoitering. I want to check out the cantina myself before I drag you into it. Besides, I need to home in on the weak link in the group. Someone who can be bribed or

pressured to confirm that Las Tormentas actually did the deed and where they took Jamie."

She got up from the chair. "I'm going with you."

In a blink he was crowding her space. "Did you hear me? Have you forgotten our arrangement already? I call the shots."

"But..."

"Uh uh." He made a sound of disgust. "There you go with the 'buts' again, Lisa." His voice was hard and firm. "I've done this a hundred times before. Here and elsewhere. I know what I'm doing. And I'm wasting time arguing with you." He reached into the packet from the car and pulled out a map. "Here. I have an assignment for you."

"Assignment?" She raised an eyebrow.

"This is more detailed than the ones we looked at. I need to know about every road on here that leads into the Roo. Some of them are just little spider trails. There's a marker in the packet. Mark every one out of Playa del Carmen that will take us into the jungle. I don't know yet which one we'll use."

"I think I can manage." But she saw her sarcasm was wasted on him.

He turned toward the door. "Lock the deadbolt and don't open it for anyone but me. No matter what."

"Wait." She reached out a hand to his arm. "If anyone's watching us, won't they think it's strange you going off like this when we're on our honeymoon?"

"Why, honey," he drawled, back in his newlywed mode, "I'll just make sure they know you need a nap because I tired you out so much last night. And I'm off to buy you a trinket in

Redemption
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appreciation." He turned back at the door. "Put the deadbolt on as soon as this door closes. Do not open it unless it's me on the other side. No matter what."

He slapped his battered Panama hat on his head and was gone.

Lisa stared after him, a tense thrill of excitement keying her nerves. This was the closest she'd been to finding Jamie in all these months. She still didn't know how much she trusted Ethan Caine, but she did know he was her one hope in this nightmare.

She looked at her watch, wondering how long he'd be gone, leaving her to her nerves and anxiety.

Hurry, Ethan.

Chapter Nine

La Mama's was exactly like a million other bars and cantinas Ethan had spent time in over the course of what he euphemistically called his career. Dark, an extreme contrast to the bright tropical sun outside. A long bar on one side, tables filling the rest of the ell-shaped space. Not clean, not dirty. Dingy. Shopworn. The backwater of life.

This was the place Dino had told him Las Tormentas spent their recreational time. Ethan had made it a point to aimlessly wander the area, stopping in several cantinas along the way, spending a few minutes in each one before finally entering La Mama's.

He ambled into the cool darkness wearing a slightly befuddled expression, blinked against the sudden absence of light and finally sat down at a table in the far corner. In his wrinkled khakis and outrageously designed shirt, he could have been any tourist come to town. His hat tilted slightly over his face, he let his eyes roam the room, taking in every detail.

Only three people sat at the bar. The rest were spread out at the tables. The customers were mostly men, only two of them with women. They looked like tourists who'd lost their way, huddling together while they tried to appear relaxed.

Ethan was getting a bad feeling about the situation and he hadn't ordered his first drink yet. Unless the evening crowd changed a lot, bringing Lisa here tonight had all the makings of a colossal disaster. He'd hoped there would be enough of a

mixture of people they could blend in, but it looked like that idea was shot to hell.

Damn that woman, anyway. He should have tied her up and locked her in a closet in Tampa until this was over. They'd have to really play the honeymoon couple determined to soak up some local color. He knew he'd never get what he needed in this place with just one visit. All he could do this afternoon was identify his most likely pigeon and how to make a connection tonight. And hope the guy would still be there.

Shit! This would probably turn out to be the clusterfuck of all time.

He turned his attention to the opposite corner of the room, by the archway leading to what Ethan assumed were the restrooms. A group of nine men were drinking at two tables pushed together.

The man at the obvious center of activity was thin with a heavy moustache and thick, dark shoulder-length hair. The heavy gold 'R', encrusted with diamonds and hanging from a chain at his throat, was easy to see even at a distance. 'R' for Rafael. Rafael Cortez. Undisputed leader of the deadly group.

Ethan dredged up what Dino had told him about the group and its leader. Rafael Cortez had seen both his parents killed in a raid on their village by guerillas. At fourteen, he'd found a new family when a member of Las Tormentas discovered him hiding in the mountains. Twenty years later, his obstacles to leadership had been eliminated and he was the undisputed ruler.

The group had a long history of violence, fighting for nothing except to protect their own corner of the world. It was common knowledge they made their living through kidnapping. According to everything Dino had learned, including Charles Mallory's five-year history in the area, this was the group most likely to have taken Jamie. Now he had to pin down some facts. Make sure this didn't turn into a wild goose chase.

"Drink, *senor*?" The waitress smiled at him.

She was a carbon copy of a million others he'd seen. Not too young, maybe late thirties. A tired face brightened by red lipstick, her slightly plump body attractive in the full skirt and peasant blouse. Her smile didn't quite reach her eyes. But a potential source of information.

"Yeah, I'll take a beer. *Gracias*." He pronounced it almost like 'gracious', concealing the fact he spoke fluent Spanish.

"We don't get too many tourists in here," she remarked.

He motioned for her to bend down to him and dropped his voice. "What's your name, honey?"

"Deloris."

"Well, Deloris, I'm on my honeymoon. My wife's taking a little nap right now but we're gonna hit a few bars tonight. She's not much for fancy places. It's not like I'm short on pesos or anything. But some of those fancy hotel bars and restaurants charge as much for a drink as I make in a week."

Deloris gave a small laugh "That is true."

"So a buddy of mine said we could find lots of places down here in Cancan Centro. Where the folks who live here go. I'm

checkin' 'em out this afternoon." He leaned close again.

"Gotta show the little woman a good time, right?"

"*Si, senor* But this might not be such a good place to take her."

"Oh, I don't know." He glanced at the bar. "Looks like you got a bouncer to keep out the riff raff." He nodded toward the man behind the bar. Not more than five foot five, Ethan guessed his weight at no less than four hundred.

"Oh, that's Mama. The owner."

"Mama's a man?" Ethan thought slapping his knee might be carrying the act a little too far. "No kidding? Well, I guess he doesn't get much trouble in here."

"No, *senor*." She moved away from him. "I'll get your beer."

Ethan slouched in his chair with his hat tilted over his forehead and watched Deloris swivel her way across the room. Rafael motioned to her as she stepped up to the bar and she moved over to him. He said something and Ethan saw her nod in his direction, then giggle. Rafael smiled, a grimace in a death's head, and stared across the room at Ethan. Then he turned to his men and made some remark, and they all laughed.

Ethan pretended not to notice but he was sure the remark was crude and disgusting. Good. So much the better. They'd think him harmless.

When Deloris brought his second beer he slipped a twenty into her hand. "Keep the change, sweetheart."

He nursed his drink for several minutes, watching the actions of the men at the table. There was an obvious pecking

order, designated by where they sat in relation to *el jefe*. He focused on one man at the far end of the table. Everyone seemed to ignore him for the most part, until someone wanted something. Then he became the gofer. Not a man with much power, the kind most easily turned. Or bought.

"Those folks over there seem like they're having a good time," he commented to Deloris, making his voice as casual as possible. "They from the neighborhood?"

She shrugged. "Here and there."

"Who's the guy in the middle? Looks interestin'." He dropped a fifty on the table and she quickly palmed it. "Just between you and me, *senorita*." He winked.

"That's Rafael Cortez. *El jefe*. Mucho hombre." She wiggled her eyebrows but the smile on her face didn't get anywhere near her eyes.

"And the little skinny guy? He doesn't seem to be havin' as much fun as the others."

"Tonio. The peon. He does *el jefe's* bidding."

"He doesn't seem to be havin' as good a time as everyone else," Ethan commented in his exaggerated drawl.

"No. I'd say not. He has a wife and child or I think he might not be here at all." She tucked the money into her pocket with barely any movement. "I talk too much. I must go, *senor*. They will want more drinks."

""Looks like they've had plenty already."

"Oh, no, not yet. When they come in they are here until closing."

Okay. So tonight the alcohol would have softened his mark a little more. And hopefully made everyone else let down their guard just a tiny bit.

He watched Deloris walk away, hips swaying. Cortez motioned to her again. She said something to him and the man laughed. He gave Ethan a look of contempt.

Finally Ethan stood up, making a show of dropping a couple of dollars on the table for Deloris and made his way to the door. He forced himself to walk slowly along the three blocks to where his car was parked, and not look over his shoulder. The middle of his back itched, as if eyes were fastened on him.

He stopped at a tiny neighborhood bakery right near his car, ostensibly to look at the pastries in the window, and slid his eyes to the right. Sure enough, one of the men at Rafael's table was about half a block behind him. When Ethan stopped, the guy leaned against a street light and lit a cigarette.

He'd been right. Strangers attracted too much attention and Rafael was apparently suspicious of everyone. He wished he had more than one day to do this. time to establish himself as a harmless *gringo* bum who didn't raise anyone's eyebrows. Well, it couldn't be helped. He was stuck with what he had.

Deciding to play out the role of honeymooner, Ethan stepped into the bakery and bought some wedding pastries for Lisa, a tactic to throw off his shadow. He didn't give a damn if she ate them, although she could certainly afford to indulge herself. The last time he'd seen a woman that skinny

was in a hospital. He was actually surprised that Lisa handled the physical training as well as she did. He'd expected her to collapse before they got to the halfway mark.

Lisa Mallory was an enigma to him. She was both tough and fragile, accepting and rejecting. His body had reactions to hers that made being near her hazardous, and the proximity this task demanded made it even more perilous. It wasn't just the physical attraction that frightened him. In her eyes he saw the same fires of hell that burned in him. A kindred soul. The most dangerous kind.

Her words stilled plagued him, still festering beneath his skin.

You're a fraud, Ethan Caine. You've created an offensive shield to make sure the world doesn't ever see what's underneath. What are you afraid of?

Somehow he'd have to figure out how to handle her while getting the job done. A daunting task.

He emerged from the bakery carrying his little box of pastries and whistling tunelessly as he made it to the car.

Everything nice and slow, Caine. Remember, you're going back there later. Don't stir the pot.

As he pulled out of his parking space, he glanced in the rear view mirror and saw the same member of Las Tormentas standing in front of the bakery. The man took a final drag on the cigarette and ground it out deliberately under his foot. He watched until the car pulled away and blended into the chaos that was Cancun traffic.

Ethan let out a slow breath, forcing himself to relax. Bringing Lisa with him when he came back here was sheer

idiocy, but he'd set himself up for it. He just hoped he didn't get her killed.

* * * *

Lisa had studied the map and finished marking the slender routes into the jungle within the first half hour after Ethan left. After that, she was reduced to pacing and staring at her watch until finally she heard the knock at the door.

"Who is it?"

"It's me, Lisa. Come to collect my honey."

But what if it wasn't him? What if this was a trick?

"How do I know it's you?"

She heard him curse briefly, then, "Who else would propose to you at Manny's Diner? Come on, sweet thing. Let me in."

His voice was strained, but when she opened the door and he slid in, he nodded approvingly.

"Good. You have a brain."

She didn't know whether to laugh hysterically or smack him, so she just ignored the comment.

"I have the information you wanted. How was your outing?"

Ethan handed her the small box from the bakery.

"What's this?" She frowned.

"A present from your new husband. If you don't like the stuff you can throw it out. It was a couple doors down from the bar and I needed a distracting errand. They sent someone out to watch me when I left."

She opened the box and looked at its contents. "These look delicious. Thanks."

He tossed his hat onto the small round table and dropped onto the bed, running his hands through his hair. "I wish to hell I could figure out a way to leave you out of it tonight. I'm having serious second thoughts about dragging you along on this."

"Why? What's the problem?"

"This place is a little rougher than I'd expected and they don't get enough *touristas* in to provide cover. I'm hoping tonight will be different. I should never have agreed to let you come along. Damn it."

Lisa blew out a breath. "Ethan, there's no way I'd still be home in Tampa chewing nails while you were down here looking for Jamie. So don't go there again."

He clenched his jaw. "This place is dangerous. It's risky enough for me, and the last thing I want is for something to happen to you."

"Damn it, Ethan." She curled her hands into fists and forced herself to stay calm. This man pushed every one of her buttons. "Nothing is more dangerous than my years with Charles Mallory were. If I hadn't had Jamie to think of, I would have been happy to die. But now my son is all I have, so don't even think about shutting me out of this."

"Doesn't matter anyway. I can't leave you alone here. If someone followed me or sniffed us out you'd be a sitting duck. So. We go as planned." He got up, went to the minibar, and took out a bottle of orange juice. He gestured toward Lisa. "Want a drink of something? A snack?"

"A juice if there's another one."

Ethan brought two bottles to the round table by the window and sat down. "Okay. Show me what you marked on the map. After that, we'll eat and pay another visit to La Mama's."

She raised her eyebrows. "La Mama's?"

He actually laughed. "Yeah. Wait until you see Mama." He drank half the juice in two swallows and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Okay. Let's have it."

Lisa unfolded the map on the table and showed each marked route to Ethan. He studied them carefully and nodded his head. "Okay. I'm hoping after tonight we can zero in on which of these we'll take." He folded the map and stuck it inside his jacket. "Let's go eat."

They stopped at a small restaurant on a side street running off of Cancun's main drag. The small room inside was dark and cool but Ethan asked for seating on the patio, where several tables with gaily colored umbrellas made an eye-catching scene. He chose one in the furthest corner, next to a gate in the back wall. When the waitress had taken their drink orders he opened the gate, poked his head out, nodded and sat down.

"I always like options if I have to leave in a hurry," he told Lisa in answer to her questioning look.

"Do you think that will happen here?"

He shrugged. "You never know, but it's always a possibility. I like to be prepared."

"That's good. Very good." She looked at the menu but her stomach was so knotted with apprehension she was sure she couldn't digest a bite.

Ethan, however, made her eat, literally forcing the food on her when she simply toyed with it. "You have to have at least one drink in this joint we're going to. You can't drink without food in your stomach."

She tried to protest. "I can order a soft drink of some kind."

Ethan shook his head. "Too conspicuous. Eat up."

He kept his sunglasses on but behind them, Lisa knew his eyes were constantly scanning the area, like a revolving radar.

"Do you see something?"

"No, but that doesn't mean anything. I have an itch at the back of my neck I don't like. Eat slowly so we look like we have all the time in the world."

Lisa was more than grateful when Ethan's plate was empty at last and he called for the check.

* * * *

Ethan was right. La Mama's is definitely not on the convention bureau's list of tourist spots.

The cantina was dark, the only light coming from some tiny wall sconces and candles on the table, a vague attempt at window dressing. Lisa was glad she wasn't seeing it in the daylight. She was sure every bug known to man was crawling around in the corners.

Lisa knew at once they were an unlikely couple for this place. Ethan had been on target about the clientele. The men reminded her of characters in a B movie. A very bad one at that. And the women had a tawdry look about them. The glances thrown their way as they walked in made her feel as if she were a dot on a microscope slide.

Every eye seemed to be on them, especially from the people at the table across the room. The man she assumed to be the group leader looked as if he'd cut their throats for mild entertainment. But she was trying to take her cue from Ethan and forced herself to appear as relaxed as possible. Only the thought they might get more information about Jamie kept her from bolting.

"The nasty piece of goods over there is Rafael Cortez." Ethan's mouth barely moved as he whispered to her. "He's the chief badass and the one I think headed the kidnap."

For the first time since she'd asked Ethan Caine to help her, she realized fully the dangerous nature of what they were undertaking. Lisa felt her whole body tighten.

Ethan had his arm around her, gripping her shoulder. "Look at me. Not over there. Now."

She forced herself to turn her head and smile at him, a smile she was far from feeling. "Who's that?" She lowered her voice to the level of his, barely nodding toward the heavy man behind the bar.

Ethan chuckled. "That's Mama."

Lisa had to stop herself from reacting. "You're kidding, right?"

"Not a bit. I'll be he makes sure even the unruliest of patrons behaves. Here comes my waitress from this afternoon." He stretched his mouth into an easy grin.

"I see you brought the *senora*." Deloris greeted Ethan with easy familiarity, tipping her head toward Lisa. "I told you, maybe this not such a good place for her to be. She looks like a classy lady."

Ethan rubbed his fingers on Lisa's shoulder in an affectionate gesture. "She is, she is. But we been doin' a little cantina hoppin' in the downtown area and she wanted to see where I'd been this afternoon while she took a little nap." He leaned forward toward Deloris and dropped his voice. "Wore her out last night, ya know."

Lisa blushed in spite of herself. "Oh, Ed," she simpered, nearly making herself gag. She looked at Deloris with what she hoped was a touch of shyness. "He loves to joke around, you know."

Deloris moved her shoulders in an eloquent shrug. "If you say so."

Ethan nodded toward the table across the room. "I see your friends from this afternoon are still here."

Lisa allowed herself another glance at the men. Rafael's dark gaze made her shudder, and she quickly looked away.

"*Si*, but not for much longer. Tonio will have to leave to go home to his wife and child, so *el jefe* will go, also. No one to fetch and carry for him."

Ethan raised his eyebrows. "Doesn't seem quite fair for the poor little guy to be the only one doin' it all."

Deloris pursed her lips. "Such is life, *senor*. He needs the money badly enough to let *el jefe* use him for a doormat. And now I must get your drinks. I am talking too much. *El jefe* would not be pleased."

Lisa saw Ethan slip her a folded bill even before he ordered.

"Just for takin' good care of the missus and me." He winked at her.

"Of course, *senor*." She gave Ethan a knowing smile. "What would you like?"

Ethan ordered beer for both of them and tilted his to his mouth at once. Watching him, Lisa realized he actually drank very little of it. He slouched with his arm around her chair and his hat pulled low, covering part of his face. He was paying careful attention to the group of men at the table across the room while appearing to relax and enjoy himself.

Ethan hitched his chair closer to her and said quietly, "Move over next to me. Act like we're in love."

"What..."

"Jesus, Lisa." He pushed his hat back slightly, pulled her head close to him and kissed her full on the mouth.

She opened her mouth to protest and his tongue slipped inside. The shock to her system nearly paralyzed her. His tongue was like a torch, leaving licks of flame every place it touched in the warm interior of her mouth. Her long dormant body woke up at once, her nipples hardening and moisture pooling between her thighs.

For a moment, Lisa forgot where they were and what they were supposed to be doing, so lost in the kiss that nothing else mattered.

When Ethan lifted his, for one moment she saw her own sense of shock mirrored in his eyes.

"Jesus," he breathed again.

Lisa's heartbeat had sped up and the pulse in her throat hammered so hard she was sure Ethan could see it.

Then his rigid discipline took over again. He moved his head away and they were two strangers joined in a common plan. The kiss might never have happened at all.

Lisa forced a calmness she didn't feel, focusing on the bottle of beer in front of her.

Ethan put his lips close to her ear. "We're acting, okay? Just think of it as acting."

Acting? Her body wasn't playing let's pretend. She reached down inside herself to gather her scattered wits. "Jamie," she whispered. "We have to focus on Jamie."

"That's what we're doing." His mouth was still close to hers. "This is all part of the plan."

Part of the plan. Right.

But she felt the tension in her body reflected in his, and it wasn't from the danger of the situation. Now what? Had she totally lost her mind? Could the situation possibly get any more complicated? The last thing she'd ever expected was the flare of sexual attraction between her and this unlikeliest of men.

She picked up her beer and sipped at it, hoping the now lukewarm liquid would in some measure cool her heated

blood. And what would happen when they returned to the hotel and the room they shared? The room with its one bed?

She didn't have much time to dwell on it, however. Deloris, the buxom waitress determined to earn her tip, brought them two more bottles of beer and did a little harmless flirting with Ethan.

"Ah, but you just have eyes for the *senora*," she laughed. "If only my man would kiss me with such fire." She kissed her fingertips and waved them in the air.

Ethan inclined his head toward Cortez's table. "Think I oughta buy those folks a drink? Show 'em how neighborly I can be?" He smiled at the group and touched the brim of his hat.

Deloris shook her head, just a fraction of a movement. Then she leaned over, showing more cleavage than Lisa thought she'd ever have in a lifetime. "They do not take kindly to strangers. You should take *la senora* someplace else. Cortez, he has been drinking all day and he is eying the lady with hunger. Finish your drinks and go."

Ethan nodded and slid another folded bill into her palm. "I thank you kindly. *Gracias*." He stood up. "Can you keep the little lady here company for a minute while I answer the call of nature?"

"*Si, senior*. My pleasure." She didn't sit down, but her posture made it very clear she was engaged in conversation with Lisa, shielding her from Rafael Cortez's avaricious stare.

"Be right back." He leaned over to kiss Lisa on the cheek and whispered, "Whatever you do, try to look relaxed and

don't stare at that table over there. Deloris rules the roost here. She'll be sure you're all right."

Lisa watched him amble off toward the back hallway, trying to tamp down the case of nerves threatening to burst forth. Ethan wouldn't really leave her alone if he thought she was in danger. She had to remember that. Or maybe this was one of those times when she'd be expected to take care of herself.

She turned toward Deloris and pasted on a smile.

* * * *

Ethan had seen Tonio slide from the table and head for the restroom. He had one chance and very few minutes to make this contact and hope it didn't blow up in his face. The itch on the back of his neck was growing stronger.

When he pushed open the door to the men's room, Tonio was just finishing at the urinal and zipping up his jeans. He gave Ethan a quick look, then averted his eyes. But as he moved toward the door, Ethan put out a hand to stop him.

"I have some money to spend for a man willing to earn it."

Tonio tried to pull away from him. "Excuse, *senor*."

Ethan didn't budge. "Five hundred dollars American could go along way to helping your family, Tonio."

At the use of his name, Tonio looked at Ethan, fear flashing in his eyes. "Who are you? Did *el jefe* send you in here to tempt me? Test my loyalty?"

"I'm no friend to Cortez. I'm trying to find a little boy who was kidnapped. Rumor has it Las Tormentas did the job. I'm willing to pay whoever can tell me where this boy is now."

Tonio began edging away from him. "*Senor*, I...'

"Five hundred dollars, Tonio. And a chance to escape Cortez. All you have to do is give me the information I need."

"I know nothing. Please."

Ethan narrowed his eyes at the man. "You do want to get out from under this, right? Rumors don't lie?"

Tonio nodded his head.

"Okay. Meet me in two hours." He named a waterfront bar he'd used centuries ago that, according to the phone book, was still in business. "Now you better get back out there. *El jefe* will send someone looking for you in a minute."

Tonio stared at him for a long moment, despair and hope mingling in his eyes, then he hurried from the restroom as if the devil was on his heels. Ethan waited an appropriate amount of time before going back to his table.

Deloris was still standing at their table. He gave Lisa high marks for concealing her nervousness and playing her role as well as she did, smiling and chatting with Deloris. Only someone who knew her as well as Ethan had come to would notice the tight grip of her hands on the bottle or the nervous movement of her leg.

"Ah, here you are, *senor*. Your bride and I have been having a wonderful conversation." Deloris winked at him. "And now I must get back to work."

"Hi, darlin'." He kissed Lisa's cheek while he skillfully slipped another folded bill into Deloris's hand. "I don't know about you, but I'm ready to head back to the hotel and get back to the best part of the honeymoon." He winked at Deloris who laughed.

Chapter Ten

Nodding casually toward the group at Cortez's table and smiling briefly, Ethan led Lisa out of La Mama's with his arm firmly around her waist and his head angled so he could drop a kiss on her cheek. When they reached the sidewalk, he popped the locks on the rental car and settled them inside. He sat for a few minutes, nuzzling Lisa's neck until she wanted to scream. In a minute, she might have to rip off both her clothes and his and tell him to take her right there in the car.

Insanity. This is pure madness.

"What are you doing?" She was trying her best to keep her voice even and slow the pulse that was beating like a butterfly on speed.

"Watching to see if we have an audience like I did this afternoon. Sure enough, there he is. No." He gripped Lisa's chin and held it firmly. "Don't turn your head. Don't look. I can see just fine from this angle."

She dug her fingernails into the outside of her purse, willing herself not to react to Ethan's nearness or the feel of his body. "How long do we stay like this?"

"Just a few seconds more." His mouth was at her ear. To the outsider looking in, it would appear he was busy necking with his wife. "Okay. Now he's looking this way again. Make this look good."

He threaded his fingers through her hair, gripping her skull, and pressed his lips hard against hers. This time he

didn't wait for her to open her mouth. He pressed his tongue hard against the seam of her lips and forced them open, the flame of his tongue scorching the insides of that dark wet cavern. His other arm was wrapped around her shoulders, binding her to him so tightly she could feel the buttons on the placket of his shirt.

She was drowning in the kiss, their situation forgotten, their location forgotten. Everything gone except the assault this man was making on her mouth and the fire that raced through her body because of it. There was something about Ethan Caine that was so primal, so male, she couldn't tear herself away from it. The tiny functioning part of her brain was shouting *I'm in trouble*.

When he released her and moved back into his seat she felt a sudden sense of loss, a chill replacing the heat. She forced her eyes open and saw him reaching for the ignition.

"Sorry about that." His voice was gruff but matter of fact. "I wanted to put on a good show for the guy on the sidewalk." *A good show. Yes. That's all it is, Lisa. Keep that in mind.*

She smoothed her skirt and adjusted the top of her dress, ran her fingers through her hair. Her lips felt swollen and she wasn't too sure she could form words with them. She cleared her throat.

"No problem. Whatever it takes." Her pulse was beating an erratic tattoo and she wasn't sure if it was the kiss or the threat of imminent danger.

Jamie. Keep thinking of Jamie.

They pulled out onto Kukulcan Boulevard, the main street that ran the length of Cancun, and blended into the traffic.

"Now what?" she asked.

"I'm afraid Ed and Lily Cameron's honeymoon is about to be derailed."

"I don't understand."

Ethan swore softly as he played dodge 'em in the erratic Cancun traffic. When he was clear of a jumble of cars he answered her. "Sometimes no matter what part you play, something triggers a reaction you don't want. The guy who came out on the sidewalk looking for us is the same one who followed me out this afternoon. We stuck out like sore thumbs at La Mama's and made Cortez take notice of us."

Lisa's stomach knotted. "So what does that mean?"

"Think. Why else would two unlikely gringos be scoping out a place like La Mama's? What's the diciest thing they've done? Kidnap Jamie."

"But..."

"There's more behind this than a band of guerillas. Normally these groups don't cross over the border for their kidnappings. A lot of times it's purely the opportunity of the moment. Jamie's was well planned and orchestrated. It means someone a lot smarter with a lot more connections is behind the whole thing and they're on the lookout for anything suspicious."

"But who?" she burst out. "With Charles dead, Jamie and I are of no importance to anyone."

"That's what we have to find out. Going back to the hotel is too risky. I don't want to be trapped in a closed room. We'll leave our stuff there in case anyone followed me this afternoon and asked questions about the honeymooners. If

they think we're still hanging around and they can find us, that might satisfy them. Or they might simply walk away from it, in which case we'll know they were just nosy about two strangers and haven't connected us to Jamie.

"What are we doing now?"

"We'll do a little bar-hopping just to try and throw people off if they're following. Also to make sure we shake them before we head for the marina area."

"And we're going there because?" she prompted when he didn't continue. God, getting information out of him was like digging a trench in stone.

"Did you see the guy who came out of the men's room before I did? I'm meeting him in two hours."

"Is he the weak link you talked about? The one who could be bought?" She did her best to keep her voice even but she wanted to scream at him and rip the words out of his throat. "Can he tell us where Jamie is?"

"That's what I'm counting on. Maybe even the name of the person really behind all of this. My end of the bargain is to get him and his family away from where Cortez can get at them. Someplace safe. At the same time I'll arrange to have some things delivered to me that we'll need. So wherever we stop tonight, just keep up with your act if you can."

"For God's sake, Ethan." She spit the words out. "I'm not going to screw anything up. I'm not an idiot, you know. I'll do whatever I have to if it means we're closer to finding Jamie. That's the most important thing."

"Fine." He flexed his hands on the steering wheel.

Lisa studied the man next to her as he weaved his way through cars and pedestrians. Gone was the man who'd let life consume him. Who ate and drank to excess. Who considered rudeness an admirable trait. In his place was a hardened warrior focused on a mission. At last she was able to believe that there was some truth to the myths about him after all.

They worked their way in an aimless pattern to the west side of Cancun one bar at a time, staying just long enough in each one not to look suspicious and for Ethan to check out who came in and went out. In the car Lisa used all her willpower not to constantly turn her head to look out the rear window.

By the time they reached their destination, her nerves were stretched as far as they could go. She was beginning to get the itch in her back like Ethan, sure someone's bullet was about to hit her any minute. Her eyes took in every face, every pair of eyes, wondering if she was looking at friend or foe. The fear was gripping her again and it took everything she had to maintain the appearance of a lovesick newlywed.

When they pulled into the parking lot at Juana's on the Beach, Ethan parked at the far end, killed the engine and the lights and put a hand on Lisa's arm to stop her from opening the door.

"Wait." His voice was so quiet she almost didn't hear him.

"For what?"

"To see who comes into the parking lot next. I wish we'd had time to give Tonio a little test drive, see if he really came

through on something, but we don't have any time to spare. So we wait and pray."

They sat in the car for five minutes, Ethan with his arm around her shoulders, giving the impression they were doing a little more impromptu necking.

Lisa forced her mind to think of unpleasant things, cold things, anything to counteract the heat they generated between them. She took some small measure of satisfaction that she wasn't the only one affected by their playacting. Ethan wasn't as immune to the kisses as he tried to pretend. Or to her. He was a disciplined person, and only if she'd been looking for it would she catch the slightly erratic breathing or the tremor in his arms. But it was there. And it wasn't due to their mission.

When had sexual attraction suddenly taken on a life of its own between the two of them? Was it during that almost kiss back at the farm house? The caresses at the airport? That first scorcher in La Mama's? Whatever, it lay there now like an elephant between them, taking up far too much space.

At this point in her life, Lisa wasn't even sure she remembered what sex was like. Or why, in the midst of her terror and fear for Jamie's life, it should be insinuating itself into her existence. Ethan Caine was hardly a person she'd choose to break her long period of abstinence, but God, her traitorous body responded to him without her even directing it.

It's the danger. The unreal situation. Just remember. We're here to find Jamie, not to have sex. Nothing's going to happen. We're adults. Nothing is going to happen.

"Okay." He slid his arm away from her. "Muss up your hair and wipe off your lipstick. You can put more on when we get inside."

"Excuse me?"

His bad temper edged his words. "You don't want people to think we've been out here discussing world politics, do you?"

"Oh." *And please continue to be rude to me so I can think of a million ways of killing you. That should keep my libido in check.*

"Come on." He reached for her hand and led her across the lot to the back door of Juana's.

Inside, music was playing loudly from speakers over the bar and the level of conversation was competing for dominance with the music. The room was wall to wall people—sitting at the tiny tables, jammed along the bar, standing in whatever space they could find.

Two bartenders were working at top speed to keep up with the orders hitting them in a steady stream. A couple in one corner was attempting to dance on the few inches of floor beneath their feet, although Lisa wasn't sure what they were doing could technically be called dancing.

Ethan steered Lisa to a space at the end of the bar and shoved some money into her hand. "Hang onto your purse and be sure you can get to your gun."

She tensed. "My gun?"

"I don't expect you to need it but let's not take any chances."

"All right." She hitched the strap up higher on her shoulder and brought the purse around so she had her hands on it. Be

prepared with the gun. Sure. Exactly. Shoot it off in a crowded bar, right?

"Order us drinks. Anything. It doesn't matter, we won't be drinking them. And don't be in too big a hurry to do it."

"Where are you going?" *And leaving me here in this mob.*

"To see a man about a bathroom." He raised his voice.

* * * *

As soon as they entered, he had spotted Tonio making himself small near the hallway to the restrooms. He left Lisa at the bar and headed in that direction. Two men were standing at urinals and one was washing his hands, but Tonio wasn't visible. Ethan took the opportunity to relieve himself, and when the last person had left, Tonio slipped out from the single stall.

"We can't talk inside here." He stood beside Ethan at the sink, his hands shaking as he washed them. "Too much traffic in and out."

"Outside. You go first."

Lisa was still standing where he'd left her, a fake smile on her face as she watched the bartenders. He yelled at her that he was getting something from the car, then made his way to the back door.

The heat of the tropical night wrapped itself around him, a humid blanket that should have had him dripping in perspiration. But Ethan had that chilled feeling he always got when he was on a mission, the feeling that someone was watching him. He stopped in the shadow of the building and let his gaze travel over the entire area—the other bars and

restaurants along this strip, the parking lot, wherever he could see—but nothing jumped out at him.

Tonio was waiting next to a storage shed, away from any illumination.

"If this is a trap," he told Ethan, "go ahead and kill me but leave my family alone."

"No trap. You have my word."

"What do you want with me? And how can you help my family?"

Ethan studied the man for a moment. Fear rolled off him in waves and his eyes shifted constantly. They both knew the kind of revenge men like Cortez extracted for betrayal. But Tonio could be as much danger to Ethan as Ethan could to him. Right at that moment, their eyes assessing each other, the decision would have to be made by both whether to trust or not.

"I hear you have a family, a wife and child, that you're worried about."

Tonio said nothing.

"A wife and child," Ethan went on. "Wouldn't you like to get them—and you—away from Cortez if the opportunity came up? Get all of you somewhere far away?"

Again Tonio just stood there, but Ethan could see him processing the words, trying to decide what to do.

"If that's so," the man said at last, "what does it mean to you? You're just a gringo down here for whatever reason. If my family and I are dead tomorrow your life still goes on."

"I need information," Ethan told him. "I told you that. You give it to me and I'll have you and your family out of here before daylight."

"You give your word?" Tonio watched Ethan's face.

Ethan nodded. "My word is good. It's not to my advantage to lie to you. Dead bodies don't make people trust you."

"What is it you want to know?"

"Did Las Tormentas engineer a kidnapping three months ago across the border? In Florida?"

He could tell if Tonio tried to bluff him. He'd cut his losses and walk away. But the frightened man answered him truthfully.

"Yes. To my shame." His face twisted with misery. "You have to believe me that we don't usually take children."

"I'm looking for that boy, Tonio. Eight years old." Ethan watched Tonio carefully. The telltale flicker in the man's eyes told him he was on the right track. "Here's his picture." He held out the photo Lisa had given him. "This is the one you and your people kidnapped in Tampa, Florida, right? And took to some place in the Quintana Roo. His mother is desperate to get him back."

Tonio said nothing, just shifted his feet and stared out at the Gulf of Mexico as if deciding what to say next.

"Tonio." Ethan's voice had softened. "You have a child yourself. How would your wife feel if that child was ripped from her arms and taken far away?"

Tonio fidgeted. "If you don't get us out of here, Cortez will kill us all. And not in a nice way."

"I told you. It's a done deal. Just give me the information."

At last the man nodded, just a sharp jerk of his head, and gave Ethan what he wanted. Las Tormentas had been hired to kidnap a small boy in Florida. Cortez had received half a million dollars for it. They handed him over to a man who owned a huge *finca*, a plantation, deep in the Quintana Roo.

"Cortez knew this man," Tonio added. "I think they do some other business together."

"Drug business?" Ethan probed.

Tonio didn't answer.

"All right. Hang on a minute."

He walked a few feet away, pulled out the cell phone Dino had given him and made the one call he would use it for. When he was finished, he separated the battery from the phone and put each piece in different pockets.

"It's all set," he said to Tonio. "Go home and get your wife and child. Do you know Sunfish Charters? At the very end of the row of marinas?"

Tonio nodded.

"Meet me there at five-thirty am. That's only a few hours from now."

"And you'll take us away from here?" Tonio had a look in his eyes halfway between fear and pleading.

Ethan nodded. "I have friends who will get you away from Cancun. Take you to the United States. There'll be a job for you and a place for you to live. If you want it, that is."

"What about the immigration people? And green cards? No green card and I can't work."

Ethan tamped down his impatience. "My friends are taking care of all that. And one of them will have a job for you, too."

A good paying one, working at the marina." He watched Tonio through narrowed eyes. "Well? Time's running out here."

Tonio seemed about to say something, then nodded his head. "I have no reason to trust you, but I also have no choice. We'll be there."

"And if you can, draw a map of where the plantation is and how to get to it."

Ethan waited until Tonio had trudged off to his car in the parking lot and pulled out onto the street before he went back inside the bar.

Lisa was in the same place wedged in at one end, sipping from a glass that was still mostly full. The man on her left was doing his best to engage her in conversation and Ethan could tell she was holding her own. The more time he spent with her, the more he realized just what a gutsy person she was. How the hell she'd ever gotten mixed up with someone like Charles Mallory still puzzled him.

He stepped up behind her and tapped her shoulder. "Time to split, honey bun. Too much noise here."

Lisa turned, threw her arms around his neck and smashed her mouth against his. "I was just telling this ... gentleman ... here we're on our honeymoon and you'd be coming right back in for me."

He pulled her tight against him. "That's right. And we're wasting too much of it in public. I think we've had enough night life, don't you?" He leered at her.

A smile teased the corners of her mouth. "Whatever you say, sweetie."

Redemption
by Judith Rochelle

Ethan guided her to the door with his arm wrapped tightly around her. He could feel the eyes of the man at the bar raking over him. A stranger? Someone who'd followed them? In any event, they needed to get out of there pronto.

Chapter Eleven

Lisa felt the tension in Ethan's body as he walked her across the bumpy parking lot to their car. The urge to hurry was in his hard grip on her body and his measured breathing, but he made them stroll as lovers would. She tried to force a calm that she was far from feeling. When they got in the car, she turned to ask him a question but he put his fingers to his lips and shook his head.

He drove about five blocks from Juana's, turned off onto a side street, pulled to the curb and killed the lights.

"Don't move," he mouthed.

Lisa nodded, trying to hold back the fear that had been growing all night.

Ethan unscrewed the overhead light, then in the darkness of the car, he searched every inch with his fingertips, even the column of the steering wheel. When he'd completed the front, he moved to the back. Lisa fought her impatience while he did his thing, wishing he'd get around to telling her what had happened.

At last he was back in the front seat, starting the engine and pulling away from the curb.

"Okay. Now we talk."

"What were you doing?"

"Looking for bugs."

"Bugs?" Lisa's eyebrows rose to her hairline. "Like in the hotel?"

He nodded. "I wanted to make sure no one zeroed in on us while we were inside Juana's or someplace else and decided to put listening devices in the car. So far so good."

"Did he show up? The man from La Mama's? Will he help us?"

"Yes."

Lisa waited for him to say something else. Finally she said, "And?"

"And he told me what we need to know. I made arrangements to get him and his family out of here and we have some things to do, too."

"You know where Jamie is." She tried to keep the excitement from her voice.

"In a manner of speaking. They turned him over to some man who has him at a huge *finca* in the middle of the Quintana Roo jungle. He's the one who hired them." Now he turned to look at her. "Can you think of any man who'd want Jamie badly enough to kidnap him and keep him?"

Lisa felt the edges of fear claiming her again. She'd been wondering that all along, but hearing Ethan's voice it made her face the fact that whoever had Jamie might not easily give him up. "I have no idea who would do that."

"Maybe some enemy of Charles'?" he pushed.

"Oh, God." The fear was tight in her throat now. "Would he ... Do you think he's killed Jamie? Whoever he is?"

Ethan shook his head. "If he wanted to kill him, he wouldn't have paid Cortez half a mil to kidnap him. And if it's an old enemy of Charles's, if he wanted some kind of revenge

or to send you a message, he'd have had him shot in front of you."

Lisa felt her stomach heave and the nausea she worked hard to keep at bay trying to erupt. "What would anyone want with an eight-year-old boy? Besides, Charles has been dead for four years and they got whatever money I could lay my hands on, so what's the point?"

Ethan lifted a shoulder. "Sending a message. Don't fuck with me or your family isn't safe."

"After all this time?"

Ethan shrugged. "It's possible they're having trouble with someone else and you're just the example they want to set."

"That's why you're getting that man and his family out of here," she guessed. "So they can't go after him."

He nodded. "He's the weak link in that band of guerillas, the only one I could approach. It might not have worked with anyone else. He's the most needy, and the most desperate."

He pulled into an alley, got out and put something under the front wheels. Then he got in and drove over whatever it was twice before picking it up and climbing back in the car.

"What are you doing?" Lisa wondered if he'd somehow lost his mind.

"Destroying a cell phone. It was good for one phone call and I already made it."

He drove around to the back of a restaurant and pitched the phone into a trash bin. A few blocks later, he repeated the same procedure with the battery.

"So they can't trace it," she guessed.

"Yes. Those things are too easy to triangulate."

She frowned. "But what if we need to make calls again? You said your friends would help us if we needed them."

"All taken care of."

A million questions banged around in her head but one look at Ethan told her he was in no mood to give answers right now. She bit her lip to keep from saying anything more.

Ethan turned back toward the beach and parked in a crowded lot at the far end of the row of marinas, killing the engine and lights.

"What now?" she asked.

"Now we wait."

"Here?"

He nodded. "I'm in a good spot to see what's happening and no one can sneak up on us."

The silence stretched between them in the darkness of the car, thicker than cotton stuffing. The tension vibrating in the air came from more than one source.

Ever since they'd entered La Mama's, Lisa had been on edge, as she knew Ethan was. Playing a part. Hoping people believed them. Praying they'd get the information they needed without getting killed first. The unexpected was always waiting around a corner.

But that wasn't the only underlying cause. Lisa had moved as close to the door as she could, putting as much space between them as the seat allowed. The kisses she and Ethan had exchanged might have been for the benefit of an audience, but there was more than playacting behind them. They both knew it even if neither of them said it out loud.

This wasn't something they should be exploring right now. Maybe never.

Lisa hadn't realized just how vulnerable she was or how afraid she was of a man's touch. She lived behind a self-imposed wall and Ethan Caine was certainly not a man she'd choose to break it down.

Thank you, Charles Mallory, for screwing up my life in more ways than one.

She closed her eyes and tried to think of anything except the man sitting next to her. Jamie's face kept swimming to the forefront and she dug her nails into her hands to keep herself from crying. No time for tears now.

Finally she turned to look at Ethan. "How much longer do we have to sit here?"

He spoke without taking his gaze from the windshield and whatever he was watching out there. "Not much. We're waiting for another hour to pass. Then we're going to a marina where hopefully my friend will have a boat waiting for Tonio and his family along with some equipment for me. And Tonio will have a map we need." He tapped his fingers on the steering wheel and stared out the windshield. "I hope."

"A map to show us how to get to wherever Jamie is?"

Ethan nodded. "This could still be a trap. I want to make sure Tonio isn't just selling us out to Cortez. That's always a very real possibility in a situation like this. Whoever's behind this—whoever hired this guerilla group to kidnap Jamie—doesn't want us to find him. We have no idea what they might have told Cortez to do to keep people from looking too hard.

We just have to operate as if there's a shooter behind every rock."

They lapsed into silence again. Lisa tried to sit as still as possible but her body was tensed to spring at a moment's notice. Every sound, every movement made her jump with panic. She kept her purse open with her hand on her gun, and she noticed Ethan had slid his own weapon from the small of his back and kept it on the seat next to him, hand resting on the grip.

At last, Ethan cranked the engine and slid out of the parking lot, leaving his lights off until they hit the street. He drove at a normal pace to the other end of the row of marinas, checking all his mirrors on the way to be sure once more they weren't being followed. He drove into another parking lot, this one dark and silent, and pulled up to a chain link fence. A sign that proclaimed *Sunfish Charters, Keep Out, This Means You* in faded black paint on a dingy white background hung on the padlocked gate.

Ethan flashed his lights twice and they got out of the car.

A man dressed in black jeans and black t-shirt materialized from a tiny shack on the other side of the fence, nodded to Ethan and unlocked the gate. They shook hands silently and Ethan urged Lisa into the dock area ahead of him. The man's eyes swept over her in an assessing gaze, but Ethan made no move to introduce them.

"Are we ready?" Ethan asked, his voice almost a whisper.

"Yes. Everything arrived a half hour ago and the boat's ready." He looked over Ethan's shoulder frowning. "Where's your extract?"

"He'll be here any minute. I wanted to get here first." Ethan turned to Lisa. "I want you to wait in the office over there until I come for you. Don't talk to anyone and don't ask questions. Take your purse with your gun in it."

She opened her mouth to say something, but the sudden deadly air surrounding both men made her close it again. She just nodded. This was for Jamie. For him she could follow orders. And neither Ethan nor this man all in black looked like they wanted to hear anything she had to say.

The so-called office was little more than a tiny room with a battered desk and chair. But along one wall were steel cabinets with heavy locks. Not your average fishing charter equipment.

Two tiny windows gave visual access to the marina and parking lot. Through one of them Lisa could see the two men walk to the end of the dock. A third man, also in black, climbed out of a boat and he, too, shook hands with Ethan. Then he reached into the boat and hauled out a large canvas that looked heavy, along with a smaller one. Ethan carried them back up the dock to the parking lot.

Lisa had no doubt these men had something to do with whatever Ethan's life had been before. The air they projected was calmly lethal. She wasn't sure if that made her feel better or worse. No amount of deep breathing would dissolve the knots in her stomach and she jammed her hands in the pockets of her dress to keep them from trembling.

Nothing happened for the next few minutes and Lisa did what had become a habit when she was nervous. She paced. Finally a car pulled into the lot, and as soon as its headlights

went off so did all the lights on the dock. Lisa opened her purse and took out her gun, trying to steady her hands. By straining her eyes she managed to make out three people getting out of the car—two adults and a small child.

A fourth shape joined them. Ethan. Then the entire black mass moved toward the dock. Lisa could no longer see them but she heard the creaking of wood as they made their way to the boat at the end. By squinting she could see the outlines of Ethan and the man in the boat shaking hands again. Then the craft moved slowly out into the water, barely breaking a ripple on the surface, and two black shapes headed back toward the office.

Lisa put her gun back in her purse, took another deep breath to control her erratic heartbeat and wiped her hands on her skirt. She was standing by the door when it opened and Ethan motioned to her.

"Let's go. We're clear so far but I'm not taking any chances."

He took her hand and pulled her toward the parking lot. The lights were still out so she took care not to stumble or trip. Instead of heading for the car, he pulled a set of keys from his pocket and popped the locks on a black SUV.

"What's this? And why is everything so dark?"

"Our new wheels. Get in. I don't want to hang around here." He was backing out of the space before Lisa even had the door closed. "And it's dark so no one will see us."

"But what about the car? We can't just leave it here."

"Someone will return it to the rental agency tomorrow." He merged quickly into the traffic on the highway. "We ditched

the car that Cortez's people have seen twice. And now we've got a vehicle we can drive into the jungle."

Lisa's stomach was flip-flopping again, and she did her best to contain the fear that kept rising. This whole evening they'd been skating on the razor's edge of danger. She sensed it in Ethan's manner, even though he'd said little. Or perhaps *because* he'd said little.

She swallowed hard and tried to make her voice calm and even. "So what do we do now, since you said we can't go back to the hotel?"

"Now we're going to get the hell out of Dodge." He shifted position. "Tonio gave me a crude map but I want to get as far away from here as possible before stopping to take a look at it. We still don't know who's behind all of this and they might have someone scoping things out. I haven't seen any sign of it except the guy at La Mama's watching us but I don't want to take any chance. Don't forget. Someone took a shot at us at Manny's."

"Forget? How could I forget?" She still couldn't get the episode out of her mind. Lisa chewed on her fingernail. She'd already destroyed the one on her thumb and had started on the index finger.

"If someone senses how close we're getting to the truth about Jamie's disappearance, we need to move as quickly as we can."

"Okay." She yanked her finger away from her mouth and leaned back in her seat. "So where are we going now?"

"Playa del Carmen." He gave her a quick glance. "You should try to get some sleep on the ride."

"What about you? You must be tired, too."

He gave her a tight smile, lacking in humor. "I've gone a long time without sleep before. I can do it again. Go on. Close your eyes."

As positive as she was that nerves alone would keep her awake, they hadn't gone two miles before tension and exhaustion caught up with Lisa and sleep captured her.

* * * *

The sky was the pink of early dawn and a faint breeze stirred the leaves of the banyan trees when Lisa opened her eyes. They were parked once again in a busy lot bordering the beach, the waves of the Caribbean Sea rolling in just beyond.

She stretched and worked her neck back and forth, trying to relieve the kinks. "What is this place?"

"We're between the bus station and the ferry on Avenida Quinta. The busiest place in Playa del Carmen. No one will pay attention to us sitting here or what we're doing."

"And what *are* we doing?" She looked at the gear on the seat between them with a curious stare.

"Getting ready." He pointed at two black boxes that looked like oversized walkie talkies. "Satellite radios. They're set on the same frequency as my friend's. That's how we'll communicate." He picked one up and showed her how it worked. "I've set the numbers. This one will connect you to mine, this one dials the number in Key West."

"Key West?" She raised her eyebrows in a questioning look. "Why are we calling there?"

"Because that's where our backup is. Waiting for us to call them in."

"What's the rest of this stuff?" She looked over the back of the seat to the open canvas bag. "Is that camping gear?"

Ethan nodded. "Thermal blanket and tent. Knife for hacking at the underbrush. Some other stuff."

Lisa ran her hands through her hair, raking it back from her face. She was trying to brush the cobwebs out of her brain and think intelligently. "Do we know where we're going?"

"I'm hoping. Tonio drew me a map of where the *finca* is; where I think they took the boy." He pulled out the map Lisa had marked lines on. "Now I need to figure out which of these mud tracks will take us the closest without putting us in their sights."

Lisa's head was filled with questions but the edge in Ethan's voice said *I'm busy and I'll tell you what you need to know when you need to know it*. Instead she took a brush from her purse, ran it through her hair and pulled out a scrunchie to fasten it into a pony tail.

"You'll need different clothes."

His voice startled her. She looked down at her skirt and sandals. "I didn't figure I could go hiking in these. My other stuff is back at the hotel."

"As soon as I'm finished with this we'll get something to eat and I'll find a store. We need clothes and supplies. I have jungle food in here but we need bottled water."

She raised her eyebrows. "Jungle food?"

"Granola bars, power bars, stuff like that." He waved at everything else spread out on the seat. "I have two backpacks here so we can carry all this stuff with us when we leave the car. And we'll need water so we don't dehydrate. I'm hoping we can do this in twenty-four hours but I won't know until we get where we're going. We have to make sure Jamie's there and then figure out how to snatch him."

"Oh." *Damn. I seem to say that a lot. Could I sound any more stupid?*

While Ethan repacked the backpacks, Lisa watched people move in and out of the bus station and around the ferry, trying to keep her nerves under control while her mind raced. None of this made any sense at all. Unless ... No. That was too totally farfetched. For a minute she thought about voicing the weird idea to Ethan but she was sure he'd think she was crazy. Wouldn't he? She kept trying to push it out of her mind but it bounced right back, like a yoyo on a string, each time hitting harder.

They stopped at a modest-looking restaurant a few blocks down Avenida Quinta and bought breakfast tacos which they ate in the car. Leaving their gear unguarded didn't seem like a smart option.

When they found a Wal-Mart-type store, Ethan handed her a list and some money. "I'll wait here with the stuff. Change clothes in the restroom after you pay for everything and get rid of the dress and shoes you're wearing."

"Throw them away? Why?"

Again the exasperated sigh. "Lisa, could you just not keep asking questions, please? You don't need any excess to carry

on your back. I'll buy you a damn dress and shoes when we get back to the states."

"Fine, fine, fine," she muttered and pushed open her door.

Thirty minutes later she was dressed in jeans and t-shirt, running shoes and socks, and handing the sacks of purchases to Ethan, which he tossed in the back seat.

"We're good to go," she told him.

"All right. Let's do it. Here." He handed her the map Tonio had drawn and the one she'd marked. "You'll have to be the navigator. Don't make any mistakes and take us on a wrong turn."

Lisa bit back the smart retort ready to pop out of her mouth and studied the map. When they came to the end of what appeared to be the tourist area, the sandy beaches disappeared and jungle took over.

"The road Tonio marked should be coming up in just a little bit," Lisa told him. "There." She pointed. "Right there. Turn left."

"Anyone who calls this a road is stretching things," Ethan grumbled.

And indeed, he was right. It was little more than a dirt track, worn down by other vehicles that had taken this turn and barely visible through the dense vegetation. As they moved deeper into the jungle proper, following dirt roads and evading mud holes and fallen tree limbs, Lisa couldn't help but be fascinated by the lush growth of strange plants, and the trees that were home to multitudes of climbing animals and birds of every color. Sometimes she got the feeling they were being swallowed up by a giant green hand.

For the next half hour she called out directions. Every so often they passed a narrower road that veered off to the left.

"Where do those go?" she asked.

"Plantations. People's homes. Whatever."

"I can't imagine people living out here. My God, you're in the middle of nowhere."

"Very few people do. Most of the residential area is on the coast where there's a natural rock seawall. But I would imagine for people who want total anonymity and privacy this is as good a place to get it as any." He stopped at a tiny clearing and took Tonio's map from her, smoothing it out on the steering wheel. "Okay. We'll stash the car here."

"This is it?" Lisa looked out the window. "This is where we're stopping?"

"You don't find the Ritz out here, lady." He sounded disgusted. "We're here to rescue your son, not have a vacation. And I don't want to drive too close. That all right with you?"

"Yes," she snapped. "I know that. And you don't have to keep biting my head off. This is fine. Whatever. And then we hike, right?"

Ethan actually grinned. "And then we hike."

"But ..." She held up a hand, palm outward. "I know. No buts. Except I have to ask. We're just leaving the car here? How do we know it'll still be here when we're ready to leave?"

"We don't. If it is, it means we accomplished our mission without much conflict. Otherwise, we'll be leaving by other means." He folded the crude map and stuck it back in his pocket. Then he set the burglar alarm on the SUV and

covered it completely with vegetation he hacked from the surrounding area and netting he pulled from the cargo space.

"Tonio said the place is at least two miles in from this road," he told Lisa. "I want to camp far enough away so we don't attract attention. All right, let's get moving."

They climbed out of the SUV and Ethan distributed their gear. He filled a backpack for each of them with bottled water, power bars, a satellite radio and their weapons.

"I'll take the tent gear." He pulled out a GPS. "Do you know how to use one of these puppies?"

"Yes. Charles showed me how to use one on a trip we took before ... before things fell apart."

"Good. Okay." He punched in some coordinates on each of them. "We'll use them to keep track of our direction. Stay right behind me and make as little noise as possible."

Just then a terrible screech, like chalk on a board magnified a thousand times, split the air.

Lisa jumped, barely suppressing her own scream. "What was that? My God, it sounds like someone's being tortured."

Ethan grinned. "Howler monkeys. They're all around us. You'll hear them all the time so get used to them."

Lisa swallowed hard and took deep breaths to calm her racing pulse, convinced she'd never get used to a sound like that.

They walked for more than an hour, shafts of blazing heat from the sun piercing the thick jungle growth. The air was heavy with the rich scent of tropical flowers and the symphony of sounds made by myriads of colorful birds. Now she knew where Ethan had acquired the habit of wearing his

disreputable straw hat and she was glad she'd thought to buy a baseball cap when she got the clothes.

She had no idea how Ethan even found footing for them as they made their way through thick vines and giant roots. When the foliage was too dense, he took the sharp knife hanging from his belt and simply hacked a pathway for them.

At last, he came to a stop in a small clearing. Mopping the sweat from her face with the hem of her t-shirt, she began to understand why he'd taken the time for his week of boot camp. This was a little more than jogging along Bayshore Boulevard.

"I don't want to go any further," he told her. "We're about a mile from the perimeter of the *finca* so we're far enough away to avoid detection and close enough to get to an observation spot." He took off his backpack and the portable tent, hung binoculars around his neck and put his hat back on. "And I need to see what's going on. Where's your gun?"

Lisa obligingly removed it from her backpack and checked to make sure there was a round in the chamber.

"All right," he said. "Don't take your hand off it until I get back. Stay here while I scout things out."

Before she could say a word, he was gone, so silent only the things he left behind assured her he'd even been there. She leaned back against the tree trunk to capture the shade from the leaves and stretched out her legs to relieve her aching muscles, keeping the gun in her lap. The hot air surrounded her like thick cloth and she spent much of her time brushing away the infinite variety of bugs that thought she might make an interesting meal.

Reaching into the pocket of her jeans with her free hand, she pulled out the tiny snapshot of Jamie she'd carried since the day he was taken.

Once again, the chilling possibility that had occurred to her roared back in her brain. Ethan might think her crazy but when he came back she had to tell him about this thought that was scratching at the back of her mind. On the remote chance she could be right, he had to know. It might change everything.

Her head was beginning to hurt from thinking and she closed her eyes, rubbing her temples.

"Don't go to sleep. You might not wake up."

Lisa jerked at the sound of Ethan's voice. "I didn't hear you come back. My God, you're like a ghost."

"That's good. If you can't hear me, neither can anyone else." He dropped down to the ground beside her.

"So what did you find out?"

"In a minute." He reached into his backpack and removed one of the bottles of water, taking slow sips to conserve the liquid. "You should drink some, too," he ordered. "It's easy to get dehydrated out here even if you're not doing anything."

"Can you tell me now what you found?" Lisa could barely contain her impatience.

"I didn't get as close as I'd like. I'm still not sure if they have sensors or cameras outside the perimeter, although I have to assume they do. But I did find out the place is surrounded by a concrete wall ten feet high that must have cost a fortune to build."

"And the house? Did you see it?"

"Only from a distance. After it gets dark we'll get up in the trees and take a better look. But I can tell you this. Whoever lives there must have a shitload of money." He raised an eyebrow. "That ring any bells?"

Lisa chewed her bottom lip. "At first it didn't. Even up until yesterday. But..."

He huffed a sigh of exasperation. "But what, Lisa? If you've got any clue, this is the time to share it."

"Well..." She looked away, not wanting to see his reaction when she shared her idea. "Do you think it's possible Charles is still alive? That he's behind the whole thing?"

Ethan was silent for so long Lisa had to turn and look at him. His face was set in a hard expression and that bottomless look was back in his eyes.

"Just how long has this little thought been running around in your brain?"

"J-Just since yesterday. It seemed so stupid I thought you'd think I was crazy."

Ethan lifted his hat, wiped his forehead with his handkerchief and plopped the hat back in place. "I wish you'd said something. I've kind of had the same idea myself. Nothing else makes sense. It's been four years since Charles's so-called death. Enough time for him to get himself established again and plot something like this. It gives him your son and the ten mil."

"But I saw his body," she protested. "And they compared dental records."

"Maybe. When you have as much money as Charles you can arrange anything."

"Now the shooting at the ransom drop makes sense. He'd want me out of the way."

Ethan nodded. "And the one at Manny's Diner. He probably didn't want you taken out at your house. Too specific. The cops would start digging."

Lisa hitched a breath. "Does that mean he knows about you?"

Ethan thought for a minute. "No. Charles would have no way of knowing me or anything about me. If we accept this whole premise, then it was just dumb luck we were together when they tried the hit at Manny's."

"God." She wrapped her arms around herself, rocking back and forth. "This is like finding out the devil has come back to live with you."

"Lisa." He touched her shoulder. "Whoever it is, even if it's Charles, we'll take care of it and get Jamie. That's a promise."

She gave him a weak smile. "I hope you're right."

Ethan pulled out a power bar, unwrapped it and bit into it. "Now things are beginning to make more sense. He picked a location he was familiar with and where he had already established connections. Remember all those trips to the Yucatan? Do you have any idea at all why he made so many trips to this area during the five years before he was killed?"

"No. He never told me anything."

"Well, if he is still alive, it's safe to say he's back in business and manipulating this whole thing."

Lisa raised her eyebrows. "Business? I'm not sure to this day what his business really was."

Ethan shifted to a more comfortable position. "Based on what came out after his so-called death. I'd say working with the *narcotraficantes*—the drug smugglers. *Narcoguerrilla* groups like Las Tormentas who mix kidnapping with drug-running with a little political upheaval. Money laundering. Arms dealing. You name it. A smorgasbord of illegal activities and Charles is probably deep into all of them."

Lisa rubbed her face as if scrubbing something away. "I'm angry at Charles for what he did to my life but I'm angrier at myself for being so stupid."

"Hey. We all do stupid things. The trick is to get past them and not do them again."

Ethan had taken another bite of the bar and a tiny piece of it clung to his lip. Lisa had to clench her fists to keep from reaching over and brushing it away. She remembered how his lips felt pressed against hers, the taste of him, the scent of him.

Get a grip here.

She stood up abruptly and went to lean against a tree, needing to put distance between them.

"Something wrong?" His knowing eyes looked at her.

"No." She hoped she didn't blush. "I just wanted to stand up for a minute."

"You'd better sit down and get all the rest you can." His eyes were still locked on hers, watching her. "We'll be doing more walking later."

He knows. And what's worse, he's fighting the same feelings. Oh, God, we are in big trouble.

Redemption
by Judith Rochelle

"So." Ethan crumpled the wrapper and stuffed it in his backpack. "If it *is* Charles, maybe we can get rid of him once and for all." He stood up. "Okay. Let's get the tent pitched while it's still light and get ready for our evening's adventures."

Chapter Twelve

They made the tent secure, then sat down to wait for darkness. Neither of them had anything to say. Ethan pretended to sleep and Lisa fought off the continuous invasion of insects. And they both tried to ignore the sexual tension growing between them. The howler monkeys continued to screech and birds of every size and color flew around them, their songs a variegated concerto.

By late afternoon Lisa's nerves were stretched as taut as guy wires. Ethan had done his best to deliberately ignore her, a fact so obvious it increased her agitation.

"Why don't we talk about something?" she asked, sitting down on a thick broken branch.

"About what?" Ethan was sitting on the ground, leaning against a tree, his hat tipped over his face as usual.

"Something. Anything." She waved her hands in the air. "Tell me about Ethan Caine."

He was silent for a long moment. "Tell you about Ethan Caine. What is it you want to know, Lisa? What I did for a living? If I killed people? Were they good or bad? Did it bother me?"

His voice was like an axe chopping wood and she recoiled from it.

"I'm sorry. I don't mean to pry. That was very rude of me. If you wanted to talk about yourself you would."

Again the silence stretched before he broke it. "Why don't you tell me why a woman with as much to offer as you have would tie herself up with a loser like Charles Mallory?"

She jerked as if he'd slapped her. "I had my reasons."

"Millions of them I'd guess."

"It wasn't money," she snapped. "Not at all."

"No? Then why don't you tell me what it was?"

"I don't think that's any of your business."

"Okay. I just thought if we were going to play Twenty Questions you could offer up something first." He settled his hat more firmly over his face.

More silence.

Lisa chewed on the thumb nail that she'd already bitten to the quick.

"I hadn't dated a lot," she blurted out.

"Excuse me?" The hat shifted and Ethan turned his gaze on her.

"You heard me. I was the proverbial prodigy. Graduated high school at sixteen, college at nineteen and law school at twenty two. Social activities didn't seem all that important to me. I was focused on what I wanted and working to get there." She chewed on a nail again. "Anyway, most boys were either intimidated by me or turned off. Fighting them off wasn't a problem."

Ethan shifted the hat completely. "Josh never said anything about that."

"Josh and I don't discuss each other with people, no matter how close they might be." She kicked at a clump of

mud. "Anyway, he was off doing his own thing. I don't think my sex life would have been a priority topic for him."

"You had hardly started at that law firm before you were being fast-tracked for partnership," Ethan commented.

Lisa nodded. "Aaron Burke took me under his wing. He wanted a tough litigator and I seemed to come by it naturally."

"So Mallory came in and swept you off your feet, right? He was a charmer from all that I hear about him."

"Yes," she said bitterly. "A charmer." She stood up and began her familiar habit of pacing. "We were married almost two years before the real Charles Mallory showed up."

"You could have left him any time," Ethan pointed out.

"When you're in a prison it's very hard to break out. The guards don't give you any breathing room. And Charles was a maniac about Jamie. He'd never have let me take him. I think he'd have killed me first."

Ethan was silent for so long Lisa stopped pacing and stood directly in front of him.

"What, no sarcastic comments? No digs? Where's that famous arrogant Caine personality?"

Ethan sat up straighter, pushing his hat back off his forehead. "I just hate to see a woman with so much to offer throw it away on someone who could never appreciate her. And look at the mess he left you when he was killed. Just seems a damn shame."

"Well, not all of us have happily ever after." She heard the edge in her own voice. "I don't see you lugging home the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow."

"I'll say this. You came out of it a lot stronger than most women would have. It took guts to stay in that situation to protect your son. And you didn't run around afterwards crying and wringing your hands."

"Oh, good. I'm so glad I have your approval." She couldn't help the acid tone of her voice. Ethan Caine got under her skin more easily than anyone she'd ever met. "Especially since you seem to have done so well with your own life."

"My life isn't for people with your delicate sensibilities," he told her in a flat voice. "Leave it at that."

"So will I ever get the real story of the real Ethan Caine?"

He looked past her, staring at nothing. "Believe me, you wouldn't want to hear it. It's not a bedtime story."

She raised her eyebrows. "I beg your pardon?"

He tossed down the plant leaf he'd been mangling. "I had ideals once, believe it or not. And a belief in noble causes. Then I learned what so-called civilized people can do to each other." A muscle jumped in his cheek. "Not to mention those who are outright savages. And what I had to do to deal with them. So, no, I don't think we'll be discussing my life."

She got the picture. Ethan Caine wasn't about to share any details of his life with her. Or anyone.

Finally he got up and opened his knapsack, motioning for Lisa to do the same. "Supper time. Better eat something. You'll need your energy. Eat a piece of the fruit and one of the power bars."

Lisa sat down on the deadwood again, wiped a peach against her t-shirt and took a bite of it. By the time they'd eaten and Ethan had wrapped their trash and buried it, the

sun had set and the first edges of darkness were creeping over the jungle.

"We'll wait another fifteen minutes before getting started," Ethan told her, checking his watch. "I want as much night as we can get to cover us without waiting too late."

"All right. Just tell me whatever you want me to do."

Ethan cocked an eyebrow at her. "You know, you're not at all what I thought you were. Not a bit."

"Is that good or bad?" She rubbed her hands nervously against the sides of her jeans.

"Good, I guess. You're plenty gutsy, nothing's made you run screaming for shelter yet, and you don't seem afraid of every bug crawling over us here."

"I intellectualize them," she said.

He stared. "Excuse me?"

"I was always scared to death of anything creepy crawly. Then I read a book about intellectualizing things you were afraid of. You know, reducing them down to what they really are and if they can really hurt you. So while I don't like them any better, they don't send me shrieking under the covers anymore."

"I'll be damned. Maybe I could try that with a few things myself." He shook his head. "Okay. You've been very good about following orders so let's see if you can follow a few more."

"Just tell me what to do."

He reached into her backpack and took out a strange device. "Night vision goggles. NVGs. We obviously can't use flashlights and we need to be able to see."

Lisa stood still while he fastened hers on and adjusted them to fit. "Weird," she told him.

"Yes. But it lights everything up. Just remember if we do run into a patch of light, yank them off right away or you'll be momentarily blinded. We don't want to give away any advantage."

"All right."

Ethan took her gun, tucked it into the small of her back and tightened her belt. "You need to be able to get to it if necessary. Just don't shoot yourself in the ass."

"Believe me, I'll do my very best."

"Let's go." Ethan adjusted his own NVGs and set off on the path he'd followed earlier.

The night sounds of the jungle echoed all around them—the calling of the wild animals, the cries of birds as they settled down, the beating of wings as they flew overhead. Lisa did her best to ignore them. After the first minute or so her eyes completely adjusted to the NVGs. It made seeing Ethan ahead of her a lot easier.

He stopped every few minutes to check his GPS, then started off again. They'd covered nearly two miles by Lisa's estimation when he came to a complete stop and motioned with his hand for her to stop and be silent. He pointed and through the dense foliage, Lisa could just make out the top of the concrete wall he'd mentioned earlier.

Ethan touched a thick tree with his hand and pointed up with his finger.

Lisa swallowed, nodded her head, and began to climb the tree. She thanked God for the training on the rock wall back

at Ethan's farmhouse. She'd never been fond of heights of any kind but at least the training had given her some confidence in what she was doing.

When she reached the place where a thick limb formed a crotch with the trunk, she felt Ethan's hand on her calf. Forcing herself to look down, pushing away the dizziness that any height usually caused, she saw him motion for her to stop and sit. Gingerly, she edged herself around until she could sit in the spot and waited for Ethan to follow her.

He climbed past her to another similar place just a little higher and settled himself in place.

Now she dared to look straight ahead. The concrete wall was just as Ethan had said, thick and surrounding the entire perimeter. It ran off in two directions into the jungle until she couldn't see its ends anymore. Inside the wall was a carpet of low-growing jungle vegetation split by walkways of crushed shells.

The estate house, at the end of a driveway also made of crushed shells, rose majestically in Spanish splendor. The driveway curved in front of the door and between it and the wall, water sprayed constantly from a huge fountain formed by figures of angels. Three steps led up to a wide terrace that ran across the front of the house, centered by carved wood double doors.

A man in khaki pants and shirt, a rifle slung over his shoulder, was leaning against the fountain smoking a cigarette. Another stood by the front door.

Ethan tapped Lisa on the shoulder. "We need to watch the guards, see if there's a pattern," he mouthed. "If they stay

there until someone relieves them. Or do they patrol. However they do it."

Lisa nodded.

"And keep your eyes out for two things—Jamie, and anyone familiar to you. Like Charles."

The waiting was the hardest part. Lisa marveled at how Ethan seemed to become part of the tree, as still as the bark, not even the faint movement of a leaf. He stayed in one position as if he'd been poured there from a mound of clay and left to harden.

Bugs and other tiny creatures seemed to know enough to avoid him, although Lisa could feel them crawling over her. She brushed them off with as little movement as possible when they became too bad to bear. Her muscles began to cramp after a while, and rather than try to shift position, she massaged them as best she could, afraid even the slightest movement would betray their presence.

Ethan had mentioned there would most likely be perimeter cameras or sensors. He'd scouted the area earlier and she had to trust he knew what he was doing, had figured out a safe path for them to the house. It was more and more obvious he really had done this for a number of years. She wondered if she'd ever find out the real truth about Ethan Caine.

They sat in the tree for what seemed an eternity, the only sounds those of the jungle night. Whatever words the guards exchanged didn't carry to them. The pattern seldom varied. Mostly they stood around, smoking cigarettes and talking, once in a while taking a turn around the grounds. Apparently,

out here in the middle of the jungle, they didn't expect unplanned visitors.

After a while her eyes became gritty with strain, watching for any sign at all of Jamie. Anything that would confirm his presence. They only had the word of a guerilla gang member that he was even here. What if the information was wrong? If Tonio lied just to get safe passage for himself and his family? What if everything Ethan had uncovered on his trip meant nothing and Jamie was actually half a world away right now?

No! She wouldn't let herself fall into that trap. He was here. She could feel it. Sense it. Somewhere behind that wall her child was a captive.

Were they feeding him well? Taking care of him? Abusing him in any way? Was he sick? Did he miss her? Did he think she'd abandoned him?

Stop it! Jamie's fine. And soon I'll have him back.

She finally had to move one leg, shifting it very gingerly so as not to dislodge any debris. Ethan glanced over at her but she shook her head and made the okay sign with one hand.

How did people do this for a living, she wondered? Sit for hours with almost nothing happening. How did Ethan stay so calm? She worked hard to conceal how terrified she was that they'd be discovered. Captured. Killed.

She was startled when Ethan reached down and touched the bare skin of her arm. He pointed at her, then down. Lisa nodded and maneuvered her body around to descend from the tree with a minimum of fuss and noise. When her feet touched the ground, for a moment she wasn't sure her legs

would support her, and she leaned against the tree until she felt them firm beneath her.

Ethan watched her carefully after he dropped down beside her. He raised his eyebrows in silent question and she shook her head, motioning that she was fine. He nodded, then set off back the way they'd come, Lisa following behind him.

They didn't say a word until they reached the tent, removed their NVGs and guns and took off their backpacks. Lisa bent to stretch and touch her toes, the release of tension in her muscles a relief after all those hours in one position.

Ethan unzipped the tent, sat down on the thermal sheet he'd spread out on the bottom and motioned for Lisa to join him. When she hesitated, he gave a short, unpleasant laugh.

"As close as we've been these few days, don't tell me you're afraid to sit next to me. If that's a problem, you'll have a hell of a time finding a place to sleep tonight."

"Sleep?"

"We have one tent and one thermal sheet. Take it or leave it. Now. Do you want to sit down and discuss what we learned tonight?"

They were both speaking in low tones, aware that sounds carried a great distance at night.

Lisa worried her bottom lip for a moment, sighed and sat down in the tent beside Ethan.

"Good. No fuss. Let's talk."

"But what did we find out tonight? We don't even know for sure if Jamie's in that house."

Ethan patted his shirt pocket, then made a disgusted sound. "Why did I have to pick this particular time to stop

smoking? Okay." He stretched out his legs and leaned back on his elbows. "Nothing, you say? Did you notice any of the shadows in the upstairs windows? No? Well, in one room there was a shadow considerably shorter than either of the other silhouettes I saw. Unless they have a dwarf living there, I'd say it's a safe bet there's a child in that house."

"I ... No, I ... No." *Let's hear it for the blithering idiot. And how did I miss seeing that?*

"Next. The guards changed at least six times while we were in that tree, and we never saw the same face twice. That means a minimum of twelve armed men. And we don't know if there are more in the house."

Lisa's shoulders slumped. "You're describing a hopeless situation. If Jamie's really there and it's Charles that has him, I can't imagine how we'll ever get him out."

Ever since Ethan had agreed to help her, she'd clung to the hope that he could do the impossible—find her son and safely rescue him. Now, realizing the odds they faced, with Charles a wild card in the mix, she was beginning to doubt the possibility of their success. To come so close and fail ... She crossed her arms across her knees and leaned her head on them, forcing back the tears that threatened to leak from her eyes.

She jumped when she felt Ethan's hand on her shoulder, gently massaging the muscle.

"I didn't picture you as a quitter." His voice was deep and unusually soft. "What happened to the woman who told me she'd do anything—anything—to get her son back? Who said her son means the world to her?"

Lisa drew in an erratic breath. "She didn't realize how close she'd come and maybe fail."

"I don't fail, Lisa. And what we saw tonight doesn't mean failure. It only gave us information we need to put an effective plan together."

"I guess this all seemed so unreal to me, so far away when we talked about it."

"We've only just gotten started here. And one night doesn't give us everything we need."

She jerked her head up. "You mean we have to do this again?"

"Uh huh. And I'd like to see what goes on during the day. I also need to scout this area better so we'll know how we're getting out of here when we have Jamie with us. When, Lisa. Not if."

His hand was still massaging her shoulder. Now he shifted so his legs bracketed her and both hands were easing the tension in her muscles. The feel of his hands was so soothing, like a narcotic, easing the tautness that had her strung tight as a bow.

He slid closer to her. "We're not alone. I have friends just waiting for a signal from me, waiting for me to put a plan together. We'll get him out, Lisa. I promise. And I don't make promises lightly."

She closed her eyes, soothed by the movement of his hands, the cadence of his voice. It wasn't just the last few months that she'd been carrying around like a satchel full of bricks weighting her down. Charles Mallory was in there, too, and the years of hell with him she'd somehow survived.

Redemption
by Judith Rochelle

Taking the punishment. Living like a prisoner. Suffering the abuse. Anything to keep Jamie with her. And safe.

"Lisa?" His voice was so close his breath was a warm breeze against her ear.

"Mmmm?"

She turned her head and instant desire struck her, like a visceral blow. The same heat glittered in Ethan's eyes. Their gazes locked for the space of a heartbeat. And then, somehow, she was leaning backwards, his arms around her and his mouth was seducing hers. Seducing. That was the word for it. And any protest she might have made disappeared like a wisp of smoke.

Chapter Thirteen

They were lying on the thermal sheet, her body cradled in his arms, one large hand holding her head. The sounds of the jungle were all around them and a tiny breeze carried the lush scents of the tropical underbrush. The edge of danger they'd been living on and the bewitching nature of the tropics combined to heighten the moment, pushing the real world away and enclosing them in a magical embrace.

His mouth moved over hers softly, gently. His teeth took tiny nibbles at her bottom lip then soothed it, the tip of his tongue tracing over the bite marks. He licked the inside of her bottom lip then turned his attention to the upper one.

Lisa felt as if she'd fallen down a well and was floating in the water. Ethan's tongue was like a feather drifting across the surface of her mouth, bringing each and every nerve to jolting life. She felt sensations where she didn't even know she had them. When she opened her mouth on a soft moan his tongue slipped inside as if it belonged there.

He tasted of fruit and power bars and the jungle and it was the most exhilarating taste she'd ever experienced. She wanted to roll it around in her mouth, swallow it, absorb it into her system. It was headier than the finest wine or the most expensive brandy.

She danced her tongue with his, a slow waltz to imagined music. Together. Retreat. Together. Retreat. His tongue slid across the surface of hers, teasing at it. Tantalizing. She couldn't imagine ever kissing anyone else after this.

She tried to press her mouth harder against his but he held her head captive, keeping the pressure of his mouth and tongue as light at the touch of a butterfly's wings. The sense of him permeated her body.

She had no idea how long he played with her mouth. When he lifted his head she felt a tremendous sense of loss. Opening her eyes she saw his black bottomless ones burning into hers.

"I can't make promises to you, except where Jamie's concerned." His voice was taut with emotion.

"I didn't ask for any." She heard the tremor in her own voice.

"Trust me, Lisa. I have nothing to give to anyone anymore, and what I have you don't want. Nobody would. We're just two people seduced by the jungle, hiding for a little while from what's really happening."

Lisa swallowed hard and nodded. "Right."

"Okay then."

Ethan lowered his mouth to hers again, just brushing his lips over hers. He dusted her face with the softest of kisses—her forehead, her eyelids, her nose her cheeks. Even her chin. Each touch was like a hot wire igniting her skin.

It barely registered when his warm hand closed over one breast, massaging it gently through the fabric of her t-shirt and bra. A gentle glide, just like his kisses. Somewhere in the back of her mind she realized she'd expected Ethan Caine to be an aggressive lover, harsh, demanding. But it seemed the seduction was as important to him as the act itself.

She moaned again, trying to thrust herself into his palm. One of her hands snaked around his neck and she tugged at the leather thong holding back his hair, letting it fall loose around his shoulders. She raked her fingers through it, letting it sift against her skin like the finest silk.

When his mouth closed over one nipple, suckling at it through the fabric covering it, she closed her eyes and let the feeling of warmth wash over her. Her nipples hardened as he pulled on them with a gentle tug of his teeth, and she wanted more. More. She wanted her clothing gone and nothing between them.

She was trembling in his arms as her body responded to him. Sensations Charles had never roused in her swept over her like waves of electricity. Every nerve was so sensitized she was sure somehow their protective coverings had dissolved. Her heart was beating so loudly she was sure Ethan could hear it. But then she felt the hard thump of his through the wall of chest muscle and it somehow grounded her.

The warmth of his hand as it slid under her shirt and moved over her bare skin heated her from her breasts to the apex of her thighs where her panties by now were surely soaked. A fluttering started deep inside her and called up responses she'd long ago buried.

He stroked her midriff, the roughened pads of his fingers creating a pleasant friction on her skin. With quick, deft movements he had the clasp of her bra open and shoved it and her t-shirt up around her neck. When his warm, wet mouth closed over a nipple she felt shards of lightening spark

throughout her body. Her hips began to move against him and tiny little mewling cries escaped her lips.

She slid her hands under his shirt to find the thick matted hair of his chest, twisting her fingers in the curls. The skin beneath the soft pelt was warm and hard and she couldn't stop herself from touching it everywhere.

He reached for the zipper on her jeans and she lifted her hips to accommodate him, willingly allowing him to roll them with her panties down her legs and over her feet. Then his mouth was touching her everywhere, leaving a wet trail that his breath wafted over like a hot breeze.

A soft nudge on her inner thighs and she opened her legs for him, wanting his touch, his heat, every part of him.

"Don't move." His voice was hoarse and uneven. "Stay just like that."

He rose and she watched through half-opened eyes as he stripped off his clothing, tossing it to the side with hers. In the bare flesh Ethan Caine was a magnificent animal. Every wonderful inch of him. Lisa could see what he'd been before his fall from grace and what his conditioning campaign had brought him back to.

He knelt down to unzip the large canvas bag he'd brought into the tent with them and reached in for something.

His lips turned up in a small grin when her eyes popped at what he held in his hand. "Condoms make the best coverings for gun barrels, believe it or not. Keeps out moisture and dust." His eyes held hers. "I didn't plan to use them for this, Lisa, but I'm damn glad I have them."

Then he was beside her again, on top of her, sheathed, poised. In one smooth motion he slid inside her, filling her, and a strange feeling of homecoming washed over her.

* * * *

Lisa thought they might feel awkward with each other in the morning but Ethan was so matter-of-fact she wasn't even sure the night before had actually happened. He simply went about whatever he was doing as if nothing had changed. And maybe in his mind it hadn't. A dozen times she had to stop herself from saying anything.

They had bottled water, more fruit and another power bar for breakfast, took care of personal business and washed with moist towelettes.

Finally she couldn't stand it anymore.

"Ethan."

He looked at her, his expression plainly telling her he knew what was on her mind. "Forget it, Lisa. Whatever you were about to say."

"But..."

"Don't make something out of nothing. We're under a lot of tension here. I've been there before. A little recreational sex is better than tranquilizers."

A little recreational sex? She recoiled as if he'd struck her. He turned away and went back to what he was doing. Conversation over.

Okay. I can be just as cool about it as he can. He said no strings, and that's fine with me.

But no matter how much he tried to deny it, Lisa knew inside where it counted that last night had been a lot more than what Ethan tried to make it be. They'd connected on a plane far greater than the physical one, and she was sure it was scaring the shit out of him.

Fine. Plenty of time to talk when this was all over.

Ethan sat cross-legged in the tent field-stripping and checking their guns. About midmorning, he turned on one of the satellite radios and punched in a number.

"Me," he told the person on the other end. "I'll recon the surrounding area today and check the *finca* again tonight. We don't have near enough information yet to make a move."

He listened for a moment, nodding to himself.

"We'll have to make a decision after tonight. We can't hang around here too long or someone will find us for sure. Here's the GPS coordinates of our location in case we get caught and you have to bring in the troops. I'll do regular check-ins. More later."

He shut down the phone and returned it to his backpack.

Lisa cleared her throat, the feeling of dread coiling in the pit of her stomach again. "Did you say something about us getting caught?"

Ethan's hard gaze pinned her. "On any mission there's always the possibility you'll get caught. Always. You have to set your mind for that eventuality and then do everything you can to avoid it."

Lisa rubbed her hands against her thighs. "Do you think they know we're here?"

"No. Not at the moment. But we're still scanning the area."

"I heard you say we're going back there today. Do you think it's wise to go in the daylight?"

Ethan busied himself repacking his backpack. "I said I was. Not you."

"But..."

"No buts, remember?" He stood up and shouldered the pack. "I can do this part better by myself, Lisa. It's second nature to me."

"You just want me to wait here until you either get back or get shot?"

He actually grinned at that. "Preferably the first one. But, yes, that's what I want you to do. Get out your sat radio."

She pulled it from her pack and handed it to him.

"You remember how to use this?"

She nodded.

"Fine. Here's your assignment. Once every hour, on the hour, press this button..." he pointed "...and when someone answers on the other end, just tell him we're still clear. Can you do that?"

"Of course I can do that." She huffed with impatience. "Do you think I'm some kind of moron?"

"No." His voice softened. "I think you're a very brave, very smart, very courageous woman who's been shortchanged by life. Watch my back, darlin'."

While she stood there stunned by his words and his term of affection, he leaned down and kissed her with all the passion he'd shown the night before. When he lifted his head he winked at her. "See you later."

* * * *

The day dragged interminably. Every time the minute hand hit twelve on her watch she punched the number on the sat radio. To the disembodied voice that answered she said, "Still clear."

The voice answered, "Okay," and disconnected.

In between calls she tried to pass the time with exercise, keeping her muscles loose and stretching them. Shortly after noon she treated herself to a small lunch, then went back to her stretching routine. It kept her from falling asleep.

Her ears strained constantly for sounds of Ethan, but all she heard were the howler monkeys screeching in the trees, the cacophony of the birds overhead and the beating of their wings in the trees, and occasional sounds of some animal crashing through the undergrowth. She kept her gun ready at all times to shoot anything that wandered into their clearing.

For a while, she battered her brain, trying to dissect every moment of the previous night. A kaleidoscope of feelings was running uncontrolled through her body—satisfaction, the need for more, fear that they'd crossed an invisible line and couldn't go back, amazement that a man she'd despised for so long could call up such a strong response from her.

Josh was right. Ethan Caine was a lot more than what he allowed people to see. He had been a wonderful lover, patiently arousing her, knowing how tense her body would be not only after the length of time she'd been abstinent but also because of the abuse she'd suffered from Charles. He roused her time and again, always with the same slow but passionate

seduction, always making sure to carry her over the peak and bring her to completion.

She'd laughed once at the seemingly inexhaustible supply of condoms. He'd just told her he was always prepared for anything.

He'd shown an unexpected tenderness, not with words but with actions, as well as respect for her. Not once had he made her feel cheap or embarrassed by what had happened. Then this morning he'd thrown her into a tizzy by ignoring what happened altogether and then giving her that heated kiss.

What would happen when this was all over and they were back in Florida, back to their normal lives?

Lisa laughed to herself. Normal lives? What was normal anymore?

Would they see each other again? Make love? Something more than that? Would he just crawl back into his cave, leaving her with nothing but memories?

When her head began to ache trying to think through all the possibilities, she shut off her brain by doing multiplication tables, a trick she'd learned to distance herself from Charles's humiliating treatment of her both in bed and out.

By the time several hours had passed her nerves were getting the better of her again. She kept sending the 'still clear', hoping she was right but expecting armed men to burst in on her at any minute.

And then he was back, moving as silently as he had the day before. He was soaked with sweat and his hat looked even more battered. She couldn't tell by his expression if he

had good news or bad. He took his time moving his pack, pulling off his t-shirt, mopping his face and body, drinking from a water bottle in long gulps.

"Well?" she asked at last, her patience finally at an end.

He settled himself against a tree trunk before answering her. "I have good news and bad news. Which do you want first?"

"Good news," she almost shouted. "I could use some."

"All right, but don't go crazy. Sound carries out here."

"I promise. Give."

"I saw Jamie."

She would have shouted with joy if she hadn't remembered Ethan's warning in time. "Where? How is he? Does he look hurt? Is he..."

He held up his hand. "Whoa. Let me give you the details, okay?"

She blew out a breath. "Yes. Of course. I'm sorry. It's just that..."

"I know." He drank down two more swallows of water. "He looks fine. At least physically. He was riding a bike up and down the driveway with one of the guards watching him at all times. He's wearing clean clothes and he doesn't look like he's been abused in any way."

"I'm sensing there's a 'but'."

Ethan nodded. "I don't remember the last time I saw a child look so unhappy."

"Damn!" Lisa smacked her fist against the tree trunk then shook it to relieve the sting of the pain. "He misses me. I

know it. He can't be happy cooped up with a houseful of strangers."

"Two pieces of bad news. One, I couldn't get a glimpse of who the owner of the place is. He never came out in the yard. I guess because he was having a busy day."

Lisa frowned at him. "What do you mean?"

"Cars arrived and departed all day long. Sometimes one man, sometimes two. A guard would take them inside for maybe an hour, then the next crew would arrive. Whatever business this guy is conducting he's doing it from home."

"What's the other bad news?"

"I used a nifty little piece of equipment my friend included with all this stuff to check out the perimeter. There are cameras in some of the trees but worse, the ground outside the wall is loaded with sensors. My guess is they're hooked up to an alarm system in the house."

Lisa began her nervous pacing again. "So how will we ever get inside? How will we get to Jamie? How will we even know where he is?"

"Lisa, stop." Ethan reached out a hand when she paced near him and grabbed her arm. "This isn't the first time I've done something like this. We're going to check out the routine once more tonight, then we'll be able to make a plan. And have the right equipment to help us. That's why I needed to check things out."

She yanked off her scrunchie, raked her hands through her hair and pulled it back into its pony tail. "Can we do this ourselves?"

"No. When we've got the plan put together, I'm calling my friend. He's on standby with ... some others."

She rubbed her hands up and down her arms, suddenly cold in the jungle heat. "I'm afraid, Ethan. I don't want to be but I am."

He pulled her down to sit facing him. "Only a fool isn't afraid, Lisa. Those who operate without fear are courting death. Fear keeps you on your toes and your senses sharpened."

She chewed on her bottom lip, drawing a circle in the dirt with a twig. "I just want to be able to get Jamie out of there and bring him home safely."

"And we will. That's what this is all about." He took the twig from her hand and wrapped his arms around her.

After a moment she looked up at him. "Ethan..."

As if he knew what she was about to say he shook his head. "Not now, Lisa. We have a job to do. I know you want to talk and that will take longer than five minutes. I also don't want to distract us from what we're here to do. Time enough when we're all back in Tampa."

Would that be a good talk or a bad one? She was almost afraid to find out.

Chapter Fourteen

They said very little to each other after that, eating their simple evening meal, then waiting until enough darkness had fallen to give them protection. Ethan checked their guns one more time and made sure every other piece of equipment he stuffed in his backpack was in working order. Finally he strapped on their NVGs and they were off.

The going tonight was a little easier since Ethan had been here during the daylight hours and Lisa remembered some of it from the night before. They climbed the same tree, took up the same positions, and began again to wait.

The night was incredibly still and the humidity lay on them like a blanket. The insects seemed to be worse than ever and Lisa was glad Ethan had rubbed both of them down with repellent. Tonight, knowing what lay ahead, she managed to arrange herself in a more comfortable position. Her eyes were totally focused on the compound, trying to register every tiny detail.

They'd been there a little more than an hour when they heard shouting from the house, the front door opened and a pajama-clad boy ran out into the front yard. He was screaming something at the top of his lungs and waving his arms wildly.

"Jamie." Lisa whispered the name to herself, digging her nails into her palms to keep herself from shouting it out. "Oh, Jamie, what are they doing to you?"

Then she heard a man's voice swearing in both English and Spanish. When he came striding through the open door, cursing the child, Lisa thought her heart would stop beating. Every bit of blood drained from her face and she began to shake. She'd fallen into a nightmare.

When it was just an idea it seemed so abstract. Now she was seeing the devil in the flesh and all the terror came creeping back.

Ethan hadn't moved as the tableau unfolded before them. She reached up and touched his leg.

"Charles," she mouthed at him. "My God, it's Charles. He's alive, just like I thought."

Ethan didn't answer, just touched her fingers to let her know he'd heard.

It was a different Charles than the one she'd known, at least physically—longer hair, deeper tan, a moustache. Despite that, she'd know him anywhere. You never forgot your tormenter. Or your jailer.

"Your mother is dead, do you hear me?" he shouted. "You will never see her again."

"She's not." Tears were running down Jamie's face. "She was in the restaurant. She thinks I've run away. I told you and told you. Let me go." His body was thrashing wildly. "I want to go home to my mother."

"Jamie, listen to me." Charles was trying to hold the boy still.

"No. I won't." He began beating his fists against his father's chest. "I hate you. You're mean. And you were mean

to Mommy. I don't want to live with you. And I don't want to stay in this place anymore."

Lisa bit her lip so hard she tasted blood. *Oh God oh God oh God.*

"I am your father. You will obey me. Do you understand?"

The guards were watching, unsure of what their role should be.

"No, I won't." Jamie began kicking.

"You need to learn some discipline, young man." He set Jamie down on the ground and slapped his face in one quick motion.

"No!" The cry escaped her mouth before she could stop herself.

Charles's head snapped up and he looked around. The guards held their rifles at the ready.

"What was that?" He looked at both of them. "Did you hear that?"

The guards spoke too softly to hear what was said, even as Lisa strained to listen. She was afraid to look up at Ethan, knowing the censure she'd see on his face. And well deserved. She'd done a stupid, foolish thing and endangered both of them.

"Go out and look around," Charles shouted, holding a kicking Jamie firmly under one arm. "I'll take the boy inside. Find whoever is out there and bring them to me."

Lisa's heart was beating so rapidly she was sure it would burst from her chest. As hot as the night was, the sweat trickling down her spine was like ice water. The guards would find them and this would be over. Their efforts would have all

been for nothing. And Ethan might be killed because of her stupidity.

She didn't know where she found the courage to do what she did next. She pulled off her NVGs and her backpack and stuffed them in the crotch of two branches, looked up at Ethan and whispered, "It's up to you now." Before he could stop her she dropped down out of the tree.

She could feel Ethan's anger even at this distance, but she had no choice. She pretended to be thrashing in the underbrush when the guards found her. They stared at her, stunned to find a woman alone in the jungle outside the *finca*.

"*Se habla espanol?*" one of them asked as he grabbed her arm roughly.

Lisa tried to jerk away from him but his grip was too tight. She shook her head at his words. "English. I speak English."

"And what's a *gringa* like you doing running around in the Quintana Roo? Tourists never come this deep." He looked behind and around her. "Who else is with you?"

"No one." Her throat was so dry she had to force the words. "No one," she repeated. "I'm alone."

"A *gringa* alone, wandering in the jungle at night? I don't think so." He motioned to his partner. "Esteban. Look around. See what you can find."

Esteban moved off into the foliage, slashing back and forth with the barrel of his rifle. Lisa held her breath, praying he wouldn't look up. Praying that Ethan was well-concealed.

"If its money you want, I have friends who will pay you," Lisa said. "Just don't ... hurt me. If you hurt me, no one will pay."

The guard laughed. "You think we do this for money? Ah, *senorita*, if we do not bring you back to the hacienda we will not live to spend even one peso."

"Then what do you want? I'm not hurting you." She peered toward the *finca*. "If your boss knew you were doing this he'd punish you."

The man's eyes glittered as he looked at her, his fingers tightened even more on her arm. "You will be lucky if he does not kill you himself. He does not take kindly to strangers on his territory."

At that moment Esteban came back to where they stood. "Nada, Ramon. No trace of anyone."

Lisa allowed herself a sigh of relief. *Get away, Ethan. You're our only hope.*

Esteban raked his eyes over her. "She's *muy linda*, Ramon. Perhaps we could enjoy her charm before taking her back to the *patron*."

"Are you a fool? He'd kill us both. Come on. Let's get her back to him."

"Wait." Lisa tried to drag her feet. "Where are you taking me? I'm just out here collecting plant specimens. Your boss can't complain about that." It was the first thing that came to her mind.

Both men laughed.

"Oh yes?" Esteban raised an eyebrow. "Where is your specimen bag? Your tools? A flashlight to see at night?"

Lisa just stood there, saying nothing.

"Tell that to *el patron*," Ramon said. "He'll get a good laugh out of it."

They maintained a bruising grip, one on each arm, as they half walked half dragged her through the jungle growth up to the perimeter wall, through a gate and up to the house. Lisa's heart was pounding so loud she was sure they'd hear it. Her stomach heaved at the thought of facing Charles again, but maybe being in the house would give her a chance to get to Jamie.

Help us, Ethan. I trust you. I know you can do this.

Then they were dragging her through the door and Charles Mallory, not one bit dead, stood before her, his face a mask of rage.

* * * *

Sitting in the tree while the guards manhandled Lisa was one of the hardest things Ethan had ever done. One minute he wanted to kill her, the next jump down and save her. She'd done a foolish, foolish thing, but he knew the minute she did it that it was the only thing she could do. If they were both discovered, Jamie Mallory would never leave Mexico and neither would they. She'd left everything in his hands, trusting him to find a way to get both her and her son to safety.

But a cold rage gripped him. He could only imagine what she'd face at Charles Mallory's hands.

Mallory! With the confirmation he was alive every answer fell into place. The man had been smart enough to fake his own death to get out from under the drug dealers and the IRS and give himself a fresh start. The kidnapping allowed him to

get his hands on the ten million dollars. And he had his son without the inconvenience of the mother.

No wonder he'd tried twice to have Lisa killed. She was the one stumbling block he needed to rid himself of. With her gone, no one would ever be looking for Jamie or the money. Or him. He'd be home free.

Ethan ground his teeth as he sat in the tree in total stillness, waiting for the guards to leave with Lisa. This put an entirely different slant on things. He'd need a new plan and he'd need it damn quick.

From his vantage point he saw Lisa dragged up to the door of the *finca*, and Charles confronting her before the front doors closed. He was sick at the images that flashed through his mind of what might happen to her, but he couldn't afford that kind of self-indulgence. Lisa had done what she had so he'd be free to save them all. He'd better get to it.

He gave himself an hour before finally climbing down from the tree and made his way back to the campsite. He dropped into the open tent where he and Lisa had made miraculous love the night before. And that was truly the only word for it. Even as he cursed himself for the insanity of it, he'd lost himself in her loving body, her kisses and caresses more of a healing balm than all the alcohol or pills in the world.

Ethan Caine had had many women in his life. Almost too many to count. But none had had the sweetness or goodness of Lisa Mallory, None had given of themselves with such unrestrained fervor, holding nothing back. He could still smell her scent of vanilla and jasmine, still feel the satin warmth of

her skin, still feel the heat of her body clench around him like a wet fist.

If ever a woman could reach his black soul, Lisa Mallory could do it. But he had no right to ask it. To expect it. Even to want it. He had nothing left to offer a woman like her except a ruined life.

But he could do this one last thing. He could save her and her son.

Swallowing the bile rising in his throat, he turned on the sat phone and clicked the preset button.

"Clear?" asked the deep voice on the other end.

"No, damn it. Far from it. We've got a mess and a half here."

There was a brief silence, then the voice said, "So what else is new in the life of Ethan Caine? All right, Details please."

Ethan rattled off everything he'd discovered so far, ending with the details of the night's fiasco.

"Your woman is either very brave or very stupid or both," Dino said. "Let's figure out how to do this."

* * * *

Charles Mallory sat in a high-backed leather chair, his eyes taking in every inch of Lisa as she stood before him. Ramon and Esteban still held her firmly by the arms.

"You can leave us," he told them. "She won't run away. She has no place to go. And besides, I have what she wants. Oh, and Esteban? Call Cortez and tell him to get his mangy ass down here. I don't know who's out there in the jungle—

you can be damn sure she's not here alone—and we may have use of his talents tonight."

"Si, patron."

Lisa rubbed her arms when the men released her, but she kept her back straight and her eyes firmly locked with Charles's. She would never again give him the satisfaction of seeing her cower.

"So you're alive," she said, the sight of him making her ill.

"Of course, my dear." His demeanor was arrogant. "I was far from ready to leave the mortal world. I just needed to rid myself of some ... difficulties."

"I want my son," she told him defiantly.

"He's my son, too." Charles's voice was like ice. "Believe me, if I could have gotten rid of you in time and taken him with me I would have."

"But why?" she cried. "What for? What place can he possibly have in this life you live?"

"Because he's my son," he told her in a mild voice. "I knew the minute I met you that you and I would produce an exceptional child. An heir to carry my name. After that I had no use for you."

"Then why didn't you let me go?"

He laughed, a sound so unpleasant it made her mouth go dry. "Too many reasons, my dear. You would have fought for custody of Jamie and I couldn't have that. And then you'd have hired a shark lawyer and cost me a great deal of money."

"Money you owed to a lot of not so very nice people," she pointed out. "Not to mention the IRS."

"Yes, well, things got a little dicey there at the end. That's why I had to bow out, so to speak."

Lisa's legs were threatening to give out on her but she refused to show any sign of weakness to Charles. "It certainly took you a long time to make your move."

"There were many reasons for that. I had to wait for the media circus to die down from my supposed death, make sure I was far enough removed from all the events that some stupid cop didn't get a bee in his bonnet and decide to take a closer look at the remains. Or the situation. And I needed time to build up the situation here."

"You staged the kidnapping so you could get the ten million dollars."

His smile held no warmth. "Of course. It was, after all, my money to begin with. And I needed it."

She stared at him, trying to comprehend that the man she'd been married to had been, on top of everything else, a killer. "You killed another man so you could get away. Just ... killed him."

Charles shrugged. "A pitiful bum. People like that are disposable." He leaned forward in his chair. "I'm curious. How did you find me? I spent a lot of time and money covering my tracks. People better than you haven't been able to discover where I am."

But Ethan's smarter than all of them.

"I wasn't looking for you. Just Jamie. I ... Someone I hired discovered this was where he'd been taken. I didn't know you were the one who had him until tonight."

"Amazing." He rubbed his moustache as his eyes raked her from top to bottom. "I wouldn't have believed you had it in you."

"I want to see Jamie."

His eyes widened. "I beg your pardon?"

"I want to see my son. Right now."

He shook his head. "First of all, you're in no position to make demands. Secondly, he won't want to see you."

Lisa gripped her hands together and forced herself to breathe evenly. "Because you told him I'm dead? He doesn't believe you."

"Ah. So you heard us."

"I saw how you treated him. I want to see him right this minute."

"Why don't you tell me who else was prowling the jungle out there with you? Maybe then I'll give you a few minutes with your son. There's no way you're in this by yourself."

"No one." *Please let him believe me.*

"Surely you don't think I'm gullible enough to believe you could manage all this by yourself. A name, Lisa. I want to know who came here with you. You want to see Jamie, don't you?"

But even for the chance to see her son she couldn't betray Ethan. He was the only salvation for all of them. "I told you. I'm alone."

Charles stood up so fast Lisa didn't even see him move. The blow he struck against her face rattled her brain, and she felt blood trickle onto her chin where her lip had split.

"Do you take me for a fool? Give me his name."

Redemption
by Judith Rochelle

Lisa clenched her hands into fists and tightened her body against what she knew was sure to come. "There's no one."

Smack! His hand cracked against her cheek again. And again. Forward then back. Her vision blurred and tears ran down her face. She held onto the image of Ethan's face to give her strength.

She heard Charles draw in a deep breath. "Whoever he is, he won't get away. I'll have my men out covering the entire area. They'll find whoever is out there. Then I can take care of you all at the same time." He picked up the phone on the table next to the chair where he'd been sitting. "Come take this piece of trash out of my living room. Put her in one of the rooms upstairs. And do not let her anywhere near the boy."

Shaking her head to clear her vision, Lisa saw Charles hang up the phone and turn to her. "Perhaps you need time to consider your situation, my dear. I'll be up to see you in a little while."

Lisa choked back the nausea rising in her throat. She would almost prefer a beating to what she was sure Charles had in mind.

Hurry, Ethan. Please.

Chapter Fifteen

Ethan had spent a good deal of his life sitting and waiting. Part of the job. And he'd trained himself to do it patiently, not to lose focus, to always be alert. This time he'd stupidly let what was left of his emotions get involved and his patience was wearing very thin. He'd been sitting with the phone in his hand for two hours and not handling it very well.

At least a dozen times he'd picked up the sat phone to call Dino back but then put it down. When the man had all the arrangements in place, he'd call. Dino didn't let grass grow under him.

He thought about calling Josh but what could he tell him? That Charles Mallory was alive and he, Ethan, had let Lisa fall into his dirty hands? That ought to win him a lot of points. Josh and Lisa had come to him because they trusted his ability to do this. To find out where Jamie Mallory was and get him back safely. Now look at the mess he'd created.

He never should have let Lisa talk him into bringing her along. He had, however, believed her when she said she'd go on her own, and he'd stupidly believed he could control the situation better if she was with him.

Damn, damn, damn.

He was still missing one piece of the puzzle, however. Mallory had to have some kind of help setting everything up, and at the moment he had no idea who that could be.

As he was considering the wisdom of taking another look at Mallory's compound the sat phone beeped.

"Are we set?" he asked. This was no time to bother with pleasantries.

"Done," Dino told him. "We're in the air. Hogan's driving the helicopter, Marsh and Angel are along for the ride and we've got enough firepower to hold off the entire *federales* if they happen to show up."

"How are we doing this so we don't alert Mallory? He's sure to hear the 'copter cruising overhead."

"Hogan checked the area. There's an ecotours company that does night flights over the jungle. He cranked out a magnetic sign in his little shop and slapped it on the ship. We only need to hover long enough for the drop. When he comes back he won't care who hears him."

Ethan looked at his watch. "What's your ETA?"

"Ten minutes. I figured we'd better wait until we were almost there to call you. Otherwise you'd be bugging us every other minute."

"You've got the coordinates?"

Dino chuckled. "Do you even need to ask? See you in a few."

Ethan clicked off the phone and began to make his own preparations.

* * * *

There was a bathroom adjoining the bedroom she was locked in, and Lisa took advantage of it to clean up as best she could. Her lip was badly split from Charles's blow and already puffy. One eye was closing and the other one didn't look too good.

After washing her face and hands, she took one of the towels, soaked it in cold water and held it to her face. Then she sat down on the bed and tried to figure out what her next move would be. She knew Charles would be showing up any minute, determined to extract information from her. And she also knew how he would do it.

In the last few years of their marriage, sex had not been like it was in the early years. It had become something Charles used to punish her with. Humiliate her. Debase her. Just remembering the things he did to her brought back the nausea and she had to swallow hard to fight it.

If she could just make him let her see Jamie, maybe she could come up with a plan to get the two of them out of there. She could do anything for Jamie. She had to keep remembering that.

As she was wetting the cloth again, she heard a key turn and the door to the bedroom opened. When she looked in the mirror, she saw Charles come up behind her. He dropped his hands to her shoulders and a shudder ran through her.

"I don't like hurting you, Lisa," he smirked, "but I can't have you ruining all my plans. Not when I've worked so hard and so long to put them in place."

"And what exactly are your plans, Charles? What do you do here, anyway?"

"I barter. I trade. Not unlike what I did in my other life."

She frowned. "You're a stockbroker? You manage finances?"

He laughed. "Only my own. No, my dear. It's a new world today and it requires new business plans. There are groups all

over the world eager for weapons, for whatever their cause is. Others are just as eager for drugs. I trade one for the other and make money from both parties."

She forced herself to control the feeling of revulsion that swept over her. "I see."

"Do you?" He was running his hands up and down her arms. "What is it you see, Lisa? A criminal or a businessman? A lover or ... a man you hate?"

She whirled to face him, slipping away from his touch. "What if I said I'd stay here with you? You and Jamie? We could be a family again."

His eyes glittered with hatred. "I think not. I know exactly how you feel about me. Not unlike my feelings for you. And I will never, ever let you near Jamie again. I've waited too long to get him back. He's mine and I'm keeping him. Now." He dropped his hands to her breast, pinching the nipples so painfully she cried out. "Let's talk about who's in this with you. I'll find out eventually. You know that. You can save yourself a great deal of pain by telling me now."

Lisa closed her eyes and prayed for the courage to get through this.

* * * *

As attuned as his ears were, listening for sounds, Ethan still never heard them approach. The *whap!whap!whap!* of the helicopter blades had sliced the night air ten minutes earlier, the machine hovering for brief seconds before taking off. He hoped not long enough to pique anyone's interest, but you

never knew. Since then his eyes and ears had been waiting for the sight and sound of his friends.

And then they were there, emerging silently from the jungle foliage, three figures all in black, hoods ready to pull over their heads.

Dino was in the lead. He and Ethan shook hands wordlessly, then the others moved forward.

"We'll have to find your previous position," Dino reminded him, "and take a fix from there. We brought two Thermal Vision MilCam Recons. These babies are tops for hand-held long-range reconnaissance. I didn't know how close your observation post was to the compound and I wanted to be prepared."

Angel Rodriguez opened a smaller bag he was holding and took out two items that looked like cameras locked into metal frames. "PTZ-35x140. You get great situational awareness with them without sacrificing a wide field of vision. We figured between the two types of units we could catch everything."

"They'll read through any surface or material," Marsh told him. "This way we'll get an accurate picture of how many people are in the house and where they are."

"Weapons?" Ethan asked.

Octavio Marsh dropped a canvas bag in front of him. "HK MP5s. Fires semi-automatic, three-round bursts or full auto. You can set it for whatever you want. And they're fitted with suppressors." He pulled one from the bag, clicked a magazine in place and showed Ethan the settings.

"A little fancier than what we used to use," he said.

"The better to do the job with," Marsh grinned.

"Enough chatter," Dino told them. "Let's pinpoint where we need to be and get going."

Ethan stood for just a moment, wondering how he'd ever be able to thank these friends who, at a moment's notice, had disrupted their lives to help him.

"We know," Dino said, as if reading his mind. "And you'd do the same for us."

"One last thing. Is Hogan set to extract us? I've got the SUV hidden in the bushes here but I don't think we'll get much chance to drive out of here."

"Not to worry," Angel assured him. He held up a small unit that looked like a miniature walkie talkie. "Two clicks on this and Hogan will be hovering right at this spot. All we have to do is get here."

Ethan drew in a deep breath and let it out. "All right, then. Let's do it."

They spent the next few minutes rigging their gear and outfitting themselves. Each man had the HK MP5 slung over his shoulder and an HK 9mm tucked into the waistband of his pants. They strapped on NVGs, distributed the thermal imagers, and each man buckled to his thigh a leather sheath holding a seven inch Tanto Recon knife, razor sharp. Finally, Dino handed Ethan a throat mic like he and the others were wearing. They checked to make sure the comm links were working and ran over their hand signals, so familiar from past journeys like this one.

Ready at last, they headed out toward Charles Mallory's *finca*. Ethan could only pray they were in time.

* * * *

Lisa blinked hard to clear the tears. Her right eye felt even more swollen, her lip throbbed, and Charles was exerting relentless pressure on her nipples. She knew he'd kill her in a minute, as soon as she told him what she knew, and that would leave Jamie alone with him. She'd have to withstand the torture long enough for Ethan to get there.

Hurry, Ethan.

But just as Charles opened his mouth to say something, the door to the bedroom opened again.

"Charles, Esteban said you were in here with some woman they'd found..." His voice trailed off as he took in the scene.

If Lisa felt faint before, now she was positively dizzy. Standing in the doorway, looking completely at home, was her former boss, Aaron Burke. She wasn't sure which of them was more shocked.

"Lisa?" His face paled. "My God, Charles, how the hell did she find you? And this place?"

"Aaron?" Lisa tried to process the appearance of her former mentor here in the middle of the jungle. With her supposedly dead husband. "What do you have to do with this?"

Charles snickered. "Who do you think has been helping me all these years?"

"The ransom." Suddenly it clicked into place. "The two of you set up the trust the way you did so it would be easy to get the money. No questions asked."

"And there wouldn't be any now," Aaron pointed out, "if the people we hired had shot better and you ended up dead instead of just wounded."

"Yes" Charles added. "That was a little disappointing. You are a pesky little thing, you know. You've managed to survive far more than most women would. I suppose I should admire you for that." He sighed. "Lisa, Lisa, Lisa. If only you had mourned the loss of your son and gotten on with your life."

"Aaron, I can't believe what I'm hearing." She couldn't drag her eyes away from him. His participation in all this was just too far-fetched. "Was the introduction to Charles also a setup?"

"No, that was an unexpected bonus for your husband. At least for a couple of years. He was instantly attracted to you."

"For a while, I thought, with your fine legal mind, I wouldn't need Aaron anymore. That we could be a team."

"A team?" She gaped at him.

"Unfortunately, my dear, you turned out to be an uptight prude who began to bore and irritate me."

Lisa was sure she'd fallen down a rabbit hole and ended up in Wonderland. None of this made any sense to her. But then again, when she thought about it, it made all the sense in the world. The senior partner in one of the most prestigious law firms in the South, practicing international law, would have every contact Charles needed. And was no doubt well paid for his troubles.

"You know she's not alone," Aaron said. "Someone's helping her. And not that techno geek brother of hers. He couldn't find his way to the bathroom."

A lot you know, Lisa thought. But at least they didn't know about Josh's connection to Ethan Caine.

Hurry, Ethan. Come now.

"I was just on the verge of finding out when you barged in," Charles answered. "Go on back downstairs and make sure I'm not disturbed."

"But..."

"Just get the hell out of here and let me take care of business, Aaron. Now."

"Don't fuck this up, Charles. We've worked too hard and too long to get where we are to let someone bring us down now."

"Worked hard selling drugs?" Lisa spat out. "And arms to terrorists?"

Charles backhanded her and she thought she felt her brains rattle. But it was worth it to see the look on Aaron Burke's face. Apparently he was all right with everything as long as he didn't have to face what they were really doing.

"How does she know that?" Aaron asked, his tone sharp.

"It doesn't matter. She won't be telling anyone. Now get out of here and let me finish what I started."

Aaron backed out of the room, closing the door behind him.

Charles stared down at Lisa with eyes colder than anything she'd ever seen. "And now, my dear, it's time to get down to business. Surely you don't think you can come in here, with whoever you brought, and ruin everything I've worked so hard to build up again?" He grabbed the neckline of her t-shirt and ripped it down the front. Her bra followed.

"Last chance, Lisa. I really don't want to do this."

"Yes, you do." She bit off the words. "You always liked hurting me. You just hid it well the first couple of years. Go ahead, Charles. I have nothing to tell you so you might as well kill me and get it over with."

"Oh, no. That would be too easy. But let's soften you up a little more."

She never saw the blow coming until it landed along the side of her head.

"Had enough yet? No? All right, then. Let's get down to business." His hands gripped her bare breasts and squeezed as hard as he could. She gritted her teeth against the pain and felt momentary relief when he removed his hands. But then he clenched one hand into a fist and she had no time to evade it before he punched the side of her head with great force.

Lisa closed her eyes and fainted.

* * * *

Aaron Burke strode out onto the front terrace where Ramon and Esteban were talking to two other guards.

"Did you check the area where you found her thoroughly?" he asked Ramon. "Every inch of it?"

"*Si*, *Senor* Burke. There was no one there. Not even a sign of anyone."

"That can't be right. That woman could never do this on her own. Someone's helping her and they can't be far away." A slight droning noise interrupted him. He lifted his head and looked up. "What's that?"

Redemption
by Judith Rochelle

"The night tours," Esteban told him. "A company in Playa does night flights for people with enough money. They do it every night. But don't worry. They never come anywhere near here."

"That sounds damn close to me."

"No, no, *senor*. I assure you."

"Just like you assured me no one was with that woman you brought in? Ramon, take these other two men and go back and check the area. Esteban, call up one of the other guards from the bunkhouse to stand watch here with you. And let me know if anything—anything—out of the ordinary happens. Understand?"

They all nodded and the three men set off.

Aaron Burke walked back into the house, cursing under his breath.

That damn bitch, Lisa. She'll ruin everything yet. Why the hell couldn't they have been better shots at the ransom drop? Or that ratty diner?

Chapter Sixteen

"We're here." Ethan whispered into his mic. He stopped and held out his hand, pointing. "This is the tree we did our spotting from."

They'd crept silently through the jungle, each man a stealth machine as they'd been trained to be years before. Killing machines who moved undetected at will. Tonight they would definitely need all the skills they'd acquired.

"All right." Dino. "You already know the setup. Let Marsh and Angel get up there and take a look. Then we'll pull out the thermal imagers."

Ethan and Dino stood with their guns held ready while Angel and Marsh silently climbed the tree. In less than two minutes they were down.

"He's got a sweet setup," Angel said, "but nothing we can't handle." He pulled a tiny object from his pocket that looked like a toy remote.

"What's that?" Ethan asked.

"This, my good man, will tell us where the sensors are so we can avoid them while getting closer."

"All right. We need to go over things one more time. The closer we get the less we should chance talking. Even over a closed comm circuit."

In silent whispers they reviewed the plan with all of its alternatives. Then, with Angel in the lead, they began to move slowly forward. Each time Angel's little unit found a sensor, it glowed green, and the men would move left or right

to avoid it. Aware of the cameras Ethan had spotted, they moved in a crouch to escape detection by them.

The going was slow as they zigzagged to evade the traps Mallory had laid out to protect his compound. Each sound of the night, each stirring of leaf or animal, was magnified as they moved in their stealthy approach. They were halfway to the wall when Angel held up his hand to stop. He clicked his mic twice. Enemy approaching.

And not too silently, Ethan thought, as he heard footsteps crashing through the dense foliage. The men separated, each taking cover, as they waited for the steps to get closer. In a moment, they heard cursing in fluent Spanish.

"Damn that gringo. Always giving us orders. Who the hell does he think he is?"

"*El patron's* great and good friend. And not someone we want to get on the wrong side of."

"There's no one here. Esteban and I looked pretty good. We just..."

His speech was cut off abruptly by Angel's arm around his throat. He scarcely felt the razor-sharp Tanto Recon knife as it sliced across his throat.

"Ramon?" One of the men raised his voice. "What happened? Where did you..."

Marsh wasted no time taking care of him, as Angel had done with Ramon. They lifted the bodies and carried them into the underbrush, relieving them of their rifles.

"Hey! *Mi hombres!* Where the hell are you?" The third man sounded a little frantic.

Ethan materialized in front of him. "Waiting for you to join them, *pendejo*." *Asshole*.

He placed the dead guard with the other two, wiped his knife on his pant leg and sheathed it.

Dino touched his arm and raised his eyebrows in a silent question. *More coming?*

Ethan shrugged, then shook his head. *Don't know but don't think so*, he mouthed.. *These guys were expected to do their job*.

Angel clicked his mic once. *Let's go*.

Now they were at the perimeter wall and they could see the two guards on the doorway. They pulled out the thermal imagers and began looking for heat signatures.

Dino touched Ethan's arm. "Ten live bodies in the house."

"Where's Jamie?" Ethan was just as silent.

Dino turned to Angel who pointed to an upstairs window. A small figure too tiny to be an adult was crouched in a window seat, bent over as if crying.

Ethan felt anger rise up in him.

Using their prearranged hand signals, they identified who would take out each person. Ethan would look for Lisa.

As they were preparing to breach the wall, a scream of such human agony split the night that Ethan's blood turned ice cold.

* * * *

Lisa had come back to consciousness to find herself stretched out on the bed, naked from the waist up, her hands tied above her to the headboard. Charles was staring down at

her. She looked at his eyes and a fear greater than she'd ever known crept through her.

Drugs! He was using his own merchandise. Again. Or maybe still. Cocaine. She always knew when he started using before. The signs were the same. The cruelty increased. The erratic behavior. The light of insanity in his eyes. That's when she'd begun to dread sex.

"I see the expression on your face, Lisa. Do you think I'm going to play one of our kinky games with you?" His laugh sounded like ice breaking. "Perhaps if you'd been into that, our sex life might not have been so pathetically boring. I might not have tired of you so easily."

"Then what are you going to do?" She knew the answers but asking the questions might buy her a little more time. She tried to keep the fear out of her voice. Her terror had always incited Charles to further cruelty.

"I need answers, Lisa. As I said, I can't afford any loose ends that could destroy everything it's taken me four years to rebuild. And I don't have that much time to waste. I need information now. Who's with you? Who else knows about me? About this place?"

She clamped her jaw shut, a signal to Charles that she'd say nothing.

He held up a thin, sharp knife. "Fine. Don't say I didn't give you plenty of opportunity to avoid this." He pinched one nipple between thumb and forefinger and very lightly drew the edge of the blade across it.

Lisa opened her mouth and a scream louder than a siren ripped from her throat.

* * * *

"Jesus Christ," Dino breathed. "What the hell was that?"

"That was Lisa." Ethan leaped to the top of the perimeter wall. "I'm going in."

He lifted his rifle to sight along it but before he could pull the trigger he heard two quick puffs next to him. The two guards fell where they stood, and Angel was over the wall beside him. He didn't hear Dino and Marsh but then they were there, all four of them running in a crouching position toward the house, Ethan well out in front.

Dino caught up with him and pulled on his arm. "Be careful. Use your brain."

Ethan pulled away and kept moving forward.

No one had heard the silenced shots so no one had come to check on the guards. When they reached the heavy carved doors, Ethan and Dino hit them together. Another guard was standing in the hallway, talking to a tall man in slacks and polo shirt.

"Hey!" the tall man shouted. "What the hell..."

His words were bitten off by the pressure of Dino's arm on his throat.

Ethan had the guard in a hard grip, the point of his knife pricking the skin under his chin. "Where is she?"

The guard stared at him in dread, no sound coming from his throat.

Ethan moved the knife in a line, making a thin cut along the underside of the man's jaw. "Once more, *pendejo*. Where is the woman?"

Before the man could say anything a second scream echoed through the house from above.

"Go," Dino hollered. He'd knocked out the tall man and had him immobilized with two sets of flex cuffs.

Ethan ran his knife into the guard's throat, wiped it on his pants and took the stairs two at a time. Every door on the second floor was open except one. When he tried it, he discovered it was locked and wouldn't budge. He yanked out his 9mm, shot the lock and kicked open the door.

In all his life, he hoped never to see another sight like the one that greeted him. Lisa, stripped to the waist, tied to the bed, with a rivulet of blood running from one bare breast down her rib cage into the waistband of her jeans. Her face was rigid with terror. Her last scream still echoed in the air.

Standing over her, knife in hand, was Charles Mallory. He paused with one hand on Lisa's other breast, the knife poised over it. At the sound of Ethan's entrance he spun around to face him.

Ethan Caine might have aged since his black ops days but his reflexes were still sharp. Without pausing, he pointed the 9mm at Mallory and squeezed off three shots. The first one was the kill shot, dead center in his forehead, but he added the other two for insurance.

Shoving the gun in the waistband of his pants, he pulled out the Tancro and sliced through Lisa's bonds. Her face was so white he was afraid she was going to faint and she was shaking so badly he thought her bones would break. He pulled her off the bed and cradled her in his arms.

"Ssh, darlin'. It's all right. Everything's all right now."

She tried to push away from him. "Jamie. We have to find Jamie."

"We've got the boy." Marsh appeared in the doorway. "Ethan, we have to get the hell out of here. One of the guards said *Las Tormentas* are on their way. We got everyone we could, but there's more in the bunkhouse and they heard the commotion."

"We're set," Ethan told him." He ripped a pillow case into strips and used them to bind Lisa's wounds. Then he pulled off the shirt he'd thrown on over his t-shirt, slid her arms into it and buttoned two buttons. "Darlin', I'll take better care of you when we get back to camp. Okay?"

She nodded.

Ethan heaved her over his shoulder and took off down the stairs. He heard the rapid staccato bursts of MP5s firing, guessing that Dino and Angel were backing around the side of the house. There were two bodies in the front hall and two more on the wide porch. Ethan detoured around them and kept running.

The roar of gunfire followed them. The resident guards didn't have suppressors on their weapons and the sounds were magnified in the still night of the jungle.

"Go, go, go," Marsh was yelling at him, running with Jamie over his shoulder. The child was flopping against his back, screaming for help.

Ethan covered the distance to the perimeter wall in seconds and heaved Lisa to the top. She rolled off and was waiting for Ethan when he climbed over.

Even in the danger of the moment, he had to admire her guts and strength. She'd been terrified and tortured yet she hadn't collapsed. She stood waiting for Marsh and her frightened child.

"It's all right," she yelled, when she saw Marsh breach the wall. "I can take him."

He landed beside them and Jamie held out his arms when he saw Lisa.

"Mommy! You came. I knew you weren't dead."

"You and Mommy can have a reunion later," Marsh said. "Ethan, we've got to get the hell out of here. Dino and Angel are laying down covering fire but Cortez and his men just pulled up so the game's changed. Those guys skin people alive just because they're bored. Mallory's guards are like pussycats compared to them."

"Can you run?" Ethan asked Lisa.

"I can do whatever I have to."

"All right. Come on." He grabbed her hand and they took off running, Marsh right behind them with Jamie.

Lisa ran, heedless of the pain the jarring steps caused to her bleeding breasts. The sound of men crashing through the foliage behind them was too heavy for just their small band, and she had no intention of being caught by any of Charles's people.

Before they even reached their clearing, they heard the helicopter overhead.

"Ethan?" she yelled.

"Keep going. Don't stop." He tossed a look at Marsh as they ran.

"Dino called him in when we hit the house," Marsh said as if reading his thoughts. He should be here right about..." He looked up. "...now."

They'd reached the clearing and sure enough, the helo was hovering. A ladder dangled from the open door and a man crouched, ready to help.

"Who's that?" Ethan asked.

"Angel's brother. He was visiting and decided he'd like a little excitement."

"He got that all right." Ethan boosted Lisa up to reach the ladder. "Can you grab the rung? Start climbing and don't look down. Diego will help you at the top."

"I can do it," she told him between clenched teeth.

"Good girl. Go on, now."

As soon as Lisa reached the top, Marsh began the climb, holding tightly to Jamie. Ethan could hear the firing of rifles and the soft answering sounds of the MP5s moving closer. In a moment, Dino and Angel backed into the clearing.

"Get the hell up that ladder," Dino yelled at him. "Then you can cover us."

Ethan scrambled up the ladder with more agility than he thought he still possessed. As soon as he tumbled into the cabin of the helo, he positioned himself at the door and began firing his own weapon. First Dino and then Angel made the climb. As each man reached the top, he, too, knelt and fired at the gathering mob below. Ethan saw Angel flinch as one of the bullets hit his leg but he kept on coming.

The minute he threw himself on the floor, Dino yelled "Go". Hogan pulled back on the collective and they were airborne.

Chapter Seventeen

Despite the intense pain in her breasts, Lisa cradled Jamie to her as tightly as she could. He was crying against her shoulder and her own tears ran down her cheeks onto his tousled hair. His tiny hands clutched her shirt as if he'd never let her go. She felt the same way herself.

She glanced behind her where Dino was attending to Angel's wound.

"Is it bad?" she asked.

"Nah." Angel forced a grin. "Don't worry, pretty lady. I've had much worse."

"I'm so sorry you got hurt." She tried to smile at him.

"He's a tough nut," Dino told her. "Anyway, it just scraped him. I've hurt myself worse reeling in a marlin."

Lisa hiccupped a laugh. "I don't know how to thank you. All of you. You don't even know me."

Dino gave Ethan a long look. "No, but we know this big jerk sitting next to you. We thought it would be a good idea to have him owe us one."

She felt Ethan's arm around her, his breath warm against her neck.

"We ought to take a look at those knife wounds," he told her softly.

Lisa shook her head. "I don't want Jamie to see. I can wait."

"Lisa, you've been running and climbing with two open wounds, and the front of this shirt is soaked with blood. I need to put something tighter around you"

"A-All right."

Ethan pulled thick rolls of bandages from a first aid kit but when he tried to move Jamie a little to tend to Lisa, the little boy just hung on tighter to his mother.

"Don't let go," he wailed.

"It's all right, sweetheart," she soothed. "Mr. Caine just has to wrap something around Mommy. I'm right here."

Ethan tied the wrapping in back as tightly as he dared. "I'm getting you to a doctor as soon as we land." He shook out two tablets from a container and handed them to her with a bottle of water. "Swallow these. You'll need them."

"Where are we going, anyway?" She tightened her arms around Jamie again, biting her lip against the pain from the pressure. She bent her head so Ethan wouldn't see, but he reached a hand under her chin and tipped up her face.

"I know you don't want Jamie to know you're hurt," he said in a low, soft voice. "But we *will* get you taken care of when we land."

"We're heading for Sailfish Key," Dino told her in answer to her question. "That's where Hogan's business is. From there we can go anywhere by car or boat." He reached a hand over to Lisa. "By the way, I'm Dino Brancuzzi."

He introduced the others who smiled at her in an easy manner, then went back to what they were doing.

"Who are these men?" she whispered to Ethan.

His lips twisted in a grim smile. "People who've been to hell and back with me."

"Military?" she persisted.

"You might say that." He turned away, the subject closed.

Jamie had fallen asleep on her chest, exhausted from his ordeal, and she shifted him slightly to give herself some relief. Ethan sat with his back against the wall of the copter, his legs bracketing her as they'd done the night before. There was a warm sense of comfort in their position, a feeling of security. Which was idiotic, of course. As soon as they were back in Tampa, he'd be hiding out in his farmhouse again and she'd probably never see him.

Why did she care, anyway? He was a man with his own isolationist policy. This morning she'd wanted to talk to him about what happened between them, but now she realized the futility of that. Despite the fact that she was sure in her heart something real had clicked between the two of them, Ethan would never acknowledge it. She needed to concentrate on getting her life and Jamie's back on track.

She was sure her son would need counseling. The last few months had to have been a nightmare for him. Being snatched away, finding out his father was alive. Held as a virtual prisoner miles away from anyone. She couldn't afford to indulge her own emotional needs when her son's were so much greater.

Anyway, in her heart of hearts, she had the feeling she'd forfeited the right to a happily ever after. She'd made so many unforgivable mistakes. If she could just get herself and Jamie through the next few years and he turned out to be a

normal human being that would be enough for her. She hoped.

"What about Aaron Burke?" she asked, pushing her hair out of her face. "God, that was the shock of all time."

Ethan grunted. "I left him trussed up like a pig in the hallway. Cortez may just hack him to bits to pass the time of day."

"I can't say I'm sorry about whatever happens to him. He was part of this all along."

"I like to think people get what they deserve," Ethan said in a quiet voice.

Lisa leaned back against him, Jamie cradled in her arms. She wasn't aware she'd dozed off until something startled her awake, and she realized it was the absence of noise and motion

Ethan bent his head to her ear. "We're here. Let Angel take Jamie while you climb out."

Jamie put up a mild protest but they all managed to debark without problems. Lisa climbed down onto the tarmac and looked around. To her left were two enormous hangars, to her right a row of SUVs.

"Is there a regulation you all have to drive these?" she asked Hogan.

He grinned. "Yes, ma'am. Part of the uniform."

"They'll go anywhere," Angel explained. "Sometimes the places we need to go don't exactly have roads."

She decided that was as much as she needed to know.

Ethan led her to one of the vehicles, Marsh behind her carrying Jamie. In what seemed like seconds, they were all buckled in and Ethan was pulling away from the airfield.

"I don't think I thanked them properly," she told him. "What they did ... They could all have been killed. You, too."

He shrugged. "Goes with the territory. They did me a favor. They know I'd do the same for them."

"So where to now? I'm so exhausted I think I could sleep for a year."

"There's a doctor on the Key here Hogan uses for his ... clients."

She gave him a weak grin. "Another member of your happy little band?"

He actually smiled back. "You might say so. He's got a little two-room hospital-type setup at his clinic. I want him to check both of you out."

"Oh, Ethan, I really want to go home."

He nodded. "And you will. But not until I'm sure you're both all right."

She was just too tired to fight with him. She leaned her head back and closed her eyes, vaguely aware of Ethan drawing Jamie into a conversation. The soothing sounds of their voices lulled her to sleep.

* * * *

Josh arrived on Sailfish Key within hours of Ethan's call. He'd been in a murderous rage when he learned the details of what happened. If Charles Mallory wasn't already dead, Josh would have been hell-bent on doing the job himself.

"It's a damn good thing that bastard's dead," he ground out between clenched teeth. "Otherwise, I'd be down there letting him know what it feels like when someone takes a knife to *him*."

"We're safe now," Lisa soothed. "Please. I just want to try and get past this."

Since then, he'd been dividing his time between her and Jamie. Lisa had been sleeping and recovering in one of the two airy patient bedrooms in the clinic where Ethan had taken her. Now she lay propped up on several pillows, the soft island breeze stirring the curtains at the window, the ceiling fan turning lazily overhead. Applications of ice had taken down the swelling in her eyes and cream had helped the bruises and the split lip. The danger of concussion had passed and the doctor Ethan had brought her to assured her she was mending well. Except for the pain where her knife wounds were healing, and the bruises on her face, the hellish escape from Quintana Roo was beginning to seem like a bad dream.

Dr. Keith Wardlow, tall and lanky with a thick shock of red hair, was possessed of a natural bedside manner. From the moment Ethan delivered her to his office, his demeanor was soothing and comforting. The only time she'd seen a change of expression was when Ethan told him how she'd been hurt. His jaw tightened, a muscle jumping in his cheek, and his eyes darkened with fury.

At the moment he was changing her dressings again.

"I've been here for three days," she pointed out. "I'm doing much better. Don't you think it's time for me to leave?"

"You're healing nicely," he told her as he spread more antibiotic cream on her wounds. He'd loaded her with antibiotics the minute he examined her and kept her wounds medicated with the cream.

"The pain isn't quite as bad as it was," she told him.

"That's always a good sign. Of course, I've been keeping you pretty well sedated, too."

"So," she prompted, "back to my question. When can I leave? I can't stay in bed forever, you know. And where's my son today?"

"I believe Ethan and your brother took him fishing."

Lisa jerked up in bed. "Fishing? Ethan Caine took a child fishing?" She shook her head. "It's funny. I would have thought he'd have been out of here as soon as Josh arrived."

Keith laughed. "I know what you mean about Ethan. I've never seen him as someone particularly fond of kids." He shook his head. "Strange."

Lisa had to agree. Ethan, the last person in the world she would have expected to relate to kids, had formed some kind of bond with Jamie. She'd been more than amazed that her son had allowed himself to be sidetracked while she was tended to, expecting a real emotional crisis. But Ethan and Josh had managed to keep him occupied and distracted.

Keith cleared his throat. "I just wanted to say I'm happy Ethan was able to get you out before any worse damage was done. To either you or your son."

Lisa shifted her eyes to the window, staring out at nothing. "Yes, I owe him a lot."

"I've known Ethan a good many years. He's given up a lot of his life to help others and it's scarred him. But I think the right person could help him heal."

A brief flash of some deep emotion wracked her. "That's a noble thought, Keith, but I'm probably not that person. I know Ethan would agree with me."

"Yes. Well. We're not always the best judge of our own lives, are we?"

"Not to be rude, but I think Ethan's business and mine is concluded. Lord." She leaned back on her pillows. "I'm sure he'll be glad to wash his hands of us once and for all. So. What about it?" she pushed. "Can I leave?"

He sighed. "I'd like you to stay at least two more days, but I know you're anxious to get back to your life. I told Ethan and your brother they could probably spring you loose tomorrow. I guess Hogan's flying you all up in the helo."

She grinned. "Jamie will love that. It's all he's talked about since we landed. But I'm glad. At least it took his mind off everything else."

"Yes. Well." He turned toward the door. "I'll tell Ethan when he gets back to make the final arrangements."

And then what? Lisa wondered.

She'd hardly seen him since the night they'd arrived. Helping Josh with Jamie gave him a perfect excuse to avoid her except for the most perfunctory of visits. Twice a day, he stopped in to check on her, then made himself scarce. At night he seemed to disappear altogether. His actions made it plain he was pulling away from her. Lisa forced herself not to show her disappointment or to ask where he was.

Ethan Caine was the last man she'd ever expected to form a bond with, yet there he was, sitting in a corner of her heart. And her soul. What the hell was she supposed to do?

* * * *

Ethan drove them home from the private airfield where they landed outside of Tampa. Lisa had seldom been so glad to see any place as she was her house. She continued to be amazed at the way Jamie seemed to adjust in such a short time. Keith had told her he was a very resilient young boy, but it also had a lot to do with the way Ethan and Josh handled him during the days she was in bed and healing.

Ethan again.

He didn't get out of the car in her driveway, just waited until they'd all piled out. When Lisa realized he was still sitting in the SUV, she walked back over to the driver's side window.

"Won't you come in for a while? Have a celebration drink with us?"

He shook his head. "No, you need to be by yourselves. As a family. I'll just head on home."

"We wouldn't still be a family if it weren't for you," she protested.

"I'm just glad everything turned out okay. I've still got all the stuff from your purse at the house. I'll send it along to Josh." He took his battered hat off his head and handed it to her. "Give this to Jamie, will you? He begged for it the whole time at Sailfish Key."

"Give it to him yourself,"

"No. Better if it comes from you. He can keep it as a souvenir of his great adventure."

Lisa snorted. "Yeah. Great adventure. I hope he never has another one like that. Ethan, I'll never be able to thank you enough. We owe you so much."

He shook his head. "You don't owe me anything. I told you. Josh is my friend."

"I hope I'm your friend, too." Lisa looked down at her feet. "Or maybe even a little bit more."

Ethan was silent for so long she finally raised her eyes to his face, wondering what she'd see. Something undecipherable flashed in his deep black eyes.

"Ethan, I..."

"You don't want what's left of me, Lisa. Believe me. Finding Jamie and bringing him home helped me put some demons to rest, but there are still too many fighting for my soul."

"Maybe I could help you battle them." She was searching for something, anything, but she couldn't seem to find the right words to make him stay.

"I don't think so." He looked at her for a long time as if memorizing every inch of her before he put the car in reverse. "Have a good life, Lisa. You deserve it."

And then he was gone, leaving her standing in the driveway feeling as if part of her had disappeared.

"Did Ethan leave?" Josh asked as she entered the house.

"Yes. I asked him to come in but he said no." She turned away, afraid of what Josh would see on her face.

But he was busy getting out a celebratory bottle of wine. "Yeah, that's Ethan. He'll go back to the farmhouse and hole up again." He carefully filled two wine goblets. "Too bad. I was hoping something about this trip would nudge him out of hiding but I guess he's just too comfortable being alone."

"I think Ethan's crafted a life for himself that has no room for anyone else."

Something about her tone of voice made Josh lift his head. "Did the two of you have problems on this trip? I know Ethan can be a pain in the ass sometimes..."

"No. Nothing. He was beyond wonderful." She picked up her wine and forced a smile. "To happy endings."

"Happy endings," Josh agreed, and they clinked glasses.

But this isn't the ending I wanted.

She sipped at her wine but it did nothing to ease the sharp ache in her heart.

In the days that followed, Lisa ruthlessly disciplined herself to forget about Ethan Caine and get her life back in order. The first thing she did was meet with her two law partners who'd been handling the entire case load while she tried to keep her life from disintegrating. She was more grateful than she could express for their support through her entire ordeal.

"You do so much for everyone else, Lisa," Joe Giamato told her. "We were glad to be able to do something for you."

"Yes," Sally Atkins agreed. "And don't think you have to plunge right back into a full schedule." She squeezed Lisa's hand. "Take some time with Jamie. And for yourself. You've earned it."

When she left the office, she had tears of thankfulness in her eyes, grateful to have such good friends.

She held her breath waiting for news out of Quintana Roo, but as the days went by with no word of any kind she began to relax. She was surprised no one seemed to be looking for Aaron but maybe he'd set himself up to be out of pocket.

Maybe the bodies would rot before anyone found them, she thought, and by that time no one would connect her with Charles again. The story of the kidnapping had long ago disappeared from news coverage so there was no notice of the fact that Jamie was safely at home again, for which Lisa thanked God. They were finally able to exist in relative anonymity.

Lisa still battled nightmares, waking up in a cold sweat, shaking, seeing Charles standing over her and feeling the sharp edge of the knife. Her wounds had healed physically but she knew the mental and emotional ones would take a long time to disappear.

She insisted that Jamie have some kind of counseling. He was adjusting to life at home again, his three months of terror fading. But Lisa knew it was important for him to talk everything out and deal with it if he were ever to go back to being the normal happy boy he'd been. One of the therapists her law practice used was a woman with many years experience in treating traumatized children. Jamie's sessions with her seemed to be going well.

Josh was a constant presence in their lives, providing the solid grounding they needed and she thought she was almost ready to rejoin her law partners. But there was one glaring

absence she couldn't ignore. No matter how many times she stared at the telephone, Ethan didn't call.

Not that she expected him to. He'd avoided her as much as possible at Sailfish Key, and told her how it was in straight talk when he drove her home. And now that everyone was back safe in Tampa, he'd crawled back into the hole she'd pulled him out of and blocked out everyone and everything.

But damn it! Those kisses they'd shared, that one night together were more than just playacting or—what did he call it?—recreational sex. He could deny it all he wanted to, but she knew he felt it as much as she did. And it scared him, just like it scared her.

So she just kept hoping. And waiting.

"How's Ethan doing?" she asked Josh one night when they were having dinner together.

Josh looked at her with a strange expression. "About the same as always, I'd say. Ethan is Ethan. Although..."

He hesitated.

"Although what?" she prodded.

"I don't know." He put down his fork and looked at her. "Something. I can't put my finger on it. He just seems very ... sad."

"Sad?" Lisa cocked her head. "What do you mean?"

"I've known him a long time and seen him in a lot of moods, but never like this. This time I get the feeling he's just withdrawn from everything." He frowned. "I expected to see the old Ethan back. You know, going to seed and telling the world to go to hell."

"And he's not?"

"Oh, he's still telling the world to go to hell. But he spends most of his time working out as if he's training for a triathlon. Or working the devil out of his system. I can't figure out which."

Lisa chewed over what Josh had said and despite her misgivings, gathered her courage and made one desperate effort to see Ethan that turned out badly. After calling and leaving several messages on his answering machine, none of which he answered, she drove out to the farmhouse early one afternoon. Luckily he was sitting on the porch and couldn't escape without being outright rude, although Lisa didn't think that would bother him one bit.

He was reverting to the old Ethan. His beard was growing out again, he was wearing one of his usual unkempt t-shirts and he was back to drinking beer.

She climbed up onto the porch, sat down in the rocking chair next to him and just stared at him.

"Do I have a bug on my face?" he asked at last.

"No. I was just searching for some clue as to how you could walk away from me the way you did."

He took a long swallow from the bottle of beer he was holding. "I didn't walk away, Lisa. The job was finished. We were finished. End of story."

"Tell me what we shared in Mexico was nothing more than relieving tension. Go ahead."

He tilted his head back. "What we shared in Mexico was nothing more than tension-relieving sex. Don't mistake it for some big romance."

"Liar," she rapped out. "I'm not the most experienced person in the world, but I know when something is more than just sex."

Ethan sighed. "Lisa, you have a life. Go back to it. I'm nothing but a ruined hulk of a man with a soul so damaged there's nothing to repair it. I'd only be poison for you."

"Jamie wears your hat all the time," she said, changing the subject. "It's miles too big for him but he won't let go of it. Josh finally stuffed the headband so it wouldn't fall off."

"Good. I'm glad. I couldn't think of anyone I'd rather give it to."

They rocked in silence for another moment.

"Damn it, Ethan, I won't let you do this." She slammed her fist on the arm of the rocker.

"Do what, Lisa? I'm not doing anything."

"That's the trouble." She could feel the anger rising in her. "You'll just ignore what happened, not even give us a chance to see if we have something together. For the future. You can tell me it wasn't more than hot sex all you want, but we both know that's not the truth."

He turned his bottomless black eyes toward her. "You have a future. I don't. I just have one day after another." He finished his beer and stood up. "Go home, Lisa. And stay there."

He walked into the house, leaving her behind with nothing but an empty feeling.

Chapter Eighteen

If Lisa thought she was done with her fifteen minutes of fame she was very much mistaken. Reality landed with a bang when Josh showed up on her doorstep at six thirty in the morning waving a copy of *The Tampa Tribune*.

"God, Josh." She pushed her hair out of her face and rubbed her eyes. "Don't you know some people are asleep at this hour?"

"Yeah? Well, they better wake up before the circus starts."

"What are you talking about?"

He brushed past her and headed for her kitchen. He flipped on the switch of the coffeemaker he knew she'd set up the night before and took two mugs from the cupboard.

"Josh? Joshua Taylor." She planted herself next to him, hands on hips, eyes blazing. "Are you going to tell me just what in the hell is going on?"

He leaned against the counter while the coffee maker dripped, hands folded, one leg crossed over the other. Tension lined his face. "Aaron Burke's body's been found."

Lisa's eyes widened. "His body? He was alive when we left him."

"Yeah, well, I guess not for much longer after that. Some eco-nuts wandering around in the jungle got lost and stumbled on Charles's compound. Thinking they could get directions and maybe some water, they were greeted by a site not usually included in tour books."

She drew in a quick breath. "It's taken this long for someone to find the bodies?"

"Word has it that some of Charles's 'business associates' visited the house but they certainly aren't the type to go running to the law. They probably just wrote him off and went looking for new business connections."

Lisa tried to wipe from her mind the image of the bloodbath they'd left behind. "I thought maybe one of the surviving guards might have reported what happened."

"Are you kidding? They hightailed it out of there along with Las Tormentas. I'm sure none them wanted to risk a run-in with the *federales*. So the bodies just lay there rotting until the poor dumb tourists found them."

The coffee was ready. He filled the mugs, handed one to Lisa and motioned her to sit down with him at the table.

"And what about Aaron?"

"According to the reports he'd been tortured before he died. Badly."

Lisa closed her eyes and swallowed back the nausea clawing its way up her throat. She could just imagine what Cortez and his men had done, in an effort to get information about the disaster that greeted them.

"What else?"

"Well." Josh took a swallow of coffee. "Of course, every law and alphabet agency in the world landed on the *finca*. They had more people than animals crawling around the Quintana Roo for quite a while. Big jurisdictional dispute over who got what papers and records." Josh laughed. "No one seems too interested in who did the killing, though."

Lisa cupped her hands around the mug as if seeking warmth. "Do-Do they know anything about Jamie? Or me?"

"Not Jamie. Charles kept him hidden so no one ever saw him except the guards, who aren't talking. Cortez and his thugs have disappeared from view. Unfortunately, though, you're number one on everybody's hit parade right now."

"Why?" She gripped the mug harder to keep her hands from shaking. "I can't tell them anything."

"Doesn't matter." Josh had finished his coffee and got up to refill his mug. "The Tampa cops are re-opening the file on Charles's death. And the shit on Aaron Burke's involvement is fodder for all kinds of speculation. You're Charles's widow. Twice. And you worked with Aaron Burke. The connection's too juicy to pass up."

He opened the newspaper he'd brought in with him and slid it over in front of her.

Lisa felt her heart stumble and her stomach lurch as her eyes caught the picture on the front page—Aaron, Charles, and herself. The headline was the worst. *Was Lisa Mallory part of an unholy triangle?* And beneath it *How deep was the so-called widow into guns and drugs?*

"Oh, God. God, God, God." She covered her face with her hands, hoping when she took them away she'd find out she'd been imagining things. Would the horrible ordeal never end?

She closed her eyes and leaned back in the chair, sure she was about to faint. In a moment, she felt Josh's hands pressing a cold cloth to her face.

"Breathe, sis. Deep breaths." He shoved her head down between her knees.

She kept it there until the spots disappeared from in front of her eyes. When she sat up again she held the cloth to her cheeks. "God, Josh. Where do they get their ideas?"

"Speculation. You know that. Whatever sells papers."

Her eyes filled with tears for the first time in weeks. "I'm just beginning to get my life back together."

"Aaron Burke was a larger-than-life person in this town. For him to be mixed up in something this bizarre will be front page news for a long time, and the reporters will dig for every angle."

"Mommy?"

Lisa jerked herself upright as Jamie's voice floated into the kitchen. In a moment, she heard his thumping steps as he did his leaping descent to the front hall. She reached over and flipped the paper closed, then grabbed Josh's hand, her nails digging into his skin.

"I can't let this touch him," she whispered. "What am I going to do?"

"I'll take care of it. Just keep taking deep breaths."

"Hi, Mommy." Jamie leaped into her arms and squeezed her in a hug. "Why are you up so early? And why is Uncle Josh here?"

"I decided to come for a cup of coffee, sport," Josh said.

Jamie bounced into his uncle's lap. "Can we go get ice cream today?"

Josh laughed in spite of the situation. "He seems to be recovering without any ill effects."

"Yes, and I'd like to keep it that way."

Josh set Jamie on his feet. "Ice cream, huh? I'll do better than that. I have to do some work from home for a few days. How would you like to come and be my assistant?"

Jamie's eyes widened. "Oh, wow! Yeah!" Then his face fell. He turned to Lisa. "What about school? Can I miss a couple of days, Mom? Please? Uncle Josh teaches me stuff."

Even Lisa had to laugh at that. "I can imagine what he teaches you. But I think we can break a few rules. Good boys deserve special treats."

"Thanks, Mommy." He gave her a hug and a sloppy kiss.

"Go upstairs and get dressed. Brush your teeth. I'll come help you pack in a minute."

She was more than grateful to Josh for his temporary solution.

He also insisted on getting her a top notch attorney. "You know the cops will come calling," he pointed out. "Don't talk to anyone until you have representation. I'll get you the best person."

"A lawyer?" She was stunned. "What for?"

"Because they'll zero in on you and your involvement, so to speak, with both men."

She threw up her hands. "But that's absurd."

"I know, but what is, is."

Josh was right. She'd barely finished her first cup of coffee before her phone began ringing off the hook and people were at her door.

"Call your office and tell them you're not coming back yet," Josh told her, switching off both the telephone and the

answering machine, "Explain the situation and don't answer your phone. I'll call your cell if I want you."

Lisa almost cried to see Jamie walking away from her just when she'd found him but she knew it would be impossible to keep him safe and sheltered at home.

The assault continued. For the next few days, she felt as if she was under siege. Her partners were, once again, more understanding than she had a right to expect. And when they began to be bombarded with calls from the police, the media, and Burke, Rivas and Doyle they brought in a hired gun to monitor calls and chase unwelcome pests away.

Josh continued to keep Jamie at his house and stayed away from Lisa, unwilling to put himself or the boy on the media's radar. When reporters somehow obtained Lisa's cell phone number, he bought her a new one under his name. She used it to stay in touch with people she needed to talk to.

True to his word, Josh hired Bart D'Amico, a top criminal attorney who took charge at once. His control of the situation gave Lisa her first sense of security since the news broke. She was only too willing to follow his instructions to the letter. He was like a pit bull, growling through every interview with the police. He also met with the remaining partners at Burke, Rivas and Doyle. No one knew what was said but after that, the phone calls from them stopped.

But she felt like a prisoner in her own home. All the stories from Charles's death and the shocking aftermath, the coverage of Jamie's kidnapping, were recycled and became instant fodder for a scandal-hungry public. The media camped out in the street in front of her house twenty-four/seven,

gathering like sharks smelling blood in the water. The stories of Charles's 'death' four years earlier surfaced again as well as those about Jamie's kidnapping.

"What if they find out about Ethan and me?" she asked Josh, her voice thick with desperation. "Our trip to Mexico? And the details of the kidnapping?"

"Not to worry. Ethan's buried the details so deep even someone who knows about it can't find them."

But she did worry, every minute of every day.

Reporters and photographers dogged her whenever she had to leave the house to answer a summons from the frustrated police or some mysterious agency. Bart managed to get a restraining order against them, ordering them to stay at least fifty feet away from her at all times. But Lisa saw it as a hollow victory because they didn't actually leave. They simply backed away and lay in wait, monitoring her in shifts.

She stopped going to the grocery store, relying on Bart to get food to her. She couldn't stand to watch television and nothing she did helped to distract her. She was sure she was slowly going mad.

"I can't do this anymore," she told Josh on the phone. "My life is not my own. I hardly sleep and when I do, I have terrible nightmares. Will it ever end?"

"I've been thinking," he told her. "You need to get out of there. Bart can handle the cops. They've squeezed every drop of blood out of you they can anyway. And the media will give up if they can't get even a sniff of you."

"How can I possibly get away without the vultures all over me?" she cried. "And where would I go? I can't invade

someone else's life. Or subject anyone to this ... this absurd spectacle."

"I have an idea. Let me get back to you."

Two hours later, he called. "Leave the back door unlocked tonight and all the lights out in the house," he told her. "Let the media think you've gone to bed. I've got someone who'll sneak you out of there and pulverize anyone who gets in the way if necessary. But if we do this as slick as I think we can, no one will even know you're gone."

"What? Who? What's happening?" Her brain was trying to absorb what he was saying.

"Do you trust me?" he asked.

"Yes. Of course."

"Then just put on something dark and easy to move in. Pack nothing. You can buy whatever you need."

"Where am I going?" She was pacing, the old habit having returned.

"Just be ready sometime after ten o'clock. That's all you need to know right now."

In the early evening, Lisa showered and dressed in black jeans and a long sleeved black shirt. She pulled her hair into a pony tail and found an old black baseball cap Josh had left one time. She choked down part of a sandwich, cleaned up the kitchen, turned out all the lights and sat down to wait. The only light in the house came in the windows obliquely from the street lamp just outside.

Time dragged until she thought she'd go crazy. At least a dozen times she picked up the cell phone to call Josh, then

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put it down again. He'd said to trust him. He'd taken care of her thus far. She couldn't start questioning him now.

The LED on the microwave clock read five after ten when she heard the faint click of the latch at the back door and the creak it made when it opened. She sat frozen at the kitchen table, wondering who in the hell Josh had sent to spirit her away.

In a moment, a large figure, outlined by the filtered street light, filled her doorway and she felt her heart turn over.

"I understand you need a little help getting out of here."

Ethan's warm, deep voice wrapped itself around her like a comforter. Without thinking, she leaped up from the chair and threw herself into his arms.

Chapter Nineteen

Lisa had never been so glad to see another human being in her life. The tears she hadn't allowed herself to shed through the entire nasty business poured from her eyes and ran down her face. She leaned into Ethan's chest, soaking his shirt, her shoulders heaving, her body shaking with the release of tension. His arms held her to his body, his big hands rubbing her back in a soothing motion.

At last she lifted her head and gave him a watery smile. "Just what you were waiting for, right? A weepy woman blubbering all over you."

His mouth crooked up in a faint grin. "Save me from washing the shirt. Here." He pulled a folded white handkerchief from his pocket and handed it to her.

Lisa took it and mopped her face with it, then blew her nose. "I'll wash it for you before I give it back," she promised in a tremulous voice.

"Don't worry about it."

"Oh, Ethan. Everything's such a mess. My life is a nightmare and I feel like I'm going crazy."

"I know." He put his hands on her shoulders and moved her a step away from him, his eyes studying her face. "You look like hell."

She gave a shaky laugh. "You sure know how to flatter a girl."

He pulled her back into his arms, holding her as if he'd never let her go. "Lisa, Lisa, Lisa. What am I going to do? No matter what I did, I couldn't get you out of my mind."

Lisa's heart skipped. Coming from Ethan that was quite an admission. "I've thought about you, too."

He looked down at her face. "We have to talk, but not until I get you out of here. This garbage you're going through is just so much bullshit. Got your purse?"

She nodded.

"Come on, then."

Dressed in black as they both were it was easy for them to blend into the night. With Bart's restraining order in place, they were able to move through her back yard and her neighbor's until they reached the street in the next block. Ethan pulled her against his side and they walked with his arm tightly around her, two lovers out for an evening stroll. In the middle of the block, away from street lights, a familiar black SUV sat waiting, and in seconds they were pulling away from the curb.

Lisa leaned back against the seat and let out a breath of relief. "You don't know how glad I am to see you. When Josh told me someone was coming to get me, you were the last person I expected to show up."

"Yeah, well, a week ago I would have said the same thing." He reached over and took her hand. "Your brother doesn't mince words when he has something to say."

Lisa gave a weak laugh. "Don't I know it. So what did he say that got you here tonight?"

"Later. After we get where we're going."

They drove in silence through the quiet streets of North Tampa. Lisa studied him, noticing that he was cleanly shaven once again, his hair was pulled back in a neat pony tail and what she could see of his black shirt actually looked clean. Her heart tripped. Were these all signs of something? Did the fact he'd come for her himself mean he'd changed his mind about them? She hardly dared to let herself hope. At least for the moment, they were together. Maybe for as long as this lasted, she could figure out a way to make him take a different look at the way things were between them.

They took Interstate 275 through downtown Tampa and crossed Tampa Bay on the Howard Frankland Bridge, passing through St. Petersburg to the beach area. Ethan held her hand throughout the entire ride.

A sign, she prayed. Please let it be a sign.

A hundred thoughts rattled through Lisa's brain. She had so many questions she wanted to ask, but for the moment, she was just grateful to be free from the prison her house had become and sitting close to Ethan. Eventually they pulled into a marina not unlike the one in Cancun.

A man—another of Ethan's silent guardians, she guessed—met them at the gate and the two shook hands. "You're all set," he told them.

Ethan nodded and led Lisa along the pier to a berth where a sleek cabin cruiser rode gently on the water. He jumped onto the deck, then reached out a hand to help her come aboard.

"Something from another friend?" she asked.

He shook his head. "Mine, as a matter of fact. I keep it for when I can't stand being on land." He moved forward to the bridge and motioned for Lisa to join him. "Come sit up here with me until we get where we're going. Then we'll talk. Okay?"

She nodded.

The man had followed them and now cast off the ropes holding the cruiser in place. Ethan turned on the engines and the running lights and they moved slowly out into the Gulf of Mexico. Lisa watched him silently, drinking in the sight of him, storing up images in case this was only temporary.

They'd been chugging along on the calm waters for about half an hour when Ethan pulled into a quiet cove, killed the engines and dropped the anchor. When the boat was secured, he turned to Lisa and pulled her into his arms with a hug she was sure would break her ribs. His kiss was just as ferocious, devouring her mouth, invading it, his tongue like a live wire scorching the sensitive insides of her lips.

Lisa clung to him like a drowning person, pressing herself to him as hard as she could. She wanted his heat, his strength, his ... everything. She wanted to beg him never to leave her. But Ethan had the lead now; she'd wait to hear what he had to say.

At length the kiss broke and he cradled her against him, the feel of his hard body like a sanctuary. The familiar touch of his hands wiped away the fear and anxiety she'd been living with every day. If she never moved from this place, this position, she'd be happy.

"Lisa." His voice was gentle but firm.

Her stomach knotted. Would she hate what he had to say? Surely he wouldn't go through this elaborate scheme just to give her another farewell speech.

He led her to the bench on one side of the bow. When he picked her up and cuddled her in his lap she began to breathe a little easier.

He cleared his throat. "This is hard for me to get out, so just let me say it all before you interrupt, okay?"

She nodded and pressed her head against his shoulder.

"I've lived alone a long time. By choice. My life hasn't been full of what you'd call sunshine and blue skies. Far from it. I did and saw things that made me want to run away from the world."

"You did that pretty well for a long time," she pointed out.

"Yeah, but it doesn't always help. There's no expiration date on bad dreams, or the solid grip they have on you."

"Don't you think I know that?" she challenged. "You have no idea how many nights I'd close my eyes and all I'd see is Charles Mallory."

He hugged her a little tighter, rubbing her back with his big palm. "I know that. So I know you understand what I go through. But I really didn't think you needed someone else's nightmares blended with your own."

"Shouldn't that be my decision as well?" A spark of anger rippled through her.

"Maybe so," he went on. "But you've had all these years of hell, and you deserve a good man, the best man available. Someone who can bring light and sunshine into your life after all the darkness you've lived through. I wasn't sure I could do

that. I've lived so long in darkness myself I didn't want to suck you down into it with me." He shifted her slightly so he could look into her face. "Then Josh came out and read me the riot act."

She leaned her head back and cocked a quizzical eyebrow at him. "Josh? My brother Josh?"

"Uh huh. In spades. Said he was tired of sitting by while the two of us ruined our lives for no good reason. Told me I owed you the right to make that choice for yourself. I guess he's about the only person who could look me in the eye and see what's going on. What I really feel."

"And how *do* you feel?" She looked down at her hands, almost afraid to hear the answer.

"That's a question it took me a long time to answer." He absently stroked her hair. "Remember when you asked me why I agreed to help you find Jamie and bring him home? I ducked the answer then because it sounded so self-serving."

Lisa started to say something but thought better of it.

"I had some convoluted notion that if I could save your child I could save myself, redeem the soul I thought I'd lost. Maybe find some of those dead ideals." He shifted her on his lap so his lips were against her forehead and he feathered light kisses across her skin.

"I know," she began, but he pressed a finger to her lips.

"But it did make a difference. Helping you, rescuing him—that gave me the first good feeling I've had in a long time.

"What you did, Ethan..." She struggled for words "...saving Jamie—and me—had to balance out a lot of the nightmares

for you. Maybe there were people you couldn't save before, but this time you did. That counts for a lot."

"Since that night in the tent—since we've been back—I've done nothing but fight the way I feel about you. You were right when you said it was more than a physical exercise. And even though for the first time in many years I felt like I belonged to the human race, I didn't think I had the right to bring anyone into the mess that was my life."

"I'll tell you again, that isn't only your choice."

"Your brother made me see that, too. He could sense what was going on with me. Josh has always been able to dig out my secrets better than anyone else. He told me I finally had a chance to catch the brass ring and I was a damn fool to throw something away without even talking to you about it first." He smiled down at her. "But someone else made a better argument."

"Someone else?" Lisa frowned. "Who?"

"A young man who told me he and his mother really need someone to look after them. They seem to keep getting into trouble on their own."

Lisa's jaw dropped. "Jamie? Where did you see Jamie?"

One corner of his mouth turned up in a grin. "Josh has been bringing him out to the farmhouse a lot. He's a very bright young man, that son of yours."

She laughed. "I think so, but then I'm his mother."

"Besides, I didn't know how else to get my hat back." Ethan's faced sobered. "Josh told me he's also been asking if there's any way to change his name from Mallory. Said he didn't want to be related to anyone who was so bad to him

and his mother. Serious, adult thoughts for someone so young."

Lisa's throat closed and tears choked her. "I didn't realize ... God. Charles must have really done a number on him. What did you tell him?"

"I told him I had a solution and if he agreed with it, I'd talk it over with you."

"And what's that?"

Ethan turned her face so his eyes held hers, keeping nothing from her, seeking answers to unspoken questions. "I still wonder if I have the right to ask you this, but I swear, if you say yes, I'll spend the rest of my life doing my very best to make you happy. Marry me, Lisa. Let me adopt Jamie." His voice was stiff with tension, his body tense as if braced for her rejection. "I love you, you know. I'm such a damn fool I was willing to throw it away to save you." He shook his head. "But whatever I've got to give is yours. If you're willing to take a chance on me."

Lisa was so stunned she couldn't find her voice.

"Hey, if I'm rushing things just let me know." Ethan sounded unsure of himself, a strange condition for him. "I can..."

The tears broke loose again and ran down her face, and she swiped at them with the back of her hand. She looked into his eyes and saw years of pain branded there. But she also saw something else. Hope. Hope for a new start to a new life. With her and Jamie.

"Oh, Ethan." Her own voice was none too steady. "I'll take whatever you can give me. I love you and I want to be with

you. I'm no prize package, either. I still have my own nightmares that won't seem to leave me. But we can help each other, can't we?"

He kissed her, just a soft touch of his lips to hers, and she could feel the heavy beat of his heart thumping against her.

"So is that a yes?" His voice still held a touch of uncertainty.

Lisa threw her arms around his neck and hugged him tightly. "Yes. Yes, yes, yes."

He let out a huge sigh of relief. "All right then. Josh is bringing Jamie here tomorrow. I thought we'd cruise around for a few days to interesting places. Let Bart handle things in Tampa until the media circus dies down. Get married along the way. What do you think?"

"I think that's the best idea I've heard in a long time."

The kiss he gave her then was one full of passion and promise. "That's tomorrow. Right now I've got other things on my mind."

"Oh, you do? I'll bet I can guess what they are."

He put his mouth to her ear, his breath warm against the skin. "I have a great big king-sized bed on this boat. I thought maybe we could start our celebration down there."

"That's the best idea you've had yet," she told him.

"All right, then." He lifted her in his arms. "Let's go start the rest of our lives right now."

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A word about the author...

It seems all my life I've been making up stories in my head, waiting for the time I could write them down. All my life experiences have added to the cartons of ideas stored in my head. I was the first female sports reporter on a college newspaper, managed rock bands and country singers, worked in retail, worked for newspapers, worked in public relations for two universities. Now I live in the beautiful Texas Hill Country with my husband and our three cats. Our children are all grown and are my biggest supporters.

Visit Judith at www.judithrochelle.com

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