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Karen van der Zee

MIDNIGHT RHYTHMS



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The last thing Sam had wanted was a stranger in the house for three long months! David was always there - making her angry, making her laugh, giving her all the fun she'd been missing...and, during the long, sleepless nights, showing just how much he desired her. Sam didn't want to fall in love - but David's irresistible charms were slowly breaking down her defenses. But in just three short months he'd be gone...wouldn't he?

CHAPTER ONE

THE man stood stark naked in the bright light of a full moon, all of his masculine splendor on full display. Samantha stopped in her tracks and stared at the man poised at the edge of the pool. "Now I know I'm going nuts," she muttered to herself. "I'm hallucinating, seeing things."

The strap of her heavy book bag bit into her right shoulder; she'd been carrying it around for the last mile home, having left her car by the side of the road with an empty gas tank. She was exhausted. She'd lived on five hours of sleep a night for the past two weeks and it was no wonder she was hallucinating. For a moment she closed her eyes, then opened them again. No naked man by the pool. She let out a deep sigh, realizing she'd been holding her breath. All she wanted was to get inside, have a shower and go to sleep.

She stumbled to the front door and let herself in, dropped her bag, and practically crawled to her bedroom. Collapsing on the bed, she kicked off her shoes, picked up the phone and dialed Gina's number at the hospital. Gina was a nurse and worked the evening shift.

"I'm going crazy," she told her friend. "I'm going stark raving mad."

"Did that bald instructor make another pass at you?"

"Yes, but that's not it." Samantha unbuttoned her blouse and struggled out of it. "I can handle him, but I think I'm seeing things. My mind is playing tricks with me. Is that what happens when you delve into the mysteries of business law with only five hours of sleep?"

"What do you mean you're seeing things?"

Sam began to laugh. She couldn't help it. "You're not going to believe this. I ran out of gas a mile from home and—"

"I believe it, Sam," Gina said dryly. "It's a warning, a metaphor. *You're* going to run out of gas if you don't stop and relax once in a while. So tell me, what are you *seeing* that's so funny?"

"I came walking up the driveway just now, a few minutes ago, and I saw a man standing near the swimming pool."

"A *man*?"

"Yes." Sam closed her eyes, seeing the man again. "Buck naked. All his God-given glory illuminated by a full moon. He looked like some Greek or Roman statue. He looked like Michelangelo's *David*. He was gorgeous. Artistically speaking, of course."

"Of course," said Gina.

"He looked very much like he belonged there, near the pool, amid all those big trees, and that fat moon overhead. Like a real statue." Revelation struck her. "Oh! That's why I saw him! Somebody showed me her vacation pictures yesterday—all these Italian paintings and fountains and statues. No wonder. Just a trick of the light, I guess."

"Phew," Gina sighed. "What a relief. I was worried you were going nuts and it was all my fault because of what I said yesterday."

Sam frowned. "I forgot about that." Gina had told her it was high time to start thinking about romance, to find a man, to find love. She'd been alone too long and she deserved a good man. Well, Gina meant well, but Sam was not in the mood for romance. She was too busy working and going to school getting her degree. She was determined to be a college graduate before she turned thirty next year.

She sighed. "What I need right now is not a man, but a shower and a good night's sleep. I won't have to get up and study in the morning, so I'll sleep in till seven."

"Wow. Seven. I'm impressed. What about your car?"

"Oh, shoot, yes." Sam raked her fingers through her damp hair. Thick and curly, the only way to keep it tamed was to pin it on top of her head or gather it back in a pony-tail with a scrunchy. Maybe she should just have it cut really short. It would be cool and easy in the heat of summer. Except then

she'd have to keep it trimmed all the time to keep it looking neat and when was she ever going to have time to go to the hair salon? She let out a weary sigh. Always this struggle for time. And now an empty gas tank to deal with.

"I'll take Susan's car and go to the gas station and get a can of gas and fill my tank, drive it back here, walk back to my car...it's going to cost me an hour." She groaned. "There goes sleeping in." She unzipped her skirt and pulled it off. "I can't win. God, what a miserable day. The air conditioner at the office wasn't working and there was one crisis after another, and I had to stay late and almost didn't make it to class in time." She frowned. "I never had dinner, come to think of it. I should be hungry, shouldn't I? I don't think I am, though. Oh, well, in this heat, who wants to eat?" Only June and it felt like August, the sweltering air humid and thick. She stripped off the rest of her damp clothes and staggered into the bathroom that adjoined her bedroom, taking the portable phone with her.

She looked at herself in the mirror, which was a mistake. Light blue eyes, pale face, brown hair—she looked washed out, her lipstick and blush long worn off. Maybe it was the light. Right, sure, she thought with a grimace. She turned away from her reflection.

"Anyway," said Sam, turning on the shower, "how's everything with you?"

"Fine, same old thing. What's that noise?"

"The shower. I'd better get in before I have no strength left to stand on my feet. Talk to you soon."

"Take it easy, Sam," said Gina. "Hallucinating about naked men is definitely a warning sign. Your feminine self is trying to tell you something."

Sam rolled her eyes at the ceiling. "Yes, Mommy."

She had a shower, washed her hair and felt marginally better—still exhausted, but clean. Wrapped in a short cotton robe, she looked a little better, too, the blue of the robe brightening her eyes. Her stomach was

grumbling now, and she felt thirsty. Having dried her hair and tied it back to keep it out of her face, she went to the kitchen to find something to eat. A banana, a glass of milk. She wasn't sure what she would find. She hadn't shopped for food in days.

The hardwood floor felt cool and smooth under her bare feet. It was such a beautiful house and she was happy to have the opportunity to live here for a while, house-sitting for Susan and Andrew, friends who were on a six-month tour of southern Europe, making a documentary. Such a stroke of luck, too, just when her apartment building had gone co-op and she'd been forced to move out.

House-sitting for Susan and Andrew was a perfect solution. The McMillans owned several acres of wooded land in Virginia, not too far from the civilized world of Washington D.C. The one-story house was an irregular, sprawling structure built to fit in with its natural surroundings. It had a big wooden deck and an in-ground swimming pool in the yard. Inside, the house was airy and spacious and furnished with casual, comfortable furniture and colorful artwork. Being used to apartment living, Sam found all the space simply wonderful, although sometimes, when she allowed herself the luxury of a moment of introspection, all that space made her feel a little lonely.

Light came from the kitchen. Had she left it on this morning? No, she was sure she hadn't. Besides, she hadn't noticed it being on when she'd come home. Trepidation gripped her. She stepped into the kitchen and her heart stopped as she took in the scene.

A red towel wrapped around his hips, Michelangelo's *David* was pouring himself a whiskey.

CHAPTER TWO

SAM froze as she stared at the man. He was tall and tanned and well-built. Very short black hair damply hugged his well-formed skull and his dark eyes looked at her with surprise, but only for a moment. An amused half-smile curved his mouth.

"I didn't know you were home," he said, putting the whiskey bottle on the counter. "I didn't mean to frighten you."

Sam couldn't talk. Here he was, a stranger in her house, huge, naked apart from a towel, and he hadn't meant to frighten her. What had he expected? A hug? She swallowed with difficulty, aware he was still observing her. Who was this man? This very good-looking man—she couldn't help noticing, tired as she was. He had strong, angular features that were not quite regular, a square jaw, a nose just a bit crooked. Dark, compelling eyes. A very masculine face. All of him was definitely very masculine—the broad chest, the muscular legs and arms, nicely tanned, all radiating a disturbing virility. She was aware of it even through the fog of her fatigue. Gina would be happy to know all her female hormones were still alive and kicking.

"Didn't you get my messages?" he asked, taking a drink from his glass. Feet planted squarely on the floor, he looked as if he owned the place. "I called several times yesterday and today and left messages on the machine." His voice held a vague note of reproach, which she did not appreciate.

"No, I didn't," she said tightly. She hadn't checked the answering machine, which was in Andrew's office and out of sight. She'd been too busy and too tired and too preoccupied. Actually, she'd plain forgotten. Not having had an answering machine in her apartment, she was not in the habit of checking one.

"You must be Samantha," he stated.

He knew her name. "And you must be David," she said promptly, and watched his eyebrows shoot up.

"I thought you didn't get the messages I left you?"

"I didn't." She took a step back. He was looming over her.

"But you know my name."

Oh, no. This could not be true. She swallowed a little laugh. "I was just guessing," she said, trying to sound casual. David. His name was *David!*

"Just guessing?" he repeated. "Out of thousands of possibilities, you come up with David? Why?"

Because you reminded me of Michelangelo's David standing there naked by the pool.

She wasn't about to tell him that. Instead, she shrugged and managed a cool look. "Yes. Sometimes I do that. Guess, I mean. People look like their names sometimes. You look like a David."

"Ah," he said. "Well, good. I wouldn't like to look like a Flip or a Bucky."

His tone was dry, and she caught a glimmer of humor in his eyes. She wondered if it had been there all along and he was laughing at her. She shifted her weight from one foot to the other and crossed her arms defensively in front of her chest, wishing she didn't feel so puny with her five foot three inches and one hundred and eight pounds. "So who are you and what are you doing here in my house?" Oddly, she felt no fear. This big man emanated strength, but she registered no threat to her physical safety. "I could call the police, you know," she added bravely.

He was not impressed by her threat. He quirked an eyebrow, his expression indicating that the very idea of his being mistrusted was rather amusing.

"This is not-your house," he said calmly, taking another leisurely drink. "This is Susan and Andrew McMillan's house and I am David McMillan, Andrew's cousin."

Yes, Your Majesty, she was tempted to say.

"Oh," she said instead, sounding not very bright. She squared her shoulders. "But I am house-sitting for them and what right do you have to come barging in here disturbing my privacy?"

'It was not my intention to do any barging and disturbing," he said soberly. "That's why I made all these calls, none of which you returned. However, I do need a place to stay for the next few months and I did have a key and—"

"What?" Sam's heart crashed into her shoes. "You're going to move into the house?" A surge of adrenaline momentarily revived her. She put her hands on her hips and glared at him. "No way! You are *not* moving in here!" So brave she sounded. As if she could prevent him from doing anything he might want to do—this man with his perfect physique and well-trained muscles.

He tossed back the rest of his drink and smiled benignly. "Oh, yes, I am, Samantha Bennett."

She stared at him, feeling helpless rage. Her head began to throb. She was so tired. She had the sudden, frightening urge to burst out into tears, which she hadn't done in years. Something was seriously wrong with her. First hallucinating, now crying. No, she hadn't been hallucinating, after all. Seeing David McMillan standing starkers in the moonlight had not been the delusion of an overwrought mind. It had been plain reality. She rubbed her forehead, trying to erase the image from her mind. She was in no state to contemplate a naked male.

She was uncomfortably aware of his scrutiny, the dark eyes intent on her face. He moved toward her and put a hand on her shoulder. "Sit down," he ordered. "You look as if you're about to collapse." He eased her into a chair at the kitchen table. She sagged down like a bag of potatoes, too tired to fight his order. A moment later he put a glass with a measure of whiskey in front of her and seated himself across from her at the table.

"You have nothing to worry about," he said calmly. "I'm not a mass murderer or a rapist or a con artist—which is easy for me to say, I'm well aware, but we can try to contact Susan and Andrew by phone tomorrow so they can set your mind at ease."

"We can call them *now*," she said. He was taking control of the situation and she didn't like it.

"We could, but it's the dead of night in Turkey and I'm not sure they'd appreciate it. Now, drink up. It'll calm your nerves."

She gritted her teeth and glared at him. 'Do you always order people around?"

Surprise flared in his dark eyes, as if he had never considered the issue. Then the left corner of his mouth lifted with faint amusement. "Yes," he said. "Now, relax, woman, and have that drink."

Sam gave up. She gazed down into the amber liquid and winced at the smell of it. "I can't. It will make me sick. I haven't had anything to eat since breakfast."

"You do have a bit of a hungry look about you," he commented. "I'll fix you a sandwich." He came to his feet, all six-two or -three inches of brown muscled manhood towering over her. He was a man used to being in charge, that was clear. A man used to giving orders. And being obeyed.

She didn't have the strength to oppose him, didn't even have the strength to come to her feet and walk to her bedroom, so she sat there like a zombie and watched him deftly assemble a huge ham and cheese sandwich, adorned with lettuce and tomato.

"Milk?" he asked. "Tea, coffee?"

"Milk. If there is any."

"There is. I brought some groceries with me when I came this afternoon."

A good thing, too, Sam thought, because there wasn't much in the house. She watched him take a carton of milk out of the refrigerator and pour her a glass. His hand was big and strong, like everything else about him.

It all seemed so ordinary, sitting here in a kitchen with another person who was fixing her something to eat. It wasn't ordinary. She didn't know this man and he was sharing this house with her. And here he was, wrapped only in a towel, and she herself with nothing on under her skimpy little robe.

Maybe all of this was a dumb dream and she would wake up and find it was morning and none of this had actually happened. If she told Gina about this nocturnal fantasy, her friend would tell her it was Sam's feminine side trying to get through to her on a subconscious level. You need a man, she'd say. Well, Sam didn't need a man. She needed a college degree and financial security, thank you.

"I didn't hear you come home," he said. "I didn't see a car." His voice was deep, resonating somewhere deep inside her, disturbing her in a way she didn't want to be disturbed.

"I came home walking." Between bites and sips she told him what had happened to the car, not caring he might think it was pretty stupid to run out of gas.

"You look exhausted," he observed. "Like someone who hasn't had a lot of fun lately."

"I haven't." Well, it was the truth. "I work for my grandfather, and he's getting old and temperamental and I worry about him." Why was she saying this? It wasn't her habit to say things like this to strangers.

"What do you do?"

She gave a low laugh. "That depends on who you ask. *He'll* tell you I'm his little granddaughter helping him out at the office. He owns a furniture retail store."

David gave her a considering look. "But you're running the whole show?"

She nodded. "He pretends he doesn't know it, but I'm sure he does. Business has been slowing down a lot over the last few years and I don't know how long we can hold out, but..." She sighed. "It's like he doesn't want to see it."

She hadn't had a raise in years; the money simply wasn't there. With more and more big furniture super-stores opening in the area, there was no chance of survival. That was why she was getting her degree: paper qualifications to back up her working experience. She intended to find a job that would offer her good career possibilities and decent money. She had her son to plan for. Kevin was only ten now, but in another eight years he'd be off to college.

She sighed and took another bite of the sandwich. Kevin was spending the summer in Florida with her sister and brother-in-law who ran recreational and educational camps for kids all year around. He was having a wonderful time, and it gave Sam the opportunity to take extra classes at night and not worry about whether she was leaving him alone too much. Still, she missed him and looked forward to the end of summer when he'd be back. She'd have to find an apartment by then, too. Closing her eyes, she rubbed her forehead. She didn't want to have to think about that now.

"Are you all right?" Concern in the man's voice.

She glanced up at him, standing near her chair. "I'm fine...just tired." Her plate was empty, the sandwich finished. She'd practically wolfed it down. "I've got to get some sleep, though."

In order to do that she'd first have to get up from her chair. She wasn't sure she could summon the strength; she felt as if she weighed a thousand pounds—inert, immovable. She had no choice but to try. Pushing her chair back, she came awkwardly to her feet, felt her body reeling, struggling for balance.

"Easy..." He moved forward, reached out a hand to steady her.

Devoid of energy, her body would not obey. It landed softly and neatly against his, like a rag doll.

She was dizzily conscious of his arm around her back, holding her. Felt her cheek against the warmth of his naked chest.

It felt very nice, very safe.

Safe. She let out a sigh. It had been a long time since she'd felt safe.

Drawing in a slow, deep breath, she smelled the warm, male scent of his skin, felt the chest hair tickling her cheek. This was a dream. Her mind was playing tricks with her again, but she didn't care. Dreaming was safe.

He had a strong chest, a strong, hard body that was holding her so comfortably, as if she belonged there and she had no worries and all was well with her world. Ah, bliss.

Then she felt something else, something more than comfort. The pounding of her heart, or was it his? The warmth rushing through her body. And the heat of his, against her.

She froze as the realization of what was happening dawned on her, clearing her mind instantly. Fearful embarrassment rushed through her on a wave of adrenalin and she drew back, her legs trembling precariously.

"I'm sorry... I..."

He gave a crooked smile. His hands were on her upper arms, steadying her. "Don't be. I like goodnight hugs."

She'd noticed. She stared at him. "I..." She couldn't even think of what she was trying to say.

"Come on, let me walk you to your room."

She drew back some more. "No, no. I'm fine, really." She turned quickly. "Goodnight," she managed.

"Goodnight, Samantha." Did she hear amusement in his voice? She wasn't sure.

Am I nuts? she asked herself as she lay in bed. Should I just be going to sleep with that stranger roaming free in the house? A stranger she had

unintentionally managed to get sexually excited. Sam groaned into her pillow. Did she believe what he'd said, that he was Andrew's cousin?

Well, he did look like Andrew, actually. They both were dark and tall, both had that air of confidence and command. They could have been brothers instead of cousins. Which proved nothing about David's purity of character and intentions. What was he doing here, anyway? She hadn't even asked. What was the matter with her? Where was her brain?

She pulled the sheet up over her head. She didn't care where it was. All she cared about now was some sleep. Deep, restorative sleep.

Birdsong awoke her the next morning. The room was full of sunshine. For a moment she lay basking in it like a lazy cat, then she leaped out of bed. The car! She needed to get gas. She was late!

The man! There was a strange man in the house. Her heart turned over as disturbing memories flashed through her mind. The scent of his skin, the feel of his hard body against her. She took a deep breath. She had no time to think about that now. She didn't even want to think about it whether she had time or not.

She had a quick shower, dressed in a navy skirt and a white blouse, twisted her hair on top of her head, put some lipstick on, got her things together and rushed to the kitchen. The smell of fresh coffee greeted her, and she noticed David in shorts and T-shirt sitting on the deck reading the paper, looking as if he owned the place, looking as if he had all the time in the world. Well, maybe he had. He came to his feet when he caught sight of her, wishing her a good morning. He followed her into the kitchen.

"Feeling better?" he asked.

' "Yes, and I apologize for the... er... Victorian virgin routine last night," she added before she could think about it. She glanced away. "I really didn't mean to...uh—"

"Neither did I," he said smoothly. "Breakfast? I'll do the honors."

Cool as a cucumber, he was; she had to admire that. She shook her head. "I've got to run. I'm late."

"You're out of gas," he reminded her.

She closed-her eyes and sighed. "I know." She poured herself some coffee. "I'm going to take Susan's car to get some gas, put it in mine, bring back hers, walk back to mine and leave."

"Much too complicated," he stated in a no-nonsense tone. "I'll come with you. That'll save you the hike back to your car."

"You don't have to."

"Of course I don't have to." He put a piece of whole- grain bread in the toaster. "But I will."

It would be a big help, of course, yet his take-charge attitude irritated her.

"Why?"

He cocked an eyebrow. "Are you always so suspicious?"

She shrugged and sipped the coffee. It was wonderful, very strong and flavorful. "When it comes to men, yes." Her words surprised her—she wasn't normally so confrontational with strangers, yet this man had an odd effect on her equilibrium. And she felt defensive about her idiotic move of practically fainting in his arms last night and the embarrassing result.

"Sorry to hear that." He reached for his cup. "Did you have a bad experience for which all men will pay for ever and ever?"

She stared at him, feeling an odd quiver of fear. Had he guessed? Could he tell?

She thought of Jason, who'd left her stranded with a newborn baby. They'd married right out of high school and Jason had wanted nothing more than for them to have a baby right away. Yet four months after Kevin was born he'd

had enough of fatherhood, packed up and left. Three days later he'd died in a construction accident, leaving her a widow at nineteen with a tiny baby to care for. She couldn't believe what had happened to her, to him. How could he have left her and the baby he'd said he wanted so much? He'd planned and saved, saying he made enough money as a construction worker for them to afford a baby; really, there was no need to wait until she'd finished college and had a job, too. It had taken a long time before she'd ever understood Jason's true motivation for wanting a baby, and it hadn't really had anything to do with fatherhood. It'd had everything to do with sabotaging her education because he'd felt threatened by her ambition. Not that he would have ever owned up to such a feeling of inadequacy.

Things had not been what they seemed. Jason had had a side to him she hadn't known. It terrified her to realize how foolish and naive she had been to allow herself to be manipulated by him, how little she had understood him, herself.

And here was David, asking if she'd had a bad experience as if he could see straight into her soul.

She took a sip of the hot coffee. "I'm just not terribly trusting," she said, trying to sound casual about it. "That's all."

He nodded thoughtfully. "I see. Well, my motives for wanting to be helpful are based on the fact that I prefer peace over war. Since we're going to be sharing this house and this kitchen, it appears to me that being able to get along is not a bad idea." He smiled. "So, if you'll find the keys to Susan's car, we can get going and solve your little gas problem."

Sometimes her imagination got in the way. It had been well-applied when Kevin was little and she'd spent hours telling him fantastic tales she'd just made up on the spot, wild stories and adventures he had loved hearing. Her active imagination was not necessarily a blessing now, but there it was. What if this guy wasn't who he said he was? What if he was a sophisticated, clever con man? What if he took off in Susan's car? What if he emptied out the house after she'd gone to work? She grew suddenly hot and cold with trepidation. She had taken on responsibility for her friend's house and possessions. Shouldn't she do something?

"Do you have some form of identification?" she heard

herself ask. "I was so tired last night I couldn't see straight." He probably was not used to having his identity, or his command questioned, but if it made him angry then so be it.

His mouth quirked, or maybe she imagined it. Without comment he whipped a leather wallet out of his back pocket and produced a driver's license.

David Colin McMillan, it said. And even on the picture he was drop-dead gorgeous. *Nobody* looked good on a driver's license mugshot.

"So, where's your car?" she asked, aware her body was tense. It wasn't easy questioning this big, intimidating man now that she was in full control of her faculties. "I didn't see one in the drive when I came home last night."

"Don't have one."

She handed him back his license. "You don't have a car? How did you get here?"

"I was dropped off." He put the license back in his wallet and fished the toast out of the toaster.

"But what are you going to do without a car?"

"I'll be using Susan's until I get myself one."

She didn't like the sound of this. How could he not have a car? Who in this day and age could get around without a car unless they lived in a big city? This was the boondocks. It was miles and miles from town. No buses, no trains, no public transportation of any sort.

Maybe he didn't have a car because he had just been released from prison. Or had escaped. Just because he was Andrew's cousin it didn't mean he wasn't a criminal. What a nightmare.

Oh, please, a more rational part of her said, *get a grip.*

He gave her a sideways glance. "Relax, Sam." There was no escaping the humor in his voice and it annoyed her.

"I am relaxed," she said tightly.

"Right. Like a violin string. I don't have a car because I've just returned from living overseas for three years."

Good story, she thought. Just substitute jail for overseas and there you go.

Oh, stop it! she said to herself.

"I want to talk to Susan before we leave," she said, trying to sound assertive. "Just a moment, please." She went into Andrew's office, found the number they'd left her, and dialed. Somewhere in Turkey the phone rang and rang. No one answered. She replaced the receiver with a bang, frustrated and angry. Now what was she supposed to do?

Oh, to hell with it, she muttered to herself, taking Susan's car keys from the desk drawer. She found David in the kitchen making a sandwich out of two pieces of toast with cheese. "Let's go," she said, the smell of toast making her feel suddenly ravenously hungry.

"Here," he said, handing her the toast sandwich. "You can eat it in the car."

She took the proffered food. "Thank you." She marched out of the kitchen into the garage with him right behind her. She tossed him the keys. "You can drive."

"Thank you," he said dryly. "Did you talk to Susan?"

"No. No one answered the phone. I thought they were in a hotel. Don't these desk people pick up the phone when it rings?"

"Not necessarily, no," he said dryly.

He opened the door for her, like a true gentleman, and she disposed of her book bag on the back seat and slid into the passenger seat. She took a big bite from the toast. The cheese was melting and it tasted delicious. Sharp cheddar, she noted. She liked strong flavors—and apparently he did, too, because he must have bought the cheese.

"Why the book bag?" he asked as he sat down, pushed the remote control to open the garage doors and started the engine. "If I may ask."

With her mouth full of food, it took a moment before she could answer. "I'm going to night school. I don't have time to come home after work, so I bring my stuff."

He eased the car out of the garage and down the drive, the door closing behind them automatically. "What are you studying?"

"Business administration."

He nodded. "Very practical, very marketable," he commented, his voice level.

She didn't know why his comment put her on the defensive. He was echoing her own opinion, so why did she feel this way? What was wrong with being practical? With learning skills that were marketable?

Nothing. Absolutely nothing.

Not that it was where she'd dreamed of being, long ago, when she was younger and freer. She'd wanted to be a kindergarten teacher, always. Instead she'd ended up in her grandfather's furniture business.

Because of Jason.

No, because she'd allowed herself to be manipulated by Jason. A treacherous mixture of anger and regret sneaked up on her. She pushed the feeling aside impatiently and took another bite of the sandwich. It was nice of David to have made her this. Last night he had fed her, too. *You do have a bit of a hungry look about you*, he'd said. Well, next to his huge frame she

didn't amount to much, and it might be getting less. Her skirts had been a bit loose lately.

She had finished eating by the time they passed by her car, sitting forlornly by the road. It was a ghastly shade of green and was hard to miss. She'd bought it second-hand some years ago and in spite of its lurid color it had done her excellent service, for which she thanked the gods.

"That your car?" he inquired, as if there were much doubt. It was the only unattended vehicle they had passed.

She nodded.

"Interesting color," he stated.

She gave him a suspicious look and caught the glint of amusement in his eyes. "All I care about is that it's reliable and doesn't break down on me every other week."

"Very practical, aren't you?"

"Something wrong with that?" she asked with a touch of hauteur, feeling the little defensive devil stirring in her again. She tried not to give it space.

"Certainly not." He looked straight ahead at the road. "Where's the gas station?"

"Take a right at the next intersection, then three miles down."

She couldn't help looking at his hands as they handled the steering wheel with competence. No rings. He was in his mid-thirties, she guessed, and she wondered if he was married, or had been married,, and if he had kids, and why he was staying at the McMillans' house. Didn't he have a place to call home? The thoughts came automatically, and she was annoyed with herself for giving them room. She didn't care about the answers. She didn't even care *why* he was staying at the house, only *that* he was staying there. Because she didn't want him there. It was disturbing her peace and reeked of trouble.

She had no time for trouble.

She had no time for anything except studying and passing her tests.

"So, what did you do overseas?" she asked, for something to say. Actually, if she were honest, she was a tiny bit curious about it.

"Built a bridge." He was a civil engineer, he told her, working mostly on foreign contracts, building roads and dams and bridges. He'd just returned from Bolivia, where he'd worked on a construction project building a bridge across one of the tributaries of the Amazon. Before that he'd been to places she wasn't sure she could find on a map.

It was easy to see him in some exotic, tropical place, bare-chested, with a hard hat on his head, directing a crew of construction workers.

They'd arrived at the gas station and David leaped out of the car before she'd even opened her door.

"I'll take care of this," he said, and strode away before she could object. She sat back and shrugged. Okay, let him, she thought. She watched him come out of door with a container, watched him fill it from one of the pumps, having first slid a credit card through the payment machine.

"How much was it?" she asked when he got back in the car.

He waved his hand. "Forget it."

"No," she said tightly. "I will not."

He flashed her a probing look and fished the receipt from the breast pocket of his T-shirt. "Here you go."

She glanced at it, got the money from her purse and handed it to him. "Thank you for helping me out."

"You're welcome," he said soberly.

There was something about him that was beginning to annoy her. She had this suspicious feeling that he was laughing at her, that for some reason he found her *amusing*.

Back at her ugly green car, he emptied the container of gas into her tank. She thanked him again for his help, and with a sigh of relief she took off down the road, alone again, oh, bliss, and not even late.

Now, if only he didn't steal Susan's car and the contents of the house...

David watched her drive off. He couldn't remember when he'd last seen a woman looking that tired and vulnerable and so in need of a warm hug. He grinned. Well, he'd given her one, even if it had unintentionally turned out to be more than a hug of the brotherly variety. The instant physical reaction he had experienced at the feel of her body in his arms had surprised even him. He wasn't exactly eighteen anymore.

She had gorgeous big, expressive eyes and a wonderful mass of naturally curly chestnut hair that tempted touching and stroking. She stirred up his protective instincts, but clearly that wasn't all.

He sat in the car without moving for a while, surprised by his feelings. Good feelings, healthy feelings. Feelings he hadn't felt for a long time, and a deep longing suddenly filled his heart.

Then fear rushed in.

He rubbed his face as if to clear his mind and turned the key in the ignition. The engine purred into life. He drove back to the house and went to work, writing an article on managing engineering projects in developing countries, where time was a stretchable commodity, skilled labor was difficult to find and cultural differences imposed unexpected problems. Working for three years in the jungle without losing your mind was no small feat, and he certainly had learned a lot—about himself as well as the job.

Come to think of it, he was tired, too.

Mostly, though, he was tired of being alone.

When Sam arrived home that night after class, she was afraid to look in the direction of the pool in case she saw David in all his unclad glory standing in the moonlight.

She looked anyway; she just couldn't help herself.

Nothing. Nobody. She let out a sigh, struggled out of the car with her book bag and purse and trekked to the back door and into the house.

Music greeted her, rippling and dancing joyfully through the air. Wearing jeans and a black T-shirt, David sat at the dining room table pounding away at a laptop with impressive speed. The table was strewn with papers and blueprints. His concentration was so intensive it took him a full minute before he noticed her. He grinned at her as his focus cleared.

"Ah, you've returned from the world of commerce and academia. How are you?"

"Exhausted."

He leaped to his feet with an explosion of energy that took her off guard. "How about a swim?" he asked. "And a glass of wine to wind down?"

A swim. A glass of wine. It sounded heavenly. It was a balmy night. It would feel good. She imagined herself in the pool with David, sipping wine, her body floating in the warm water, the sky full of stars above, and her heart began to gallop. Her imagination was running wild again. It was crazy. She didn't even like the man. He was looming over her, and she didn't like that either. She took a step back.

"No, thank you," she said. "I've got things to do." Laundry, for one. More useful than gazing at the moon.

"You're a very busy person," he observed.

"Yes, I am."

He put his hands in the pockets of his jeans and gave her a searching look. "What do you normally do in your free time?" he asked conversationally.

"I don't have any."

"Never?"

"Not lately, anyway." Not since she'd taken the extra summer courses. "I work, go to classes, study, take care of the house." Fortunately housework didn't require much time; Susan had insisted her regular cleaning lady keep coming at least once a week, and the yard was taken care of by a gardener. She never saw either of these people because she was never at home during the day. "If there's time left, I sleep," she added. "Or at least I try."

His left eyebrow arched up. "No frivolity at all? No romance, no fun?"

"I haven't got time." *Romance?* she added silently. *Are you kidding?* "And now, if you'll excuse me?" She trekked down the hall to her bedroom, changed into shorts and T-shirt and headed to the laundry room. The dryer held clothes she'd done two days earlier and hadn't yet taken out. She dumped them on the folding table and found David behind her as she picked up a pair of cotton panties to fold them. He was leaning against the door, a glass of white wine in each hand.

"Have one of these while you're doing that," he said easily.

The last thing she needed was for him to stand there watching her fold her underwear, her practical, serviceable cotton panties. He'd been here barely twenty-four hours and he was getting on her nerves already. She suppressed the urge to tell him to get lost.

What she'd really like was a drink to help her relax. And he was offering her one. Oh, what the heck, why not? She dropped the panties back on the pile, accepted the glass from him and took a sip. "Thank you," she said politely, caving in to civility. She tried not to see how good he looked wearing just jeans and a T-shirt-lean, muscular, fit. Of course she saw anyway.

"I've been trying to contact Susan and Andrew today," he said, "but it seems they've disappeared in the Turkish hinterland. I'll try again tomorrow."

She frowned. "Why were you trying to contact them?" After all, he wasn't the one worried about the situation.

"So they can reassure you about my presence here, tell you I'm an upstanding citizen and not an escaped convict or whatever you might have imagined," he said levelly. Again the humor in his voice. As if the very idea of someone finding him suspicious was exceedingly comical.

She took another sip of the wine. "I see. Well, I do like to hear from them." She picked up a towel and folded it, hoping he'd go away, but he seemed perfectly content lounging against the doorpost, drinking his wine in a leisurely way.

She concentrated on folding the towels, trying not to look at him. She wished he weren't so damned good-looking. It was having a disturbing effect on her equilibrium. She had enough problems in her life; she didn't need a man to add to them. And certainly not a take-charge type like this one.

"So, what have you been doing all day?" she asked casually. Not that she cared, of course.

"Had a good long run this morning, made some phone calls, did some reading, some writing."

"Sounds pretty strenuous," she said evenly.

"It was very restorative, actually."

Restorative? He didn't look like anyone in need of restoration.

"More wine?" he asked, reaching for her empty glass, and before she even thought about it she had agreed, and he left to go to the kitchen to get it. She was an idiot. She'd never get rid of him this way.

And, of course, the inevitable happened.

The wine loosened her tongue, as it always did. Just two small glasses was all it took. Fifteen minutes later she found herself sitting at the kitchen table, telling him about her horrible day and her cranky grandfather who lived in the Stone Age when it came to running a business, and that she was worried about him and the future of the store, and that she'd been friends with Susan since high school, and how she'd cried for days when her dog had died when she was twelve, and that she needed to find an apartment by the end of August because Kevin had to start school again, and all kinds of other boring things he couldn't possibly be interested in.

She stopped talking, embarrassed suddenly. What had possessed her to tell all this to this man? It was that sexy voice of his, a voice that beckoned, tempted: *Come here, let me hold you, I'll make you safe.* As if she lived in the Dark Ages and needed protection. Like the Prince coming to rescue Cinderella from her dreary lot.

The wine...it was the wine making her say things, think things, making her all maudlin. Good thing she hadn't started telling him about Jason leaving her and her parents drowning, or she'd be sitting here now bawling her eyes out.

"Kevin?" he asked.

She swallowed. "My son. He's at summer camp right now. in Florida."

"You have a kid," he said, as if trying out the sound of it. "Imagine that. How old is he?"

"Ten."

His eyes widened, his brows arched. "*Ten?* Good Lord..." A quizzical expression darkened his face.

She could imagine what he was thinking. She looked young for her age and could easily pass for twenty-four or -five instead of twenty-nine. She really couldn't blame people for wondering about her having a ten-year-old son,

yet it irritated her. She looked straight at him. "And just for your information, no, I wasn't an unwed mother, and I didn't 'have to' get married."

"Well, that's a relief," he said dryly. "I'm not sure I could have lived under the same roof as you—you being a loose woman with all those sinful secrets in your past and all."

She glowered at him and he laughed.

She came to her feet. "I've got to get some sleep," she said, and moved to the door.

"And I'm going to have a swim." He rotated his shoulders as if they felt tight. "It's a great night. Sure you don't want to join me?"

"Yes—no, thank you."

She lay in bed thinking about him swimming in the pool. Would he be wearing swimming trunks?

She turned her face in the pillow and groaned. "You are so pathetic," she told herself out loud.- "You're acting like a teenager obsessed with nudity and sex. Get a grip on yourself, will you?"

Well, it had been an awfully long time since she'd been in the arms of a man. And under the right circumstances, and with the right man, that was really a very nice place to be. Last night her tired brain had played tricks with her and she'd been momentarily deluded. She should just forget about it.

"Oh, go to sleep," she muttered into the pillow.

So she did.

And she dreamed.

She was swimming in the pool with David and they had no clothes on. It felt wonderful and quite all right because they'd known each other for a long

time and he was so familiar to her. And then they were in bed together and he was holding her, just holding her.

Heart pounding, David watched her lying on the ground, her clothes muddy, a dry leaf caught in her pale hair. She made no sound, no movement. He could not help her, he could do nothing but watch her, powerless, while birds chirped cheerfully in the trees and a sweet summer breeze whispered through the lush greenery. He stood there, paralyzed, until pure panic hit him and he was awake, drenched in sweat, his heart racing in terror.

He sat up in bed, turned on the bedside lamp and buried his face in his hands. "Oh, please, not again," he muttered. " Not again."

After some time he got to his feet, pulled on a pair of boxer shorts and went into the kitchen and poured himself a measure of Scotch. He carried it out onto the deck and drank it slowly, standing at the railing. He stared up at the stars, concentrated on his breathing and tried to empty his mind, to think of nothing—a meditation technique someone had taught him when he'd found himself in the derelict little hospital on that godforsaken island in the China Sea. Giggling little nurses, cats in the hallway. And then that runny little Buddhist monk.

And then, to his own surprise and relief, he found himself smiling.

The night air was pleasantly cool. Crickets and other insects cheeped and buzzed, vibrating the air. For a long time, he simply stood there.

CHAPTER THREE

"ARE you crazy?" Gina yelled at Sam over the telephone the next afternoon. "You're letting that guy stay with you in the house? And you don't even know if he's telling the truth?"

"I don't have much of a choice," Sam said, leaning back from her desk at the office. "I can hardly throw him out, can I? He's six foot two or three and he's got muscles on him you wouldn't believe. Not body-builder muscles, mind you, but the real, natural variety."

There was a silence, then a smothered laugh. "Oh, yeah, Michelangelo's *David*. So, what's his name?"

Sam grinned into the receiver. "David, of course."

"Oh, no! You're kidding!"

"No, I'm not kidding. David McMillan. Andrew's cousin, or so he says. Well, actually, I believe him; I saw his driver's license."

"Oh, wow," Gina said. "Think of the possibilities here! The two of you in the same house!"

"I don't want him in the same house!"

"It could be such pleasant distraction, Sam, think about it."

"I can't afford to think about it! I've got to study. I've got to get my degree!"

Next year she'd be thirty. No longer young, but at least educated.

She felt a sudden, treacherous longing. She wanted to be young and have some fun, go places, do things, not worry so much, be free. Being the mother of a small child, she hadn't had much of that in her twenties—and

she wasn't going to have much of it for the rest of her life if she didn't make charge of her future—get educated, get a career. First.

Gina's long-suffering sigh floated down the phone line. "Your aspirations are all very commendable, Sam, but surely you can fit in a little fun with a handsome guy once in a while, before all your hormones dry up?"

Now, that sounded lovely. "No, I have no time," she said stubbornly. "It will have to wait."

"Is he rich?"

Is he rich?" Sam groaned and rolled her eyes. Gina, in one of her pretend shallow moods. "I have no idea." Being one of the McMillan clan, he probably was, but she hadn't given it a thought.

"Well, does he *look* rich?"

"Like how?"

Gina sighed. "You're hopeless. His clothes, his car, his watch, his briefcase—you know, that sort of thing."

Sam pushed her cold coffee aside. "I haven't seen a briefcase. I've paid no attention to his watch and, besides, I wouldn't know a designer watch from a dime store special. And he just wears shorts and T-shirts and he doesn't have a car. He's buying one, he says."

"What kind?"

"I didn't ask! Sheesh, Gina, what's with you?"

"This floor is no fun today—my patients are not responding to my tender loving care by getting better and waltzing out of here, so I'm in serious need of a fantasy to keep me from wallowing in despair. And this sounds like a really good one, so work with me, will you?"

"Having a rough day?"

"Nothing but tragedy. You don't want to hear about it, believe you me. So, tell me, what type is this David? I mean, what kind of car do you think he belongs in?"

Sam contemplated this for a moment. "A fancy sports car, I suppose. Something low and sleek and very expensive.

"Cool. Just my kind of man. If you don't want him, I might come over and have a look at him. By the way, is he married, or attached?"

"Last time I heard, *you* were attached," Sam said dryly. "Engaged to be married, in fact. To the most wonderful man in the world."

Another sigh. "Oh, right. I forgot."

An old pick-up truck lounged in the driveway when Sam arrived home at ten that evening. It was a garish red and had a dent in one of the fenders. A purple bumper sticker proclaimed that the end of the world was near and it was time to repent.

"Whose pick-up is that?" she asked when she found David watching the international news on television.

"Mine. I bought it today."

"Wow," she said, dropping her purse and book bag. "And I had you pegged as a Ferrari type."

"Really?" Again the spark of humor in his eyes. "I'm more of a Maserati man. But I had to be practical."

"Practical?" Now this was getting good. She tucked a stray curl behind her ear.

He nodded. "I had to consider the fact that I'll be transporting construction material rather than loose, empty-headed blondes with long flowing hair."

"How depressing," she said mockingly. "You'll never get them into that truck."

He sighed. "I know. I suppose I'd better get myself a Maserati as well."

'Why did you buy a used car instead of a new one?'

He shrugged. "I don't need a new one. I'm only going to use it for a few months. Besides, I just happened to see it sitting by the road with a 'For Sale' sign on it and it spoke to me."

"It *spoke* to you?"

"Yes. It has...character, a certain *je ne sais quoi* with that sexy dent, and that passionate red color and that purple sticker." '

She laughed; she couldn't help it.

"And I think it looks just perfect parked next to that lurid green car of yours."

"Don't offend my car."

"Okay," he said amiably, and leaped off the couch again, the way he had the night before. He might be a laid-back sort of person, but there certainly was plenty of energy hiding in that body.

An image flashed through her mind—a tiger lounging on a tree branch. The vision so surprised her, she almost sighed out loud.

David switched off the television set. "There's a fax from Susan for you," he told her. "It's in Andrew's office."

And so there was. Sam read it standing up by the fax machine. Susan said they'd been stuck in a remote Turkish mountain village with car trouble, but they'd had a wonderful time. She waxed lyrical about the food, the people, the beauty of the landscape. They'd just returned to their hotel in Istanbul and David had called them on the phone. She was very sorry they'd been out

of reach for the last few days and had been unable to reassure her that David truly was Andrew's beloved cousin and an honorable, trustworthy human being, if a bit off-center at times, which was to be expected of people roaming the globe and sojourning in exotic places.

Sam grinned. Off-center. Well, that would explain that red truck.

David, Susan went on to explain, had been expected to stay with them in the fall, to build himself a cabin on the north end of their property. But, since his plans had changed, Susan hoped sincerely Sam didn't mind if he stayed at the house while she was there.

Since she and Andrew would be asleep by the time Sam would come home, she'd written the fax instead of calling later.

Sam read the fax twice. Well, there it was. Just as he had told her. Except he hadn't said anything about building a cabin—but then she hadn't asked, either. That was why he had bought the pick-up truck, she realized.

There was something odd about it all, though. Why was David McMillan building a cabin? The McMillan family was wealthy; she knew that from Susan's stories about her in-laws. Why not build a proper house? Why not buy a house?

She'd seen him naked, but she knew very little about this man—his life, his work, his character. Nothing except that he wasn't a criminal on the loose, and that he was going to share the house with her.

She didn't like it. She wanted peace and quiet. She wanted the house to herself. It was not to be. She looked down at the fax in her hand, crumpled, her hands clenched into fists.

Back in the living room, she found David with a bottle of champagne and two glasses. Music undulated through the room, something vibrant and seductive—Brazilian jazz? David McMillan seemed to have a thing for sensuous music.

"Shall we celebrate?" he asked, filling the glasses.

"Celebrate what?" There wasn't anything to celebrate as far as she was concerned. On the contrary; she felt like mourning the loss of her precious privacy and isolation.

"The truth," said David. "That I am a man with only the purest of intentions."

"Susan didn't say that. She said you were a tad off- center."

His brows arched. "She said I was *off-center*?"

"Didn't you read the fax?"

"Certainly not. It wasn't addressed to me." He handed her a glass, then took his own and lifted it. "To a pleasant cohabitation," he toasted.

She had no choice but to lift her glass and clink it with his and meet his eyes. Brown eyes with the devil dancing in them.

A pleasant cohabitation. Oh, please! What a nightmare!

And then it got worse. He invited her to dinner on Saturday night when she had no classes, and she said, no, she didn't have time, she had to prepare for a test and do some grocery shopping. And, as she was saying this, a small voice somewhere inside her inquired if she were insane. Here was a handsome man with pure intentions inviting her to dinner and when was the last time she'd come across a man with pure intentions?

She took a sip of the champagne, felt the music stroke her senses, triggering images and feelings. She'd never known music could be so...intoxicating.

She took another close look at David's handsome face, the gleam in his brown eyes. Pure intentions, my foot, she thought.

Sam's heart made a crazy little leap when David appeared in the kitchen the next morning. She was standing up at the counter, eating a piece of toast, and she almost dropped the knife.

Dressed in a suit and tie, David looked like a different man. Formal, imposing, dynamic... intimidating. Sharp creases in his trousers, high gloss on his black leather shoes. His suit jacket fitted perfectly over his broad shoulders, and his white shirt practically blinded her. A modern god of business and high finance, dressed for battle.

She swallowed her food; she'd stopped chewing as she'd stared at him, practically awestruck.

"Nice tie," she managed.

"Thank you." He gave her a crooked smile and reached for the coffee pot.

"I take it you're not playing construction worker today," she commented, gathering composure.

He poured coffee in his cup and put the pot down. "No, not today. Have to take care of a little family business this afternoon."

She wondered what kind of family business required a suit and tie, but thought it better not to ask. She glanced at the clock, put her plate and knife in the dishwasher and picked up her purse and book bag. "Well, I'd better go and help Grandpa."

He moved toward her unexpectedly, put his hands on her shoulders and kissed her lightly on the mouth. "Don't work too hard. Take care of yourself," he said, moving away.

She stared at him, heart galloping. "Why did you do that?"

"Because I wanted to and it seemed like a nice thing to do." He smiled. "I'll see you tomorrow, Samantha."

"Tomorrow? You're not coming home tonight?"

He grinned. "Don't look so delighted."

She shrugged. "Just wondering."

As she dashed out the door, a sleek, silver-gray limousine glided up the driveway. She caught a glimpse of a chauffeur in uniform.

She sucked in a deep breath. "Oh, boy," she muttered. She climbed into her ugly green car and drove to work.

Before leaving the house, David glanced in the mirror and adjusted his tie, smiling as he remembered Samantha's expression at seeing him dressed in a suit. Whenever he thought of her, he found himself smiling.

It had been a while since he'd last worn a suit. He grimaced. Well, he was on family business now and he'd better wear the appropriate costume. Meeting with one of the outside shareholders and convincing the man of the error of his ways was hardly a big job, and a small price to pay for family happiness. He knew how to talk to people, how to get them to do things, how to change their minds and, although he was not involved in the day-to-day running of the company, his talents in the verbal-persuasion department were sometimes called upon.

He found good old Lester waiting for him with the limousine and he smiled in greeting. The man must be a hundred years-old by now, he thought with affection. Lester had been around when David had been a little boy roaming the woods of his father's property, pretending to be an explorer in the jungles of Africa.

"Good morning, sir!" said Lester, his wrinkled face all smiles.

' 'Good morning, Lester. How are you?"

"Fine, sir, just fine."

"And the arthritis?"

"Livin' with it, sir. Just livin' with it."

Yes, thought David, some things you just learned to live with. For a fraction of a moment Celia's face flashed through his mind, then it was gone. He settled himself in the back and opened his briefcase to look over his notes and get ready for his meeting.

Instead, he thought of Samantha, seeing her as she had left that morning to go to work in her grandfather's store. She wore neat little skirts, ending just at the knee, and proper little blouses. She wore small gold hoops in her ears, and she fiddled with them when her hands were not doing something else. Her shoes were simple flats or low-heeled pumps and she gave a general impression of tidiness and neatness that drove him crazy. He wanted to ruffle her up a bit, loosen a button, hang some dangling earrings in her ears, take her hair down, run his hands through the curls and kiss her silly. She had the sexiest hair he'd seen in a long time, wild and untamable, doing its own thing, in total • contrast to the rest of her prim and proper appearance. She obviously tried to tame it by gathering it in a band at the back of her neck, but curly strands were always escaping.

Yet all he had to do was look into those big blue eyes of hers and know that there was more to Sam than the neat package she presented to the world. There was a lot of not-so-tidy stuff churning inside her.

And for some unfathomable reason he felt the need to find out what. And the growing urge to put his arms around her and tell her to relax.

* * *

In the muted early-evening sunlight, the large, stone and wood plantation house looked as it always had—solid, immutable, yet with an elegant Southern charm. He had lived here all his childhood, as had his father and grandfather before him. His parents still occupied the house.

The place was surrounded by luxuriant, well-tended gardens beyond which stretched several hundred acres of unspoiled woodland, all part of the property. His mother awaited him at the door and hugged him. "How did your meeting go?" she asked.

"Everything's fine, Mother, don't worry about a thing."

He found his father in his study, a cigar in one hand and a whiskey in the other, both strictly against doctor's orders. He was a handsome man with compelling dark eyes and a commanding presence.

"So tell me about your meeting with Sanchez," his father said after David had poured himself a drink.

"Nothing but a misunderstanding blown out of all proportions. It's all straightened out and he'll drop the suit. We'll need to accommodate him on a few points, but I don't think it presents a problem."

His father was pleased with the news, asked for further details and commended David on the way he had handled the affair. "You're sure you don't want to join us now that you're back in the country?" he asked. It was almost a rhetorical question by now, posed whenever the occasion presented itself. The answer had always been no, as it was again today.

The intercom buzzed. "David, Tara is here to see you," his mother's voice announced. "She's in the sitting room."

"I'll be there in a minute."

Having finished his business with his father, David went in search of Tara.

She was sitting in a chair and leaped to her feet when he entered the room, her glossy black hair swinging loose around her shoulders. He had not seen her for a long time, but she was as gorgeous as ever.

He smiled at her. "Hello, Tara."

"David!" She hugged him. "How's my favorite cousin?"

He grinned at her. "I'm fine. How about you?"

"Oh, I'm all right." She stepped back from him and looked him over. "Wow, a suit. You don't look like you've just come out of the jungle."

"It's been a few days."

She sat back down in her chair, crossing her long legs. ""Did you manage to get that humongous bridge built?"

He sat down. "Yes, I did." Against all odds. Every possible complication had presented itself. Still, in the end he'd left the country with the job completed.

"Of course you did." Tara laughed. "Why did I even ask the question? What David McMillan starts, David McMillan finishes."

"You make it sound like a character flaw," he said dryly.

"No, I'm just jealous. You're so disgustingly competent. I always screw everything up."

An odd tone of voice, setting off a ripple of alarm in him. "What's wrong?"

"Oh, nothing. Just a general statement." Her voice was breezy. She stood up again. "Let's find your mother and see if she'll invite me to dinner."

He came to his feet as well and put an arm around her shoulders. "You're invited, Tara."

It was a pleasant evening. David enjoyed being with his parents, sitting at the familiar table, eating good food, and Tara, irrepressibly cheery, was always good company.

After dinner he excused himself for a few minutes to make a phone call. He dialed the number and a moment later Samantha picked up. She had no classes today, he knew, and she was home.

"Hi, it's David," he said.

A short silence. "Hi. Why are you calling?"

"To check up on you."

"*Check up* on me?" Her tone of voice indicated she was not pleased with that news.

"To see if you're home." He grinned into the mouthpiece.

"Where else would I be?"

"By the side of the road, out of gas, or with a breakdown."

"Very funny."

"Not funny, because I'm all the way here and I couldn't come and rescue you."

"I don't need any rescuing," she said coolly.

"Good. I'm glad. Then I won't keep you. Goodnight, Samantha."

"Goodnight, David."

He put the phone down. He didn't like that old rattletrap of a car of hers, but she was home safe and sound. He went to the sitting room where the after-dinner coffee and liqueurs were served.

"How long will you be in the country this time?" his father wanted to know.

"For the rest of the summer." He told them about a project in Mexico in the fall, and that he was building himself a cabin in the woods on a piece of property Susan and Andrew had sold him. It was clear this was news to them and the family grapevine had failed.

"You're building a *cabin*?" Tara asked, wide-eyed.

"With my own bare hands," he said with a grin.

Silence reigned. His mother stared at him. Tara stared at him. His father stared at him. "I thought you'd outgrown that by the time you turned twelve," his father said finally.

David laughed. Building forts, tree houses and huts in the woods had been fun when he'd been a kid. It would be fun now, as an adult. It appealed to the pioneer in him.

"I think I'll enjoy it. Using a hammer, saws, nails, elbow grease." He picked up his coffee cup and smiled at the perplexed faces around the room.

His father gave a long-suffering sigh and closed his eyes briefly. "And I keep hoping you'll turn out normal eventually."

David laughed. "Give it up, Dad," he said.

Sam was in the kitchen cleaning up spilled orange juice when David came home the next evening. She'd only just come home herself, had dropped her bag, kicked off her shoes, grabbed the juice from the fridge and promptly dropped the carton.

He came striding through the door, wearing a different suit, equally impressive. He radiated power and energy, looking as if he'd conquered the world, or at least a piece of it. And here she was, barefoot, clutching a mop like a true Cinderella. Late in the day as it was, he still looked dynamic and...well...gorgeous. So gorgeous, in fact, that her breath caught in her throat and her heart skipped a beat at seeing all this male splendor.

Then she saw his smile, and the familiar gleam in his brown eyes. "Don't look so awestruck, Sam. It's just a suit."

Of course it wasn't just the suit. Thousands of men could wear that suit and not look the way he did. The suit only accentuated what was already part of David—she just hadn't seen it before, at least not displayed in this way. She gathered her composure and gave him a breezy smile.

"Well, you look quite impressive to a simple country girl like me."

He waved his hand. "It's just packaging. Underneath I'm just a simple construction worker."

Oh, sure. She laughed. "That's a relief."

"Why are you mopping the floor at this hour of the day?" he asked.

"I spilled orange juice. The carton slipped right out of my hand."

"Maybe you weren't supposed to have orange juice. How about a brandy? Or a glass of wine? I'll slip into something comfortable and you can tell me about your day." He said this with a straight face, but his eyes were laughing.

"I've got to study."

"It's past ten."

"I *know* it's past ten," she said irritably. "Believe me, I know." Every part of her body knew, including her brain.

"All right," he said calmly, "I'll see you in the morning, then." He picked up his overnight bag and briefcase and strode down the hall to his room.

He changed into shorts and T-shirt and ambled back to the kitchen, where he kept his own bottle of whiskey for convenience's sake. The wet bar was elsewhere in the house, well-stocked.

He found Samantha sitting at the kitchen table, staring at a bowl of fruit.

"I thought you had to study." Her book bag lay on the floor, untouched.

"I do. I just can't make myself."

She looked tired. "Go to bed, then."

"I think maybe I'll have that glass of wine you mentioned."

He took the bottle of Sauvignon Blanc out of the fridge and poured her a glass, then had himself a whiskey. He sat down at the table with her.

"So, how was your day?" he asked.

She took a sip of the wine. "I don't want to talk about it. Tell me about yours."

"I had a good day, two good days. Visited with my parents, took care of a little business problem, and that's about it."

"What kind of company is it your family has? Susan said something about commodities, but I can't remember."

"The company deals in commodities, buying and selling on the world market—cacao, sugar, soy beans, rubber, buying and selling futures, crops that have not yet been planted."

"Seems strange," she said. "I mean, making money buying and selling stuff that doesn't even exist."

Her observation pleased him. "Yes, to me, too. But my brother Anthony loves the game, as he calls it. He seems to thrive on the challenge, the hair-raising stress of it."

A half-a-cent drop in price could lose them a fortune. A half-a-cent increase could make them one.

"But you don't?" she asked. "You're not really working for the McMillan company, are you?"

"No, I just do odd jobs here and there." He took a drink. "I've never been interested in numbers on computer screens. I want to touch things with my hands, build, construct, create a final product."

"Like bridges and dams?"

"Yeah." He loved the challenge of doing this in the most difficult of circumstances—dynamiting tunnels through mountainsides, carving roads through seemingly impassable terrain. And in the end he loved the satisfaction of knowing that the structure he'd designed, fought over, struggled with and completed would improve the lives of the people who used it. That decades, maybe even a century from now, it would still be there.

He gave a crooked grin. "Numbers on paper are just dead stuff."

She rubbed her forehead. "Numbers on papers represent money, or the lack thereof," she said.

"You're right. But it just doesn't do a thing for me."

She raised her eyebrows at him. "You don't like money?"

He grinned. "I don't like the numbers game. I like money itself just fine." It could buy you things—luxury physical comfort, people's time. What it couldn't do was buy you happiness, love, inner contentment. A lesson had to be learned the hard way. He watched Samantha, practically falling asleep as she sat there. She'd drunk only half her wine.

He came to his feet and reached for her hand. "Come on, you need to go to bed," he said.

She stared at him fuzzily. "I'm not going to bed with you."

He almost laughed. "Why not? It would be nice."

She sighed. "It would be stupid."

"You're too hard on yourself, and much too serious."

She pulled her hand free from his and straightened in her chair. "Meaning?" She looked quite awake now.

"A little relaxation is good for the soul. A little recreational lovemaking is good for the soul."

She gave him a scathing look. "I'm honored you're so concerned for the welfare of my soul, and so eager to be of assistance."

He laughed. He couldn't help it. "I live to serve," he said.

Samantha was trying to think how they'd arrived at this topic, but couldn't. She glowered at him. "Is there anything at all that you take serious in life?" she asked, exasperated. What was the matter with this man? He treated everything as a joke, or as inconsequential.

"Not much," he said amiably, "but some things, yes."

"Like what? Please tell."

"A good meal is important. And my health. I take that very seriously. And having friends. And, of course, the agreeable company of a good woman."

The *agreeable company* of a good woman? Now she was impressed! "Is that what you're looking for? The *agreeable company* of a good woman?" she asked with mild mockery.

He gave a weary sigh. "Yes, but it's not a simple quest. Good women aren't easy to find." He held her gaze and smiled wickedly. "I'm thinking you might be one," he said slowly.

"Me? Are you out of your mind?"

"Aren't you a good woman?"

She gave a derisive little laugh. "But I'm not *agreeable*."

He gave her a considering look. "You'd be good for me."

"Me? Hah! Why would I be good for you?"

"You make me laugh."

"I make you laugh?" she asked, affronted. "Well, it certainly isn't my intention to make you laugh."

"Well, you do." He smiled crookedly. "You are so funny, sweet Samantha, with all your intensity and seriousness and *naivete*."

"*Naivete*?" Why was she standing here listening to this lunatic? Did she need this? No, she didn't. She had better things to do with her time.

She picked up her purse and book bag. "I've heard enough of your nonsense. I'm going to study."

"Right. Don't waste your time having a little fun, Sam." His tone was mildly teasing, but it hit a raw nerve.

"Well, *you* may have time to laze round and do nothing, but I don't! I have responsibilities and duties and work and school, so do me a favor and leave me alone!" She swung around, her bag hooking over the doorknob. It went flying. Her books, notebooks, paper, all ended up on the floor.

"Damn!" she yelled, and went down on her knees to gather her things. He was next to her, helping her, and there he was, holding her business law test with the big fat red F on it. She grabbed for it, mortified, but he evaded her reach, his gaze on the paper.

If he was going to make a wisecrack she'd kill him with her bare hands.

He didn't. He gave her back the paper without comment, gathered up the rest of the stuff on the floor and came to his feet. "I'm happy to help you with your business law, if you'd like," he said casually, reaching out to help her to her feet.

His hand was rough and hard, a working hand. She slipped hers out of his grasp. "I can manage, thank you," she said politely.

"Just ask when you're stuck."

"Thank you," she said again, a tad coolly.

"Hey." He put a hand lightly on her shoulder. "Accepting help when you need it is not a sign of weakness, you know. Not even for strong, independent people."

Her body went rigid. She felt as if he'd looked into her soul and seen her fear. Oh, God, she couldn't stand it. She didn't want him looking into her soul. She didn't want him anywhere near her.

He was very near her. She could smell soap and warm skin and that undefinable, sexy man-smell. Felt the magic spell begin its work.

"Sam, relax," he said, smiling a little. And then his arms slipped around her and his mouth was on hers, gentle, but firm.

Her heart slammed against her ribs. She stood immobilized in his arms. So much for relaxing.

Then her body softened, melted. Heat. A tingling heat all over, rushing through her blood. Instinctively, her mouth opened to his and his kiss changed from a gentle stroking into an eager, erotic little dance. She felt her body yielding, molding against his. It was wonderful to feel the hard strength of him against her, the support of his arms around her.

She should not be feeling this at all.

But she was feeling it.

And she wasn't struggling against it, either. She was kissing him back, leaning into him, awash with wanting and needing and the promise of an enchanted universe full of light, freedom, the sound of music.

She gave a soft moan of rebellion as he gently released her. She did not want to stop, did not want to open her eyes. Her legs trembled and she grabbed a chair for support. Why did she let this happen? Where was her sanity?

"Well, that was very encouraging," he said with a devilish glint in his dark eyes. "You're a good kisser for someone who's not interested in romance and frivolity."

He was making fun of her. "What do you think you were doing?" she said, trying for outrage but failing miserably. Her voice was a feeble whisper, truly pathetic.

"Actually, I'm not sure I was thinking at all," he said, his eyes gleaming. "All thought magically left me. How about you? Were you thinking?"

Well, what could she say to that?

"I don't think you were," he answered for her. "You seemed quite wrapped up in the passion of the moment."

Passion. Oh, great.

"Don't look so appalled, Sam. Passion is not a sin. It's gift. It's magical and wonderful and—"

"Oh, shut *up!*" she managed to say.

He laughed. "What's wrong, Samantha?"

"What's wrong? *You* are wrong—your presence in this house! I want you to stay out of my way. I don't want you to touch me or kiss me again."

"But you enjoyed it so," he said soberly.

"That's what you think," she snapped, knowing she sounded ridiculous the moment she heard her own words. "I don't want to be involved with you. I have—"

"No time for that," he finished for her. "Of course, I understand. I'll see what I can do. I'll try to keep my animal instincts under control." He gave a theatrical sigh. "It will be hard, because I find myself very much attracted to you, and—"

"Oh, go take a cold shower," she said irritably. "I have work to do."

She worked and studied like a maniac for the next several days, declining to have a break with David in the evening, avoiding him and his charms to protect herself. Avoiding the music that was always playing when she came home—exotic rhythms and sensuous melodies that evoked in her emotions and desires she didn't want to feel.

He appeared to be obliging her, minding his own business, leaving her be. She was relieved. Or so she told herself.

Still, in the back of her mind he was always there, like the refrain of a distant song chasing the shadows of her days.

And then one day, just after twelve noon, she found David standing in her office door at the store. Her heart lurched. He was the last person she'd expected to see, but here he was, dressed in crisp khakis and a Greek blue polo shirt. Calm and relaxed, he radiated health and wellbeing. Not a molecule of stress anywhere. She straightened in her chair and wiped a rebellious curl behind her ear, willing her heart to calm down. So the man was handsome, so the man had charm. She could handle him.

"What brings you here?" she inquired, picking up a green paper-clip, twisting it with her fingers.

He smiled his hundred-watt smile. "I'm taking you to lunch," he announced.

CHAPTER FOUR

DAVID watched her expression as she took in his words and he knew she wasn't going to jump up and down with enthusiasm and say, Cool! I'm hungry, let's go! or something equally cheery.

Cheer, come to think of it, was not what came to mind, seeing the shabby office in which she spent her days. He'd be happy to take her out to lunch every day of the week just to get her away from the place for a while.

She looked at him coolly. "Oh? You are?" He did not miss the derision in her voice.

"Yes." If he had to carry her out bodily and force-feed her something nutritious.

"Well, this may come as a shock to you, but I can't leave just because you want me to."

"You can't? Why not?"

"I'm busy, and you're not my boss."

"But you run the show and you're in charge."

"True." A defiant look in her eyes. She was destroying the paper-clip in her hands. She was wearing another one of her prim little blouses, pale blue, with pearly buttons down the front. Prim—except that the top little button had come undone and was showing a teasing bit of white lace from her bra.

He smiled charmingly. "Is there anything you're doing right now that can't wait for an hour?"

"No," she said.

"Okay, good. So really, if you wanted to, you could go out to lunch."

"If I wanted to, yes."

"And you don't want to?" He was enjoying this, but felt slightly guilty for egging her on, knowing perfectly well why she was resisting him. He'd tried to leave her alone, had managed for about a week, but now...he just *had* to do something, if it was only taking her out to lunch.

"Correct. I don't want to," she said.

"Why not?"

She looked straight at him. "Because I don't like being told what to do."

"Not even when it's about a nice lunch, with real food, wholesome, healthy food that will build your stamina and give you energy for the rest of the day to do your work in a more efficient and expedient way?"

"No," she said stonily.

She was a tough one, this woman, and she knew her own mind. Infuriating as she might be at times, he found her irresistible. He crossed his arms in front of his chest and studied her, seeing the sexily tousled hair, the firm chin, and what he wanted more than anything was to take her away from all this and make wild, passionate love to her on some deserted beach, away from work and other responsibilities.

Warning bells began to ring deep inside. He ignored them. Nothing wrong with a little romance, was there? It would be good for them both. There'd been other romances in his life, harmless, enjoyable affairs with career women who valued their freedom and had no interest in long-term commitments. Relationships that had ended without crises and broken hearts.

The way he liked it.

The only way it was ever going to be.

"What if I told you you were coming with me on a plane and I was whisking you away to a Caribbean island for rest and relaxation?"

"I don't answer hypothetical questions," she said loftily. But for a fleeting micro-second he saw naked longing flash across her face. It made him feel instantly guilty. What had possessed him to say something stupid like that?

She dropped the tortured paper-clip, rested her arms on the desk and leaned forward a little. "You may be in the habit of ordering people around, David, but I'm not a good one to try that with. May I remind you I'm not on your payroll?"

"True," he agreed, trying not to smile. If she were, she probably wouldn't act any differently.

"I don't like people taking charge of me. Just so you know."

"But somebody's got to." He simply couldn't resist provoking her. Shame on him.

"Go take a long hike off a short pier," she said curtly, "and don't come back."

He leaned against the doorframe and narrowed his eyes at her. "I'm not good at taking orders, either," he said softly.

"Then stand there."

Obviously he wasn't going to get anywhere and a new approach was called for. "I have a better idea. I'm going to start this all over."

She rolled her eyes at him and said nothing, pretending to busy herself with the papers on her desk.

"I want to apologize," he said pseudo-humbly. "I was having a little fun with you and I'm sorry."

"No, you're not." She kept shuffling papers.

"Samantha?" he said nicely.

She looked up. "Yes?"

She really had the most gorgeous blue eyes. "It has come to my attention that, apart from a fast and furious minute in the morning, we hardly ever see each other in the daylight." He paused and watched her.

"True," she said coolly, and glanced down at her desk.

"So I had the idea to come by and see if you might be interested in having lunch with me," he said politely.

She did not answer immediately, apparently contemplating his suggestion. She leaned back in her chair and studied him, head tilting to the side a bit, twisting a pen in her fingers. Her blouse gaped a little more, showing the soft upper curve of her left breast. For a skinny thing, she had surprisingly full breasts.

She lifted her chin, swiveling her chair left to right. "Considering the fact that I have a lot to do, and the fact that I'm not sure I like you very much, why would I want to have lunch with you?"

He could think of a couple of reasons, one being the uninspired sandwich in her bag, made with some revolting compressed turkey meat and limp lettuce. He'd seen her throw it together in a hurry this morning.

"The food?" he suggested.

She seemed to consider this. "Am I allowed to order my own food?" she inquired.

He grinned. "Yes, you are. And you can have dessert as well—two, even—if you want."

To his enjoyment he saw the corners of her mouth twitch. "Goodie," she said, and broke out in a full smile. "I'll be ready in a minute and a half."

He loved that about her: she caved in, and the pretending was over.

"So, tell me about your son," David said—giving her another order. Samantha let it pass, feeling rather magnanimous. In front of her a luscious shrimp salad tempted her. So she told him about Kevin, trying not to sound too much like a gushing mother, but it was difficult because Kevin was such a lovable kid and he was hers and she was proud of him. She wondered why David was interested; most men she'd met were not crazy about her having a young son. He even wanted to see the picture she had of him in her purse. And he looked at it longer than just politeness required.

"Is his father in the picture?" he asked. "Does he see him?"

He thought she was divorced. She glanced down at her plate. "No. He...his father died when Kevin was only four months old." *And even then his father wasn't interested in him*, she added silently. For Kevin's sake she was always glad she didn't have to say Jason had left them. For her own sake as well. *My husband left me*. It sounded so... well, as if maybe there was something wrong with her.

"I'm sorry," David said, his eyes suddenly dark and solemn.

"It's all right." She smiled. "It's a long time ago."

"You have other family, apart from your sister and grandfather? Parents?"

She told him about her parents, that they had died, drowned, when Kevin was two, the same year her sister had married and moved to Florida. It had been a terrible time and she'd felt lost and lonely, but she didn't tell him that.

"You've worked for your grandfather all that time?"

She nodded. "Yes."

And he asked her about her work and why she hadn't found another job years ago.

"I thought about it a lot. I even went on a couple of interviews."

"Then why not?"

"Because my grandfather wouldn't have found another qualified person to take my job for the money he's paying." She gave him a challenging look. "I'm very good at what I'm doing. And I'm nuts enough to put up with him."

"Not a doubt in my mind," he said, "but finding a replacement isn't your responsibility."

She gave a crooked smile. "I know. But he's my grand- rather and this family loyalty thing really gets in the way. He's old, and I can't just abandon him."

His eyes looked into hers and he was smiling. "You have a soft heart, Samantha, no matter how you try to cover it up."

"He's my grandfather," she said. "He used to bring me candy and stuffed animals. What can I say?"

"Why is the business not doing well?"

"A combination of factors. Mostly the competition from the new, big furniture stores they've built in the area in the last ten years, and the fact that he's losing touch with what the customers really want." She sighed. "It's time for him to retire, but he's alone and the store is his life."

"So what's going to happen?"

"I don't know. He can't sell the business; it's not worth anything. It's not generating enough income anymore for anybody to want to buy it, and the building is in disrepair." She frowned as she stared down at her plate. "What worries me most is what it's going to do to him to admit the fact that what he thought he had isn't there anymore. We can't go on much longer." She put her fork down. "And, of course, I'll be out of a job. No small matter, either."

"You love your grandfather."

"Yes." She sighed. "I love him but he drives me up the wall. He's grumpy a lot and he's not well. He smokes these disgusting cigars and he won't quit and he refuses to go to the doctor for a check-up."

"Are you sure you don't want a glass of wine?" he asked, humor in his voice.

She felt reckless suddenly. "Sure, I'll have a glass of wine."

She couldn't remember the last time she'd had wine with lunch. Of course she never went out to a real restaurant for lunch. It was nice, she had to admit, to sit in this bright and cheerful place, eating wonderful food. She studied the framed pictures on the wall, scenes from the south of France, she guessed. Rustic villages, lots of flowers, brightly painted window shutters. She sighed longingly.

"You like them?" He was watching her looking at the pictures.

"The stuff of fantasy," she said, taking a drink from her glass.

"Your fantasy?"

She gave a little smile. "Not realistically, no."

He laughed. "Fantasies aren't about realism."

"There are fantasies and fantasies." She gave him a challenging look. "Some fantasies have the potential to become true. Others you know will never happen."

"So, tell me about one of your realistic fantasies."

"I want to sleep for three days straight. And don't tell me that is a pathetic fantasy. It only means you have no idea how good it would feel."

"Oh, there was a time in my life I had that fantasy, too. So you think this one might actually come true?"

"I'm going to give it a try. There will be no classes for the third week of July, a break between two sessions. I intend to get into bed and not come out for three days."

He nodded solemnly. "I'll bring you food in bed—croissants, smoked salmon, chocolate mousse."

"I do not want to be disturbed."

"All right, I'll try my very best to be quiet and not disturb you." He raised his glass to her. "However, I wish for you that the time will come when you'll be able to have less prosaic fantasies."

"Such as?" She regretted her words the moment she had uttered them.

"Fantasies about the sweet things in life. Romance and frivolity. A midnight swim, a stroll on the beach, a passionate love affair." He held up his hand to stop her from responding. "You want to know my fantasy?"

She smiled sweetly. "I'd rather not."

"I'll tell you anyway. I want to go for a walk in the dark with you. Show you Venus in the sky, have you smell the roses and feel the grass under your bare feet."

She raised her brows at him. "That's it?"

"All right, kiss you silly under a full moon, take off your clothes and ravish you in the grass."

"That a pretty tame fantasy, for a man."

He laughed. "I didn't say I have no others."

Mercifully the waiter appeared to fill their wine glasses.

She took another bite of food, knowing she was enjoying the meal, enjoying sitting here with David with the devil in his eyes, trying to charm her.

No, she wasn't going to allow herself to fall under his spell, allow herself to be seduced by sexy smiles and shrimp salad.

It was too dangerous.

Then again, it was only lunch, really, and it was nice and she was enjoying herself. And in another hour she'd be back in the office where reality would instantly rescue her. Really, how dangerous could it be?

So she sat back and relaxed, sipped her wine, and ordered a very luscious dessert.

David tromped around his property and once again inspected the foundation that had been laid the day before, and the stacks of timber that had been delivered and piled at the edge of the cleared lot.

It was a truly beautiful place, with the woods on the back side and a front view of the sloping fields and the Blue Ridge Mountains. He stood quietly for a moment, taking it in, and unbidden came the image of Sam standing in the kitchen earlier that morning, looking at the view with a dreamy look in her big blue eyes. In the two weeks that he had been at the house he had never actually seen her stand still, doing nothing.

He'd watched her for a few moments, sensing the tendrils of newly found feelings reach out and curl through his blood.

Impatient with himself, he began hauling out equipment and material from his truck. He'd be leaving again in the fall. He had until mid-October to build this cabin and when it was finished he'd have a place to call his own again, even if he wouldn't live in it very often.

He tried not to think of the magnificent old colonial country house he had once owned and shared with a beautiful woman—the place he'd called home.

It had been the last time he lived anywhere on a permanent basis—a long time ago now. And he would never have again what he had lost then. He had reconciled himself to that, determined never again to experience the hell he'd gone through. He wanted his life simple, easy, without risk.

He frowned, impatient with his own thoughts, and slammed the truck's tailgate shut with a little more force than necessary.

Two-eleven, the bedside clock told her when she awoke. Sam sighed and turned onto her other side. She was doing this more and more lately: waking up for no apparent reason and then having trouble getting back to sleep. Her mind would begin to churn with worries—about work, about her grandfather, about Kevin. He'd been gone for ages, it seemed, and she missed him. She missed the sparkle in his blue eyes, his sense of humor, the general noisiness and activity of having him around. But he was having fun and there was no reason to feel guilty. He was in good, loving hands, doing good, healthy boy things. Her brother-in-law was a great male role model.

What if something happened to him? An accident?

She broke out in a cold sweat. *Stop it!* she told herself. *Just stop it!* She got out of bed and went to the kitchen to make herself some tea. While she waited for the water to boil she ate a nectarine, sweet and delicious. As she stood there with the juice running down her chin she became aware of noises coming from the office—music, a voice, something else. Was David up? The water boiled and she took the kettle off the burner, then wiped her mouth with a wet paper towel and went to investigate.

She saw light coming from Andrew's office, heard the rattling of the fax machine mixing with the strains of classical music she could not identify. The door was open and, coming closer, she heard David talking on the phone. His broad back was turned to her and he seemed to be focusing focusing on the paper spewing forth from the fax machine.

Her heart made its familiar little leap just seeing him. She tried to ignore it.

He must have sensed her standing in the doorway— surely he could not have heard her—and turned around. As he saw her his face went very still, then relaxed into a faint smile. He gestured for her to come in as he continued talking into the phone.

She was suddenly aware of her appearance—barefoot, wearing only a long white nightgown, thin cotton, wrinkled from sleeping in it, her hair all tangled and standing out in all directions.

"I'll call you when I've reviewed this—oh, in a couple of hours." David finished his conversation and put the phone down.

"Did I wake you?" he asked her.

She shook her head. "No. I can't hear you at the other end of the house. I heard you when I was in the kitchen, making some tea. Why are you up at this hour?"

He came to his feet and stretched, as if he were stiff from sitting too long. "Work."

"Work? At half past two in the morning?" She tried not to notice the way the muscles flexed in his body.

"It's afternoon in Singapore."

She stared at him. "Oh," she said then, not sounding terribly bright. Well, what could you expect in the middle of the night?

He ran his fingers through his hair. "Why are you up?"

She shrugged. "Just woke up and couldn't go back to sleep, so I thought I'd make some tea." The fax machine stopped its noise and the music rippled unchallenged through the room with passionate intensity. Classical, with exotic eastern overtones—romantic and seductive.

For a moment they both listened, captured by the music.

Behind the glass doors, the night was dark and mysterious. He was looking at her and the air around them seemed charged with a secret, sensuous energy. She felt an odd apprehension quivering through her.

Was it the music? Was it him?

"Well, I'd better go," she said, hearing the strange tone of her own voice, low and husky.

"You don't have to."

Such simple words. Sam tried to move, but her legs I wouldn't obey. It was the music, hypnotizing her, stroking \ the secret dreams hiding in the shadows of her heart.

And the look in David's eyes.

He was standing in front of her, looking down at her. He seemed awfully big, and she felt very small standing there barefoot in her flimsy nightgown, and she couldn't move, couldn't get away.

He smiled into her eyes, saying nothing, and the music filled the silence between them with an erotic energy that ' made her tremble. Her heart was beating fast and it was suddenly hard to breathe. An invisible power seemed to radiate from him, surrounding her, captivating her like a witch's spell.

"You smell very sweet," he said then, and he bent his head and kissed her full on the mouth.

She stood perfectly still, her heart racing, and she felt his arms slide slowly and gently around her, holding her very I carefully, kissing her with such warm sensuality that heat I rushed through her blood like warm wine.

Touch me, she thought dizzily, *touch me*. But the words stayed silent in her head. She wanted to feel his hands on her body, she wanted...

And then she did feel his hands on her, felt his touch on her breast, warm through the thin material of her night-gown, a gentle caressing that felt so exquisite her breath caught in her throat. Then his hands moved down to her waist and he straightened away from her. "And you taste delicious," he added softly.

The nectarine, she realized. Looking at his face, she knew it would be the easiest thing in the world to move back into his arms, the easiest thing to end up in his bed, where he would touch her and kiss her all over and make love to her and...

Instead, she backed away from him, turned and fled back to her room, her heart pounding.

"You are such an idiot," she muttered to herself as she pushed her face into the pillow. "You act like an frightened virgin. You are so pitiful."

She didn't sleep much after that. She kept feeling David's mouth on hers, his hands on her breasts. Kept hearing the deep, sexy tone of his voice. *You taste delicious.*

David sat at the desk and stared at the report he'd fished out of the fax machine an hour ago. But instead of the words and numbers and graphs on the paper, he saw Sam in his mind's eye. He'd caught her off guard. She'd stood there at the door into the office, wearing a long white nightgown, looking like a sexy angel with her curly hair wild around her head like a messy halo. She'd been nervous, her fingers fiddling with one of the tiny buttons on the front of her nightgown.

It was a good thing he'd been on the phone; his reaction to her had been instant and powerful and he'd needed a minute to gather his composure.

But he had not been able to resist kissing her, and he remembered the feel of her soft mouth under his, her slim body against his own. He'd not been wrong about the hunger he'd felt in her; he'd seen it in her eyes, felt her reaction when he'd caressed her breasts. But her own feelings had frightened

her and she'd fled as if he'd been the devil himself. Her body might be ready, but her mind was not convinced.

What the hell was the matter with him? He should have more sense than to keep kissing and hugging her. It wasn't fair to her. It wasn't fair to himself.

But why not? They were both grown-up, mature people. What was wrong with a little romance, a little fun? Nothing at all. And the gods knew he was ready for some.

He yawned and tossed the report aside. He'd read it tomorrow. He'd better get some sleep before the night was over.

Quietly he moved down the hall, seeing Samantha's door half open. She must not have closed it properly and it had slid open of its own accord. Faint light came from the room.

He glanced inside, unable to resist. The curtains were not drawn. Sam lay on her back, asleep in a pool of moonlight, hair spread out on the pillow, the sheet pulled up to her waist. She looked peaceful and relaxed and he watched her, feeling a little guilty. Her lips were slightly parted, her long eyelashes lay like a dark fringe on her skin. She was breathing quietly.

A sweetness filled him, warm and tender, and he hastily drew back from the doorway, and went to his own bed. When had he last looked at a sleeping woman with such overwhelming emotion? And why now? Why Samantha, this evasive, stressed-out, always-in-a-hurry woman who had no time for fun and laughter?

He had no answer, which was nothing new. There were many unanswered questions in his life.

All he knew was that she stirred something deep inside him, and it made him feel alive. It made him want to tease her and make her laugh, feeling a lightness of spirit that he'd thought had died inside him a long time ago.

Fear whispered through his mind, pushing at a door he did not want to open.

He should leave her alone.

He wasn't sure he could.

Sam sat cross-legged on her bed, staring at the book in her lap, and gritted her teeth. Business law. She *hated* it. How could she not understand this stuff? She wasn't stupid, so why didn't she get it? Then, in a fit of frustration, she threw the book across the room, which was an unfortunate impulse. The book hit the lamp on the dressing table and the two came crashing down on the floor, taking a glass of water with them. The glass shattered, the water splashing everywhere.

A moment later David was pounding on her door. "Samantha!" he shouted. "What's going on in there?"

"Nothing!" she yelled back. "Just..."

He opened the door and barged in. "What's going on?" he demanded. "What was all that noise?" Then he noticed the lamp on the floor and the water, and the book.

She took a deep breath and tried for a semblance of composure. "The lamp fell, that's all. I'll handle it."

He rescued the lamp from the floor and put it back on the dressing table. The shade was all askew. Then he picked up her book, shook the water off it and handed it to her. She was still sitting on the bed, surrounded by papers and notebooks, feeling like a schoolgirl with him towering over her in all his calm, competent, masculinity. It was not one of her better moments.

"Throwing books, are we?" he said lightly.

She glared at him, saying nothing.

"Sam, why are you so bloody stubborn? Why won't you let me help you? It's no big deal, for heaven's sake." He moved to the door, not waiting for an answer. "I'll pour you a drink. Bring your stuff and we'll have a look at it."

The door closed behind him.

She closed her eyes. He was trying to be nice; why then did he make her so mad? She forced herself to take a few deep breaths before she climbed off the bed. She'd better take care of the mess she'd made. A bedroom floor was not a good place for shards of glass.

Cleaning up gave her time to calm down. He was right, of course. She was being stubborn and it wasn't going to do her any good if she didn't learn what she needed to learn.

She gathered her book and papers and went in search of him. He was sitting on the porch, doing nothing. Well, reading a spy novel, which was as good as doing nothing.

She straightened her shoulders. "I'd appreciate some help," she said, trying to sound dignified rather than desperate.

"Sure." He leaped to his feet.

So there they were, minutes later, sitting next to each other at the kitchen table, and she realized the terrible mistake she had made. She couldn't keep her mind on business law. Her mind was tormenting her about his closeness and the warm, male scent of him, and his hand, that big strong, competent hand, moving a pencil across the paper, writing Chinese, for all she understood, and the sexy sound of his voice as he was explaining a particular problem she'd been struggling with. His voice... setting off little flames inside her.

She was struggling with an entirely different problem now.

Her body grew warmer and warmer; her blood tingled and she couldn't think straight. Some alien force was taking over her mind; it was terrifying. She had to get away from him before the little flames turned into a bonfire.

Before she threw herself at him and begged him to make love to her, to make her feel alive in his arms.

Which would not do. It would be so needy, so pitiful. And she was not a needy, pitiful person. She was strong and independent and she was absolutely, positively not going to succumb to this ridiculous, frivolous, physical attraction to a man she hardly knew. Not even Michelangelo's *David* in the flesh.

"I'm sorry," she said, moving her chair away. "I'm just too tired to think. My brain is scrambled. Would you mind :: we did this another time?"

His looked into her eyes. "Of course not," he said evenly. She stacked book and paper and came awkwardly to her feet. "Thanks," she said, not looking at him. Straightening her spine, she tried for a dignified exit, which got sabotaged before she'd even left the room when she tripped over the corner of a colorful Navajo rug, which made her stumble against a chair, where she got her foot stuck behind one of the legs. And from there on all hope for dignity was lost as she crumpled to the floor in a most undignified heap.

CHAPTER FIVE

DAVID was with her in a flash, helping her back to her feet. "Did you hurt anything?" She was too damn skinny, he thought, not for the first time. She looked as if she could break a bone without even trying.

"No," she snapped. "I just tripped." She looked furious and embarrassed and he wanted to gather her into his arms and hold her tight and comfort her.

He guided her to the sofa and gently nudged her down, sitting down beside her.

"Sam," he said, "you're not just tired, you know. You're stressed out."

"So is half the world's population." She rubbed her ankle.

"And the other half is not," he said calmly.

"Which includes you, I suppose. Well, lucky you." A loose curl was hanging in front of her eyes. She tossed her head in irritation.

"You're overworked, overstudied, and overwrought," he went on, deciding to ignore her comment. Somebody needed to talk some sense into her. "You don't get enough sleep, you don't eat one decent meal a day, if I'm any judge, and you never take time to just relax. Where do you think this is going to lead you?"

"To a business degree, a better job, more money, a house, a college education for my son!"

"If you ever live that long."

He saw her clenched jaws, watched her grit her teeth. She said nothing. She sat like a statue next to him, her body -tiff with anger, and he could tell that she was going to break down in tears at any moment. He sat there, wishing she would, so he could comfort her and persuade her to let him help her.

She did not cry.

"I admire your goals and ambitions, Sam," he said, "but there's something wrong with the way you're going about getting them."

"Oh, really?" Her voice trembled. "And who are you to make that judgement? What do you know about my life?"

"Enough," he said, remembering the hell he had once gone through, the years of trying to forget, years of too much work and too little rest. He hadn't wanted to sleep, tormented by nightmares. "The way you live, Sam, you're going to make yourself sick, one way or another. Stress does that to people." It had done it to him.

"I'm not going to get sick. I'm perfectly healthy, thank you." She was trying very hard to be calm, he could tell.

"Tell me, what would be so bad about stretching out your courses over a longer period of time?"

"*I have* no time! I'll be *thirty* next May. I have a son who needs to go to college in a few years and I have no money. And I would appreciate it if you'd mind your own business!" She jumped to her feet, ready to march off, but he grabbed her by the arm to stop her.

"Why are you doing this?" he ground out, feeling a sudden wild frustration rushing to the surface. "I'm just— I'm just trying to help you! What's so terrible about that? Why are you acting as if I'm the enemy?"

"Let go of my arm," she said, her voice shaking. He could feel her body trembling.

He let go of her arm.

They stared at each other in silence, the air charged with tension. Her eyes were dark pools of anger—despair? He couldn't tell. Her hands were clenched by her sides.

He could feel the beating of his heart. "Sam, I'm not the enemy."

He saw her swallow. She looked scared and vulnerable and he wanted to take her in his arms.

"Don't," she whispered, as if she'd guessed his thoughts.

"Sam..."

"Please," she said huskily. "Please, just leave me alone." She turned and rushed out the door. He made no move to stop her.

He groaned in utter frustration. He'd blown it. Royally.

He should do as she'd asked and leave her alone, not tease her or try to help her or touch her...just leave her alone.

Why was it so hard?

He thought of the other women he'd known in the past ten years. Not many, and none had touched him deeply.

That was how he had liked it. It was easier that way. He lived in far-away places, often not under the most comfortable of circumstances, and being free to go where he pleased and to do as he pleased was important to him. He loved his work, too much probably. It took all his energy and time and there was no room in his life for a permanent relationship, a commitment to a woman. He didn't want the complications.

He didn't want to feel. He didn't want to feel.

So what the hell was he doing?

She didn't like him and his laughing eyes. Sam kicked off her shoes and they went sailing across the floor. He was presumptuous, invaded her space, and she absolutely, positively didn't want anything more to do with him.

This morning she'd complained to Gina about David being so disgustingly distracting. "Love's like that," Gina had said dryly.

Well, she wasn't in love. Sam yanked her T-shirt over her head and sent it flying after the shoes. She hardly knew the man. Physical attraction, lust, was all it was. Her long- dormant hormones dancing up a storm. He was leaving for Mexico in the fall, so he'd told her. It was useless to even think about giving in to her feelings.

"So, have a love affair for the rest of the summer," Gina had suggested, apparently of a different mindset. "Have a little fun, Sam. God knows, you deserve to have some fun."

Gina was an idiot. An affair with David—what a nightmare that would be! She ripped off the rest of her clothes and flung them across the room. Next thing she knew, he'd be rearranging her life, telling her what to eat, when to eat, what to wear, what job to take. Telling her to stop taking classes.

Like Jason.

Fear swept through her. She'd done what Jason had wanted: had a baby, quit college. Then he'd left her.

Never again would she let a man tell her what to do.

Turning on the shower full blast, she climbed in and stood for a long time in the pelting water, trying to calm herself.

She had a long list of goals, but she'd better add another one and put it on the top:

STAY AWAY FROM DAVID.

Which was easier said than done, of course. Late the next morning a florist's van stopped in front of the store. Sam watched through the window as a

delivery man with a blond ponytail and a ring through his nose carried in an enormous flower arrangement.

"Samantha Bennett?" he asked.

She nodded, speechless.

"Okay if I put it down here?" Without waiting for an answer he placed the flowers on one of the tables on the sales floor.

"Thank you," she said to his retreating back. She stared at the extravagant display of blooms and reached for the little card tucked into the greenery, feeling suddenly a little breathless.

I was thinking of you this morning and felt inspired to send these flowers to help you remember the sweet things in life. David.

All day she kept glancing at the flowers, beautiful, exotic blooms whose names she didn't know. Delicate colors, fragile petals, exquisite forms and shapes. All day she inhaled the intoxicating fragrance, seeing the shimmering of visions on the fringes of her consciousness...forgotten fantasies, hidden dreams, lost imaginings.

The sweet things in life. A walk in the moonlight, love and romance, kisses. And then other images floated through her mind. Mexico. Palm trees, colorful markets, Mayan ruins, wonderful music. She'd seen pictures, knew people who had been there. She visualized herself lying next to David on a beach, doing absolutely nothing, sipping something fruity from a coconut shell, getting drunk on the sound of the waves.

She, Samantha Bennett, doing absolutely nothing but lazing on a beach. It was ridiculous. It was wonderful.

David leaped in his truck and started the engine. He'd accomplished a lot today, but now it was time to quit. He lurched down the rough track to the road and turned toward home. He sighed and tried to clear his mind. A rabbit scooted across the road, barely escaping his wheels.

He glanced at his watch. He needed to write a few e-mails and read up on the Mexico project. But first, a shower. He was hot, dirty and sweaty, but it felt good. He liked the feeling of doing physical work, out in the open air. An image of Sam, sitting in her dismal little office all day, flashed through his mind. He thought of the flowers he'd sent her this morning and hoped they'd cheered up her day.

Flowers. Not very original, but for the moment it was the best he could come up with on short notice. What she needed was to get away from that dreary office, away from her books and obsession with studying before she had a nervous breakdown. Away. Far away.

An idea had been forming in his head and he'd been playing with the possibilities. It was a wild and crazy idea, for sure. Impossible, maybe. Illegal, probably. An idea that appealed to him because of its audacity. And if he had a little help, he could pull it off.

She would hate him for it.

For a little while.

She'd never forgive him.

Sure she would. She was a woman. He would...explain, show her...

He grinned. It was such a nice idea. The wickedness of it appealed to him. He reached for the cellphone on the seat beside him and punched in a number.

"I want to thank you for the flowers," Sam told David when she came home at ten that night. "They're beautiful." Music was playing, something lively

and cheery. A man and a woman were singing something sexy in Spanish. She was beginning to wonder if the music David played at night was some subtle attempt at seduction.

"I'm glad you like them," said David, putting down the book he was reading. Not a spy novel, she noticed. Something technical. He smiled. "I hope they reminded you of the sweet things in life." He grinned. "You know, stars in the sky, the smell of roses, crickets in the grass."

And hugs and kisses and making love, came the unbidden thought. Her treacherous heart began an uneasy rhythm.

"It's nice to have something beautiful to look at," she said noncommittally.

He waved at a chair. "Sit down, relax. Have a drink."

She shook her head. "I've got to study for a test."

He said nothing, just looked at her. She hesitated. 'Why do you bother with me, David? Why not just let me be?"

"It disturbs me to see you so overextended. It reminds me of myself, some years ago, and it was...not good." He gave a light shrug. "Anyway, besides that, well..." he grinned crookedly "...I *like* bothering you."

"And you're thinking that if I were less preoccupied with my work and classes, I'd have more time to frolic with you?"

He laughed. "I like your choice of words. Yes, I would be very pleased to do some frolicking with you."

She anchored her feet to the floor and took in a deep breath. "Well, then, I really want you to understand this, David: I don't want to frolic with you."

"Maybe you don't know how nice it would be," he said, deadpan.

"Oh I think I do. You're a very...sexy man and I'm sure you're very experienced with women and I imagine we'd have a great time together, but having a great time right now is not on my program."

He came to his feet and nodded. "You have no time," he commented.

"Right."

He stood in front of her and observed her calmly. "Sometimes we have to be flexible and make time for things or events we hadn't planned. I'm sure somewhere in your business management courses this issue comes up."

He was too close. Her skin tingled with his nearness. She took a step back, away from him. "I can't afford the luxury of a summer fling, David. I'm sure it would be wonderful in many ways. I'm sure you'd wine and dine me, you'd take me places, we'd walk hand in hand in the moonlight, you probably make wonderful love and all that, but the price is too high, David." *I can't afford a broken heart.* "I just—"

"You sound like an accountant," he interrupted her, faint amusement in his voice. "*Afford, luxury, price.* I was talking about getting to know each other, enjoying each other's company. Enjoy the present moment, have a little fun."

"I know the kind of fun you're—"

He silenced her with his mouth, his arms suddenly around her. It took her by surprise and his kiss sent her senses reeling: a deep, erotic kiss that left nothing to the imagination—passionate and demanding, claiming possession. Her body leaped to life and there was not a thing she could do about it. It happened. It just happened. She wanted to fight him, really she did, but he was so big and strong. His hands moved into her hair and stroked her head. It felt so good, so good. Her heart raced and her blood sang. It wasn't fair, it truly wasn't, not with all her hormones making war with her common sense.

He released her mouth, his hands brushing softly across her cheeks and chin, her shoulders. "Did you know," he said, ' 'that kissing and fondling and stroking and caressing are very good for the immune system?"

She stared at him, her mind blank for just a second. Then her sanity returned. "Did you know," she shot back, "that I have absolutely no intention of having an affair with you?"

And with that she turned and marched off to her room. She tried not to hear the buoyant sounds of music undulating after her down the hall, tempting her. Tempting her to do what?

Turn around and walk right back into the sitting room and throw herself at David and tell him she'd changed her mind and she wanted nothing more than a wild, passionate love affair. Whatever the consequences.

In her room, she ripped the scrunchy out of her ponytail and shook her hair loose. "You are such a sap," she told her reflection in the mirror. "So he knows how to kiss— does that mean you have to fall for him?"

She got ready for bed, talking to herself. "You do not want an-affair with David McMillan. It's all way too convenient for him. Here you are, right in this house. He'd spend his days building his cabin and his nights in your bed. What a wonderful arrangement. When hell freezes over," she muttered, and crawled into bed.

She didn't want to be anybody's plaything. A plaything just to be tossed away when he got back on a plane to depart for some alien location, where, needless to say, he'd find himself another plaything to dally with.

David McMillan. So charming, so sexy, such a wonderful kisser. She groaned in her pillow. Why him? Why now?

The house was silent and empty when Sam came home one night the following week.

Her classes had been canceled due to air-conditioning problems at the college and it was only just after six.

She wandered through the house. No David. No music. It felt strange to come home to this quiet emptiness. David was always there, even though she avoided spending time with him. There was always music.

Another flower arrangement had arrived at the office that morning, accompanied by a tantalizing little note.

Look at these flowers and remember, there's magic out there. David.

It gave her an odd sense of excitement, of danger, to know she was so blatantly pursued. She shouldn't be accepting flowers from him. She shouldn't be accepting anything from him. Yet it was wonderful to be thought of, to evoke in a man the wish to send flowers. Few men had ever sent her flowers and there was something wonderfully romantic about it.

"Oh, grow up," she muttered to herself. "Don't be so naive. He's just trying to get you into bed."

In her room she dropped her book bag and purse. A free evening beckoned. Not really free, of course, because there was so much to do, but at least free of classes. Maybe she should take a walk before she hit the books. A long, healthy walk, get some of that woodsy air in her lungs. The worst of the heat was over and she really needed some exercise.

She pulled on shorts, a sleeveless shirt and running shoes. Having gulped down a glass of water, she struck out down the shady country road and swung her arms. Her body felt in need of movement, of air, of...she didn't know what. Freedom. A small plane flew overhead and she glimpsed it through the small openings in the canopy of trees overhead. Flying free. How wonderful it would be to be able to fly! She smiled at the sudden, whimsical thought.

She walked without a particular destination in mind, just followed the road, then turned down the track through the woods and somehow found herself at David's building site. She surprised herself. She hadn't planned to go there, but here she was just the same. Amazing.

A framework had been built, the outlines of the cabin now visible. And there was David, up high, wearing jeans and boots and sporting a bare upper torso, hammering away.

Her heart skipped a beat on seeing him. His back was turned to her and she moved a little into the shadows, not wanting him to spot her.

She watched him. Watched the agile movements of his body, the muscles rippling in his bare back, the swing of his arms as he worked. He moved with such confidence and ease, his body beautiful in the muted evening sun, all male strength and virility.

She knew she shouldn't just stand there watching him without his knowing it, but she couldn't resist. Her head felt light, and sweet desire whispered through her blood. She couldn't stop herself from enjoying the sight of him.

Well, she wasn't dead, was she? She was twenty-nine, and if a man like David left her stone-cold she'd have something to worry about. Only, what she was really be- I ginning to worry about was the fact that she might be affected by more than his body. There was something very appealing about David McMillan, something that had nothing to do with his muscles or his big shoulders.

The sweet things in life.

She closed her eyes to block him out. Am I crazy? she asked herself. Why am I standing here? Go home. Do something productive.

She swallowed and opened her eyes, and as she did so David swung down from one of the support beams and jumped to the ground with all the ease of an athlete.

And then he saw her. For a fraction of a second he stood very still, then his face broke into a huge smile. "Sam? You're home already?"

It was the look on his face, the tone of his voice, that went straight to the soft spot in her heart, the place where her dreams and fantasies lived, the spot she was trying so very hard to protect.

She nodded and moved toward the structure, toward David, her heart doing a cheery little dance.

"My classes were canceled," she told him, staring at his bare chest. She loved that strong, wide chest; she just couldn't help it.

"Lucky you." He reached out a hand. "Come on in and I'll show you my castle."

She listened as he pointed out the floor plan, the location of the kitchen, the living room, the fireplace. The open staircase ran up to a sleeping loft, or an office, he wasn't sure yet.

"You've done so much already," she said in awe.

"I've had help and I've worked on it every day."

She hadn't known, not really. She'd hardly seen him and she felt a little guilty that she'd not been more aware of what he had been doing with his days.

She liked listening to him as he talked about what he was doing, and noticed the obvious pleasure he took in the work.

"I thought you'd be more interested in dams and bridges and roads," she said. Big, impressive he-man stuff, she added silently.

"This is an interesting little diversion," he said. "I've spent years doing the big stuff, but I've never built a house." He grinned. "I like the idea of living in a house I've built with my own hands. Primitive emotion, isn't it?"

She laughed. "I like it." Her heart was beating faster and faster, also from primitive emotions.

"But you're not really going to settle here, are you?" His work took him to live in foreign places for long periods of time. Surely he wasn't giving that up?

He shrugged. "I'm beginning to like the idea of having a little place that's my own, a place that I can come home to after I've been gone." He stood very still for a moment, his eyes unreadable, and an unfamiliar expression flashed across his features. Sadness? Pain? Sam couldn't tell; all she felt was a sudden, odd disquiet as she looked at his face. He shook his head a little, as if shaking off something—a thought, a memory. Then he looked at her and j smiled.

"Did you have dinner yet?"

She shook her head. "No."

"I'll take you out, then, somewhere nice."

She should refuse. He wasn't even *asking*-, he was stating. As if she had no choice in the matter, as if he couldn't 'conceive of her not wanting to go.

Well, of course she *did* want to go. On some level. What healthy woman in her prime wouldn't want to be wined and dined by a handsome, sexy man with the devil in his eyes?

A healthy woman with good sense in her head, that was who.

"Let's go to Au Gourmet," he said. "Wonderful French food."

"I didn't say I was going out with you," she said calmly, j compelled to let him know not to take her acceptance for granted. ~

"Oh, but you will," he said with a deliberately arrogant lady-killer smile. "Why wouldn't you? You have time, you haven't had a decent dinner in

weeks, and you'll have my stimulating company and scintillating conversation to entertain you."

She tried not to laugh. The man was impossible. "Because you're insufferable," she said, "that's why."

His brows shot up. "Really? No one has ever called me that. I think it's you who brings it out in me."

"Oh, great! Blame me for your character deficiencies! Now I really want to go out with you!"

He grinned. "Please?"

She felt very reckless suddenly, a delicious feeling, really. She did not want to be sensible. She was sick of working, of studying, of going to classes, of always being in a hurry, of never having time for something nice. Apart from their lunch together, she couldn't remember the last time she'd had a meal in a restaurant other than a fast-food hamburger joint.

She wanted to be free, to feel carefree, to have some fun, to eat some really good food.

To spend some time with David McMillan, even if he had a way of pushing her buttons.

Her common sense made one more feeble effort at convincing her that going out with David McMillan, charmer and good kisser, was a bad idea.

A really bad idea.

"All right," she heard herself say. "I'll be ready in an hour."

CHAPTER SIX

SHE ran home, light on her feet, feeling free and reckless. Feeling almost as if she were flying.

In her room, she flung open her closet. What to wear? She searched frantically through her meager supply of clothes. Something nice and feminine, something a little dressy. She didn't have many dresses, mostly skirts and blouses she wore to work, practical, businesslike clothes. One dress was too big, another so old-fashioned she should throw it away. A third was just a little sundress that made her look fifteen.

She felt despair welling up. She was going out with a drop-dead gorgeous man who was used to women with style and money and expensive clothes, elegant women who knew how to dress. She was going to have dinner with him in a swanky French restaurant where they'd probably have a whole line-up of forks and knives she'd have no idea how to use. Well, she'd just have to watch him. And wine. She wouldn't know what to ask for...

"Oh, stop it!" she said out loud. David had probably figured out by now she wasn't a rich, sophisticated female with a closet full of fancy clothes and lots of experience of eating in classy restaurants. And if he hadn't, he was dumber than she'd thought.

So, what to wear? She sighed and bit her lip. If only she were a little taller and a size bigger, she'd borrow something from Susan. Susan wouldn't mind, she knew, and she had lots of wonderful, stylish clothes. But nothing would fit, she was sure.

A skirt and a blouse, then. It wouldn't be inappropriate, just not very imaginative or special. Well, that was all she had and it would have to do. She picked out a cream-colored skirt and a simple black blouse. Black at least was supposed to be a sophisticated color.

What about jewelry? She didn't have much of that either.

Grandma's peacock necklace!

She had never worn it before, never known when to wear it. It was antique, unusual, and had long ago come from India. The large oval pendant, Jaipur enamel and gold, displayed a beautiful peacock whose eyes were tiny rubies. It would certainly dress up a simple black blouse. *If* she had the guts to wear something so exotic. Well, why not? she thought bravely, the rest of me is going to need some help.

Of course David noticed the pendant, it was impossible not to, and so she told him the story of her English great- grandmother who'd been engaged to a young man who'd served in India and had brought back the necklace for her as a gift. His passion for her had only been surpassed by his patriotism and, postponing the wedding one more time, he'd returned to India where he'd died of snake bite. Her great-grandmother had later married another young man and they had emigrated to America, where they'd intended to make a fortune, but hadn't. Instead of money, they'd made babies, twelve of them.

And David told her a colorful story of one of his long- departed relative's search for riches, which involved pirating in the Caribbean and other shady dealings.

The restaurant was very ritzy, but Sam forgot to be nervous because she was talking and David was talking and she was generally having a very good time. The first course was a delicious warm goat's cheese salad. David chose the wine, and when it came to knives and forks she imitated what he did and it seemed easy enough.

She told him about Jason, that he had left her and the baby before he had died. She tried to keep her tone light, not wanting to be emotional about it, just wanting him to know the facts. She wasn't sure *why* she wanted him to know, really.

He frowned. "He left you with a newborn baby?"

"Yes. He said he was tired of the baby crying all the time and he wasn't cut out for all that baby stuff." He'd had the gall to actually say that, after all the talking he'd done to convince her he wanted a baby, to be a father.

She was talking about herself too much. She took a sip of wine, smiled at David and asked him lightly if he'd ever been married, assuming he hadn't, moving around the world the way he did.

"Yes," he said, and she noticed an unfamiliar tightness about his mouth. "A long time ago." He lifted his glass and took a swallow of wine.

His answer surprised her. He had never mentioned a wife and she wondered why. She looked at him, full of questions, seeing the sudden dull darkness in his eyes, knowing instinctively she shouldn't ask any of them.

Maybe he'd had a really awful, ugly divorce and he didn't want to be reminded of it. Well, she could understand that.

He glanced away. "Here comes our food," he said, his voice calm.

The waiter arrived with their Chateaubriand, which David had ordered for both of them.

"This looks wonderful," she said.

"Bon appetit." He smiled at her as he reached for his fork and knife. To her relief she saw that the darkness had gone from his eyes.

They began to eat, talking easily again, the tense moment past.

She'd never had Chateaubriand before and it was delicious. And she enjoyed the wine, feeling herself mellowing,] savoring the luxury of her surroundings. How wonderful to I sit here so leisurely, to not be in a hurry.

Over a luscious dessert of brandied peaches, David I talked about his childhood, drawing a picture of himself as a kid who'd loved spending time outdoors, much like Kevin did.

"My friend Corky and I were always tromping through the woods. We built tree houses and forts and constructed dams in the streams or built bridges over them. Then we'd sit on or in these contraptions and fantasize about being explorers or spies, making up elaborate adventures." He gave a half-smile. "It was magnificent."

Sam laughed. "And look at you now, building bridges and building a cabin."

"I suppose it was meant to be," he said. "What about you? What did you want when you were a kid?"

She shrugged, feeling awkward suddenly. "I went through the usual fantasies. I wanted to be a nursery school teacher, and I wanted to be married and have a whole bunch of kids."

"And when you were older? In high school?"

He expected her to have had more lofty ambitions or ideals, even if they hadn't manifested into reality. The problem was, she hadn't. She'd never wanted to be a doctor or a scientist or a concert pianist. She'd wanted to be a teacher and she'd wanted to have a big family.

"Same thing," she said, looking down at her dessert. *And here I am*, she thought, not uttering the words. *One child, no husband and studying business administration.*

Still, in the deep recesses of her mind her secret dream was still there, a dream she was not supposed to have in this day and age where women had careers and developed their talents outside their traditional role as housewife and mother.

She wanted to be a teacher, but not forever. She wanted a home with a husband and Kevin and more babies and no outside job. She wanted to wake up and go to sleep in the warmth of a husband's arms. She wanted to play with her children without hurry, braid the long hair of a daughter, read fairy tales to her brood. She imagined a house full of plants and books and children's music, a house strewn with toys. A happy, happy home. A life full of sweetness— sticky children's kisses, laughter, a husband's loving.

And she wanted never to have to worry about money.

"You still want a lot of kids?" he asked.

She glanced up. "It's a little late for that. I'll be thirty next year." Not to speak of the lack of a husband, money, a roof over her head.

He nodded. "Ancient, over the hill, finished."

She put her spoon down. "It's not funny."

He nodded, laughing. "Yes, Sam, it is funny. *You* are funny."

She didn't see it. She didn't like him laughing at her. Anger rushed into her head. She swallowed, clenching her hands in her lap. To her horror, tears sprang into her eyes. Pushing her chair back, she came to her feet.

"Excuse me." She almost ran from the room, into the ladies' room, which gleamed and sparkled with polish and shine. Taking in deep gulps of air, she ran cold water over her wrists. She'd read somewhere that that would help you calm down. What was wrong with her? She was operating too close to the edge these days. She'd never been the weepy type and now the tears were so close to the surface it was frightening.

It was embarrassing.

She tucked in a loose curl and applied more lipstick. So, she had once wanted to be a teacher; she'd wanted a husband and more kids. Youthful dreams, not necessarily practical. Life did not always give you what you wanted. She was no longer nineteen and she was doing the best she could. Straightening her back, she walked out of the ladies' room and found David waiting for her in the entryway.

"Are we leaving?" she asked, surprised.

"I thought you'd like to."

"Oh, I'm fine," she said lightly.

He studied her for a moment, then held the outside door open for her. ' 'We can have coffee somewhere else, if you like."

She shook her head. "No coffee for me at night."

The valet drove up with Susan's car and moments later they were on their way.

"My apologies for upsetting you," he said. "I didn't mean to hurt your feelings, Sam."

"I'm fine," she said again. "You obviously look at life differently than I do, but of course we all have our own vantage point." She manufactured a smile. "It was a wonderful dinner," she went on, trying to change the subject. ' 'I felt very pampered, just sitting there and being served all that delicious food. And I don't even have to clean up afterward." She meant what she said, but her tone was just a tad too cheerful.

During dinner she'd sensed a lowering of the barriers between them. Now they were back.

She felt a sudden sense of loss.

In his bedroom, David tossed his jacket on a chair and tore off his tie, his teeth clenched. He was appalled at how he had screwed up in the restaurant. It was so easy to tease her a little, to push her buttons. She was so tightly strung, anybody could do it. He could not resist, but it had never been his intention to hurt her—never that.

He stripped naked, pulled on swimming trunks and headed for the pool. He swam laps, hard and fast. He kept seeing Sam's face.

It was clear her emotions were easily stirred. Tough, strong, competent Sam had got tears in her eyes because he had thought it was funny she was worried about being old. The veneer was almost transparent. She was stressed- out and scared, trying not to show anyone, pretending she was

tough and could do it all. He wished he could calm her down, wished he could give her some fun and pleasure.

He thought of the plan he'd set in motion.

What was he getting himself into here? Again he felt the fear hovering around the edges of his consciousness and shrugged it away. He had to do this. He could not stand by and watch her self-destruct.

The next morning Sam managed to escape the house without seeing David. Sitting in her office, she stared at the flowers he'd sent her the day before. Magic. There was magic out there. She sighed and closed her eyes. She had no time for magic. She wasn't so sure she believed in it, anyway.

The phone rang. She picked up the receiver. "Good morning, the Furniture Place, may I help you?"

"What size shoes do you wear?" Gina asked, not bothering with good mornings and other civilities.

Sam laughed. "Seven."

"Perfect!"

"Thank you. May I know why you ask?"

"You won't believe this. You know my sister-in-law, the fashion queen?"

"Pauline?"

' "That one, yes. She cleaned out her closets and brought me the stuff she doesn't want any more—like I'm the poor relative, which of course I am, being a nurse and severely underpaid, but let me not digress. I wish you could see me sit here in the middle of this pile of bags and boxes of clothes. It's more than I've owned in my last three lifetimes together."

"Lucky you."

"Like I *need* this stuff. I spend my life in a uniform. Anyway, there are some fabulous things here, although not all my taste or my size. There are about four different sizes—she diets constantly, loses weight and then gains it back. Why don't you take the morning off, or at least a couple of hours—I'm sure you've got it coming—and see if there's something you like? You might want to have something in case you go out with Michelangelo's *David*."

"That was yesterday. Where were you when I needed you?"

"You went out with him! Oh, Sam, I am so proud of you! This is so great! Now you really have to come over and tell me every little dirty detail."

Sam had no idea what came over her, but she got out of her chair, left a note for her grandfather, who had not yet arrived, and walked out the door. Going out to dinner with David last night had made her feel reckless; and now, leaving in the middle of the day on a whim...she was scaring herself with her sudden impulsiveness.

I don't care, she thought, and got into her car.

"You made it! You did it!" Gina said as she opened her apartment door to Sam. She had very short dark hair, clear gray eyes and a big, laughing mouth. She gave Sam a warm hug. "I'm glad you let yourself be irresponsible! I am so proud of you! Come on in. You want coffee?"

They tried on clothes, drank coffee, ate pastries Gina had bought from a Swiss patisserie, and laughed till they hurt. It was like being young again, and silly and without worries. Sam could not remember the last time she had laughed so hard.

Gina was parading around in a white flowing confection sweet as spun sugar. "I look like a fairy in this thing," she said. "All I need is a wand and I could make your dreams come true." She swirled in front of the mirror, waving an imaginary wand. "All right, tell me, Sam, what do you want?"

' I never want to see another sales journal. I never want to go to another management class. I never..."

"No, no. Tell me what you *do* want. Tell me the fantasy you want to live." Gina's voice dropped to a husky whisper. "Your most secret fantasy."

"I want to be a domestic goddess," said Sam, and Gina pulled a face.

"Yuk," she said.

"I want to be a genius in the kitchen," Sam went on, "an earth mother, a love goddess in bed, all of that. I want to bake bread and arrange flowers and play the piano while my seven children sing lovely songs, and I want to wear loose, flowing clothes and smell heavenly, and my husband is a prince who's totally besotted with me and can't keep his hands off me and ravishes me every chance he gets. And if you ever mention this to anyone I will personally kill you."

"I'm silent as the grave," said Gina, making another face. "You want to *bake bread!*"

"Yes," said Sam. "So shoot me."

Sam drove back to the office, still laughing, a large cardboard box of expensive clothes and shoes in the back of the car, and more on hangers. She sat at her desk and looked at David's flowers. Magic. Well, maybe there was magic after all.

She made a pot of coffee and had a cup ready when her grandfather came in. It was past noon. He gave her a grumpy good morning and disappeared into his own little office which was cramped full of furniture catalogues, fabric samples, trade magazines and assorted other junk collected over the years.

Her good mood sank like a brick to the bottom of a murky pond. She wasn't happy with the way her grandfather looked. He seemed more tired lately and he kept coughing. She wished he'd quit smoking his foul-smelling cigars, but she'd given up hope after years of trying.

She put a cup of coffee on his desk. 'Grandpa, will you please let me make an appointment for you with Dr Miller?'

"I don't need to see the doctor," he grumbled. "I don't need a doctor to tell me what's wrong with me. I already know."

"What?"

He puffed on his cigar and gave her a wicked grin. "I'm old, pumpkin, I'm old. There's no cure for that."

A sleek red sports car was parked in the driveway when Sam came home late one night. The first thing she noticed as she came into the kitchen was a pair of expensive- looking taupe-colored high-heeled shoes irreverently discarded under the kitchen table. Two wine glasses perched on the counter. She stared at them. One sported a faint touch of lipstick on the edge.

A woman. There was a woman in the house. Her heart slammed against her ribs. Her stomach churned.

This is crazy, she thought. What is the matter with you? What do you care? It's none of your business. Maybe it's not what you think. Maybe his mother is visiting, or his grandmother, or his sister. No, he didn't have a sister.

Maybe it's exactly what you think it is. Maybe he found someone more agreeable to his charms and desires. Someone not so terribly busy with other pursuits. Someone who has time to put lipstick on and money to buy designer shoes.

There was no one in the living room and she moved down the hall, seeing light coming from under David's bedroom door. She felt sick.

She went into her own bedroom and sagged down onto the edge of the bed, taking in deep gulps of air, clutching her stomach. She wanted to do something terrible—scream, break something, burst into tears.

There was a woman in David's bedroom and she wanted to die.

How dared he do this? How dared he flaunt his sexual pursuits in front of her, in this house?

She closed her eyes, trembling. It wouldn't matter if she didn't care. She didn't want to care, but the truth was that she did. She cared more than she was willing to admit, even to herself.

She heard a door open, voices: David's, and a soft, woman's voice. She couldn't hear what they said. Maybe they were hungry after their little exercise and were going to the kitchen for some gastronomic restoration. She didn't want to hear. She went into the bathroom and turned on the shower and got in.

She stood in the hot, steaming water for a very long time, trying to calm herself. In bed, she turned on the radio to some soft classical music and managed, by some miracle, to fall asleep.

When the alarm awakened her at five, the house was quiet, as usual. She tried to study, but her mind kept producing visions of David asleep with a woman in his arms, not images conducive to higher learning. Later she heard movement in the house, probably David. At seven-fifteen she was dressed and ready to slip out of the house, hoping to encounter no one on her trek from her room to her car.

No such luck.

No sooner had she stepped out of her room into the hall than David's door opened and out came a woman in a silk robe. She was young, beautiful in a dark, exotic way, and had gorgeous, gleaming black hair.

Well, of course, Sam thought bitterly. She wouldn't be old and wrinkled and bald.

The woman smiled at Sam. "Hi," she said. Her face looked soft with sleep, or maybe sex. Sam wished she could fall into a hole and hide, or, even better, die.

"Hi," said Sam automatically, politely.

"You must be Samantha," the woman said. She had a soft, husky voice. Very sexy. Her fingernails were perfectly manicured.

Sam nodded, hoisting her book bag strap higher onto her shoulder, feeling like a clumsy donkey. No way was she going to stand here and have a cozy chat. She moved forward, excused herself and dashed into the living room, through the kitchen and out the back door.

She didn't know how she made it to the store—on automatic, no doubt. All she could think of was David making love to the beautiful dark-haired woman with her perfect nails. How she despised him. What an idiot she was to care. How lucky she was to find out what kind of man he was before she *really* fell for him.

She stared at the flower arrangement he'd sent a few days earlier. She got up from her chair, picked it up, went out the back door of the store and tossed the whole thing into the garbage can. Damn David with his flowers!

She was in no mood to contemplate magic, nor the sweet things in life.

She didn't want to go home that night, but she had no choice. She'd not let him see his behavior had affected her. It was after ten when she walked into the kitchen, finding no one in the house. Good. But it was only five minutes later when she heard the front door open. She was sitting at the kitchen table, spooning a carton of yogurt and skimming through the newspaper.

She'd just read her horoscope, which promised new opportunities for expressing herself and that something that had been lost would be returned. Having lost nothing, she had no idea what this might mean. It went on to suggest she take a vacation and find some rest, which was not useful information. In fact, it was irritating. The whole world seemed to be telling her she needed to relax.

She heard David's deep, vibrant voice, then the woman's soft, husky one. Sam's felt her heart trip, then start a nervous rhythm as they entered the kitchen. David wore tan trousers, a shirt and tie and a navy blazer, and he radiated relaxed, manly confidence. The woman looked like a fashion model, wearing a simple silk summer dress that loosely draped over her perfect curves. The glossy black hair framed her features beautifully, and elegant shoes accentuated long slender legs.

They made a stunning couple.

"Sam," said David. "Glad we caught you. Where were you this morning?"

She'd left without eating anything, without even a cup of coffee to keep her awake at the wheel. She hadn't needed it. Her rage had done a better job than caffeine. "I was running late," she said, trying to sound casual, trying not to feel dowdy in her navy skirt and white blouse.

"Sam, this is Tara, my cousin. I hope you don't mind if she stays here for a couple of days."

Sam almost gaped. His *cousin*? Was this the best he could do? Did David think she was an idiot?

"Tara," David went on, "Samantha, Susan's friend."

Tara smiled and extended her hand. "We met in the hall this morning," she said.

Sam manufactured a breezy smile and shook her hand briefly. "Nice to meet you, Tara," she said blandly. She glanced up at David. "Boy, cousins keep coming out of the woodwork, don't they?" She got to her feet. "It's my bedtime. See you in the morning."

"No time for a drink?" asked David.

"No, thank you," she said coolly, moving out of the kitchen. Did he really think she was going to sit there with the two of them, sipping wine and

discussing the stock market or whatever rich people with time on their hands discussed?

She'd barely entered her room when she heard a peremptory knock on her door. "Samantha?" came David's voice, curt, demanding.

She gritted her teeth and opened the door. He moved into her room without her invitation and closed the door behind him.

"What's going on?" he demanded, his jaw tense. He loomed over her, his dark eyes probing hers.

Anger rushed to her head. "I should ask you that!" she said, trying hard not to shout at him. "Not that I don't know, of course."

He frowned. "And what do you know?"

"That it's not exactly discreet behavior to bring some woman into the house like this, don't you think?"

"Some woman?" He cocked a brow.

"Tara, whatever her name is."

"My cousin."

"Oh, please," she said with mocking contempt. "How stupid do you think I am?" Since she was always busy,

she rarely watched the talk-shows on TV, but from what she'd heard they frequently featured women who were capable of deceiving themselves in amazing ways, usually by believing the most outrageous stories men would tell them. She wasn't going to be one of them.

She looked straight at him, daring him to defend his story or make up something else. To her amazement, he gave a smile which quite relaxed his face. "Sam," he said slowly, "are you jealous?"

"No!" Her heart lurched. "I just think your behavior is despicable! You can't stand the fact that I don't fall on my knees for you so you find yourself some floozy to flaunt in front of me!"

He threw back his head and laughed heartily.

"You think this is funny?" Her body was rigid with anger.

"Yes," he said, "it's very funny."

Everything was funny to David McMillan: her fear of being old, her desire to get a degree. He was forever amused by her and she hated it. She hated him.

"Get out," she said, her voice shaking. "Get out of my room!"

CHAPTER SEVEN

DAVID didn't move an inch, his feet anchored to the floor as if he owned the place.

"Get out of my room," Sam repeated coldly, trying to steady her trembling legs.

"Not yet." He took a step closer. "Sam, just calm down, will you? You're getting yourself upset over nothing."

"I'm not upset!" she yelled. Oh, God, she thought, listen to me. I'm losing it.

"Sam—"

"Leave me alone!"

"No." He moved closer toward her.

She clenched her hands into fists. "What do you want?"

"I want you to listen to me, and then I'll leave."

Crossing her arms in front of her chest, she glared at him. "Fine."

"Tara is my cousin," he said calmly, looking right at her. "We grew up together. Her father, my father, and Andrew's father are three of four brothers." He hesitated for a moment, frowning a little. "She's going through a hard time and she needs a place to stay where her husband won't easily find her, and she needed someone to talk to, someone she could trust."

He could be lying, but somehow Sam didn't think so. Maybe she was naive, wanting to believe him, just like all these women on the talk-shows. She felt herself break out in a cold sweat.

"Does her husband abuse her?" She held up her hand. "Sorry, I shouldn't ask. It's none of my business."

"He's abusing her money," he said dryly. "He's a gambling addict and refuses to get treatment. She's decided to divorce him, and he's not cooperative. He's not a very stable character and it's better for her to be out of the way for a few days until her father and her lawyer can take charge of the situation."

"Oh, I'm sorry. How awful."

"Yes," he said. "But she'll be all right. She's tough and she's known this would happen for a long time."

"I thought—"

"I know what you thought." He gave a crooked smile.

"I saw her come out of your bedroom this morning."

"I gave her my room. I'm camping out on the sofa in Andrew's office."

He could have given her the master bedroom, or taken it himself, but she was not surprised he hadn't. Susan and Andrew's bedroom was an intimately personal space, decorated by Susan herself, and even walking in there made f you feel you were trespassing into someone's holy of holies.

She was beginning to feel better, but her anger had given her away, she knew. David thought she was jealous. Well, she had been, of course. Even to her own surprise.

"I misunderstood," she said, trying to put a little dignity in her voice. "And I'm sorry I lost my cool."

He gave a soft laugh. "I'm not. I'm finding it quite encouraging." He put a hand under her chin and lifted her face to his. "I'm glad you're not as indifferent as you profess to be. Not that I really doubted it."

She tensed and took a step back, wanting distance.

"I wish you'd allow yourself to enjoy life a little, Sam. Smell the roses, look at the moon."

"Have an affair with you," she added derisively.

"That, too," he said blandly. "I want to take you dancing and sailing. I want to walk outside with you in the dark and make love to you in the grass."

"Mosquitoes," she said. "No, thank you."

He laughed. "Oh, I'll find a way, Sam."

"Find a way what?"

"To rescue you from your follies. To make you laugh. To make passionate love with you—in a big bed, or on a beach, or in the woods."

She shook her head, fighting against the images, the terrible temptations. "It isn't that simple," she said.

He came forward and rested his hands on her shoulders, looked deep into her eyes. "It doesn't have to be complicated, Sam." And then he kissed her softly on her mouth, a seductive little stroking of his lips over hers. "This is not complicated, is it?"

"Maybe not for you," she said tightly, fighting the need trembling inside her. "But I don't sleep around just because it's simple and convenient and fun." She was filled with an aching need—a hunger for loving, for trust, for happiness. A need not to feel so terrified.

Terrified of being stupid and naive again. Terrified of getting hurt again. Of being left and discarded.

But David would not take away her fear, only momentarily allow her to forget it.

And she wanted to forget, if only for a night. She was so tired of being afraid, of worrying about the future. She wanted pleasure and freedom and joy.

But she didn't want the crash that no doubt would come afterward.

"Please," she said thickly. "Just go."

"Well," Tara said with dry humor, "sounded like she was happy to see you."

He did not reply, sat down and picked up his drink. "I could hear her yell at you all the way over here. What did you do to quiet her? Put a pillow over her head?"

"I told her the truth," he said.

"Wow, and that worked? And what truth are we talking about?"

"That you are not a loose hussy out to snare me in your net."

Tara nearly choked on her drink. "Oh, my. And she believed you?"

"Of course," he said with a touch of hauteur.

Tara laughed. "She was upset about finding me here."

"Sleeping in my room."

"She's jealous?"

"Oh, not at all," he said wryly. "Merely outraged that I had so little class as to bring a female into the house while having the gall to pursue her. Never mind that she keeps telling me she's not interested in my attentions."

"Oops. Not so good for your ego."

"My ego is fine, thank you." He tossed down the last of his drink and put the glass on the table. He could see Sam's face, the anger in her eyes.

"She's a skinny little thing," said Tara.

"All she does is work and study. She hardly eats; she can't sleep."

Tara arched her brows at him. "Sounds familiar?"

He gave a light shrug. Tara knew his story. "She's so stressed-out. I know she's going to crash one of these days."

"Like you did."

He didn't want to think about it—that dark time in his life when he hadn't cared if he lived or died. A nightmare he never wanted to relive again.

"I keep wanting her to...relax, to enjoy life a little." He didn't dare tell her about his plan yet, although he would require her help soon.

Tara sipped her wine and looked at him thoughtfully. "How serious are your feelings for her?"

"I..." He rubbed his forehead. "I wish I could help her. I want to..."

"You want to rescue her."

He grimaced. "Sounds a trifle dramatic, doesn't it?"

She made a small gesture. "But it's true."

He glanced out the window, seeing nothing but the darkness of night. "I suppose so, yes."

"And she doesn't want to be rescued. She wants you to mind your own business."

He glowered at her. "Did you talk to her behind my back?"

She laughed. "No. I can guess." She put the glass back on the table. "And I'm guessing that, jealous or not, she's not interested in a cheap summer fling with you."

He didn't like her choice of words. "I don't have cheap summer flings," he said, knowing he sounded defensive, which irritated him.

"Then what *would* you call it? A mature, no-strings- attached relationship?"

"What's wrong with that?"

Tara shrugged. "Nothing, if that's what you both want. But I'm thinking she doesn't. She probably figures that in the end she'd come out the loser."

"The loser? Well, thank you, that makes me feel good."

Tara arched her brows. "Don't look so wounded. I can well imagine what she's thinking. From what you've told me, she's got a lot on her plate. And here you are, a charmer with lots of money, and you want fun and games and—"

"You're not being fair!"

"Well, then, what are you thinking of? May I remind you that in a couple of months you're back on a plane, which would leave her to pick up the pieces of her shattered emotions. She's protecting herself, that's all."

"Sheesh, you make me sound as if I'd just dump her!"

"Well, what else did you have in mind? Marry her? You haven't exactly shown any interest in being married again, or being committed in any meaningful way. As a matter of fact, it seems you've been burying yourself in places where the subject probably doesn't even come up."

True enough. He said nothing.

Tara reached for his hand. "Are you scared?" she asked softly, and he heard the concern in her voice, felt touched by it.

"That wouldn't be rational, would it?" He wanted to sound casual, but he failed, he knew. He didn't like where this conversation was going.

"But very understandable." She hesitated. "David, what happened was so awful, how could you possibly be rational about it? How could you not want to protect yourself from... from—"

He felt his body tense. "Don't analyze me, Tara."

She bit her lip. "It's been a long time, David. You need to move on. Don't tell me you want to stay alone for the rest of your life. Wander around the world from place to place, without any permanency."

He came to his feet, almost symbolically, as if ready to run.

"I like what I do. I don't want permanency. I want my freedom. No hassles."

She met his eyes. "That's what you tell yourself."

His chest felt heavy. His head ached. "I'm not getting married again, Tara. There's no way in hell."

"Because you're scared."

"All right," he said roughly, clenching his hands. "All right, I'm scared."

It was all wrong.

Sam was brushing her teeth with the vigor of a cleaning lady scrubbing a kitchen floor. From the living room she could hear the barely discernible voices of David and his gorgeous cousin.

David wasn't the man for her. He was way out of her league. He was too sophisticated, too well-traveled, too rich, too everything. She made a face at herself in the mirror. Her hair was a mess. Toothpaste dribbled down her chin. She looked demented.

He was leaving the country again in a few months; surely she wasn't so stupid as not to see the writing on the wall? She scrubbed a little faster, harder. He was a man on the move, a man who'd probably had numerous temporary relationships, a man with the motto: love them and leave them. She spat out the toothpaste and rinsed her mouth. She'd been there. Done that. She'd loved. She'd been left. Left with a baby. Left without education and without money. Once was enough.

She couldn't sleep. She lay in bed thinking about him lying on the sofa in Andrew's office. All she wanted was to go to him, make love to him—wonderful, totally uninhibited love—forget about being sensible and realistic and practical, forget about what was really important: her career, her independence, her son, her future.

She pushed her face into the pillow and moaned. She couldn't allow herself to get distracted and side-tracked. If she allowed herself to fall for David she'd end up hurt, her plans would be off-course and her focus shattered.

I have to stay focused on what needs to be done, she told herself. Stay focused. Stay focused.

The sea roared in his ears and terror seized him. David watched Celia standing in the sand, her long white dress flapping around her ankles, one hand holding down the big floppy sun hat. Her face was in the shadows, but he saw her body silhouetted against the backdrop of green hills and blue sky, her feet bare. He could see her pregnant belly, not too big yet, but clearly visible. His baby.

Again the wrenching pain, the overwhelming sense of powerlessness, the lack of air in his lungs, his chest caving in. His legs were anchored into the sand and he could not move. He could not reach her, could not pull her against him and protect her, save her.

He could not breathe.

Then she turned and started coming toward him, running, laughing, and her hat flew off into the sea and it wasn't Celia. It was Samantha.

Sam, flying straight into his arms.

Relief flooded him. Air rushed into his lungs and he awoke, gasping.

He was drenched in sweat, his heart pounding.

It was raining—a hard, drenching, summer rain that hammered the windows and poured down onto the leafy greenery outside.

There had been no sand, no sea. They'd been in the mountains. She'd been wearing walking shoes and a baseball cap. The dream was all wrong.

But it hadn't been Celia. It had been Samantha running through the sand towards him.

It was a cozy scene that greeted her when Sam entered the kitchen the next morning. Tara, wearing shorts and a T-shirt, glossy black hair pulled back in a pony-tail, was fishing a tray of hot muffins out of the oven. The table was set for three. Orange juice poured, cups and saucers ready for coffee, a bowl of blueberries in the middle of the table.

Tara straightened and put the muffins on the counter. Her face was flushed a little and she wore no make-up apart from a dusting of flour on her left cheek. She was still beautiful, but looked less glamorous than the night before, which did Sam's soul good. Tara smiled at her.

"Good morning," she said. "I hope you like to eat breakfast."

"Good morning," Sam said, somewhat surprised by Tara's display of kitchen know-how. The muffins looked and smelled wonderful, and they were made from scratch; they'd had no mixes in the pantry.

"They look wonderful. You made them?"

Tara nodded. "I woke up early. I didn't know what to do with myself." She gave a helpless little shrug. "I love cooking, so I thought I might as well make myself useful. I hope you don't mind my taking the liberty."

Sam had to laugh. "This isn't my house, you know."

"But you live here. Anyway, I made a big farmer's omelet, too—cheese, ham and tomato. Would you like some?"

David stalked into the kitchen before she could answer.

"I'm starving," he announced. "Is this breakfast you promised about ready?"

"Yessir." Tara grinned. "Sit yourself down, both of you."

It was hard not to like Tara, Sam found out in the next few days. She was easy to talk to, made no demands and cooked wonderful food. Coming home from classes at night, Sam always found something delicious waiting for her. The best thing yet was the fact that Tara's presence made it easier not to be alone with David, who kept looking at her with an intensity in his eyes that stirred up all her suppressed longings and desires.

After dinner on Saturday, Tara asked Sam to come with her for a walk. David had returned from the cabin and was now ensconced in the office, talking on the phone in Spanish and not showing any signs of being finished in the near future.

The worst heat of the day had dissipated and the setting sun washed the world with a golden sheen. Sam took in a deep breath and swung her arms. "I should do some regular exercise," she said. "I know I need it, it's just...I don't know where to find the time."

"You're a busy person, I've noticed. Maybe once you have your degree, your life will calm down a bit."

"I sure hope so." Sam let out a long breath. A thought occurred to her. "But don't give me any lectures, all right? David is on my case already."

Tara laughed. "He told me. Okay, no lectures from me."

They'd walked through the woods to the cabin. It had been a week since Sam had last seen it and the progress David had made was obvious. Exterior and interior walls were up, and it was beginning to take more shape. It would be a nice place.

"I think it's great he's building this little house," Tara said thoughtfully. "It's a start."

Sam looked at her. "A start of what?"

"He's been on the run for a long time now, you know.

And building this little place might be a sign he's thinking of at least a little bit of permanency, having even this small place to call home. He's not had that for years."

Sam digested this information, not sure what it really meant, but feeling an odd apprehension. They sat and observed the cabin in silence.

"Why was David on the run?" Sam asked finally. "From what?"

Tara gave her a quick sideways glance before looking ahead again, into the woods. She was biting her lip. "From himself, I guess." She came to her feet, restless, suddenly. "Let's go."

Tara was uneasy, Sam realized. Maybe Tara was afraid she'd said something she shouldn't have.

And there was more, much more she wouldn't tell. Sam felt the apprehension grow.

David didn't seem like a man running from himself. He seemed like a man quite comfortable with who he was and what he did. She glanced up at the sky, peering into the endless, limitless blue.

But how well did she know him, really?

Every few days a new flower arrangement arrived in the store, each one of them beautiful, each one of them with a little note from David. It made her feel increasingly uneasy.

"There's no reason for you to keep sending me these flowers," she told David one morning as she was ready to leave for work. Tara had left and David had made scrambled eggs, toast and coffee.

"You're wrong," he said. "There's a very good reason."

"I know, I know," she said impatiently, waving a piece of toast in the air. "To remind me of the sweet things in life." She sighed impatiently. "David, stop sending me flowers. It makes me uncomfortable."

He stopped sending her flowers. Instead, he sent her a box of handmade, imported French chocolates so outrageously extravagant that for a moment all she could do was stare at it.

What to do about David?

Take the box home and give it back to him? Tell him to stop sending her chocolates?

Eat them, and then tell him to stop sending more?

Eat them first, definitely. She was a weak person when it came to chocolate. After all, if he wanted to waste his time and money sending them to her, that was his decision. She could also tell him she'd thrown them in the garbage. Yes, right, he'd believe that.

She grinned to herself and carefully selected a luscious chocolate, which she popped into her mouth just as her grandfather entered her office, ruining the special moment by blowing a cloud of cigar smoke over her desk. Quickly she covered up the chocolates to keep them from being contaminated.

He tossed the paper with the end-of-month sales figures onto her desk, saying she must have made a mistake: the numbers were too low. He'd said this every month for almost a year now.

"I didn't make a mistake, Grandpa," she said with her mouth full of chocolate, saying it automatically, as she always did.

He puffed on his cigar and gave her a narrow-eyed look. "So what do you think, pumpkin?" he asked.

She almost choked on the chocolate. He had never before asked her that question.

"I think it's time to face the truth," she said, feeling a sadness creep through her, a pity for her grandfather who'd built up this store fifty years earlier.

"And what's that?" he growled.

She sighed. "The big guys are winning. Grandpa. They're doing us in."

He nodded. "I'm glad you figured it out, pumpkin. But

don't you worry about a thing. It'll all work out."

* * *

Sam's heart beat in fear. It was pitch dark and she was stranded by the side of the road in her car, with Kevin next to her, crying because he was hungry and thirsty and tired.

She was all alone in the world, her grandfather dead, no job, no education, no apartment. Susan had said she could no longer live in the house, so she and Kevin had been sleeping in the car.

Every time she applied for a job, people laughed at her. She had no college degree and she didn't qualify and her experience working for her grandfather didn't really mean anything. The Furniture Place was nothing but a little dump.

She had nowhere to go, no one to turn to. Gina had moved to California to become a movie star. There was nobody to ask for help.

And Grandpa was dead. She felt terror and grief all rolled into one. And Kevin was crying. He was hungry and all she had was sixty-two cents in her purse. And here they were sitting by the side of the road in her green car, out of gas.

Out of gas. She'd run out of gas, just as Gina had predicted. And she didn't even have any shoes on. Where were her shoes?

She didn't have any shoes.

Sam awoke in tears, her heart beating fast.

Three-forty, the clock said.

She wiped her teary face with the sheet. It was only a dream. Thank God it was only a dream. She took in a deep, shuddering breath and tried to calm herself down.

She couldn't get her thoughts under control. She couldn't sleep. Horrible scenarios raced through her mind. Rational thinking seemed to have no effect. Rational thinking such as that she was getting her college education, that she had friends and family and wasn't at all alone in the world, that working for her grandfather was valuable experience and that there was no doubt she'd be able to find a decent job in the future.

She was competent, intelligent, hard-working. She was perfectly qualified to have a successful career.

None of these thoughts was able to chase away the depressing images of destitution and despair.

"Oh, hell," she muttered, and got out of bed. As quietly as possible she moved to the kitchen to make some tea. The first thing she did was drop the tea cup, which shattered on the marble tile floor with a crash.

Tears sprang into her eyes and she felt a sudden wave of despair mixed with anger. What is *wrong* with you? she asked herself. She bent down to pick up the larger pieces and found David's bare legs in her view.

"What's going on, Sam?" he asked from above her head.

She straightened up and tossed the shards in the waste basket. "I broke a cup," she said tightly, not looking at him. Her voice sounded thick and she hoped he wouldn't notice. She moved to the utility closet and took out a broom to sweep up the rest of the shattered cup.

"Sam? Have you been crying?"

"No," she muttered.

He put a hand on her shoulder, turned her to face him, taking the broom from her hand. "What's wrong?"

She heard the concern in his voice, felt new tears rise to the surface. She fought them back.

"I had a stupid dream, that's all," she said tremulously. "And I couldn't get back to sleep so I thought I'd make myself some tea." She swallowed hard. His hand was warm on her shoulder. He was wearing a pair of running shorts, which was all he had on, and his naked chest was treacherously close. She took in a steadying breath, fighting the sudden, insane impulse to put her face against his chest, to hear his heart beat, to feel the comfort of his arms around her. To feel, for an instant, that she was not alone.

It was a dangerous impulse, a dangerous deception. In moments of fear and weakness it was too easy to want to lean on someone else, make the wrong choices. Too easy to be blind.

His arms came around her, one hand on the back of her head, holding it against his chest.

And then she was crying, mortified, helpless. "I'm sorry," she sobbed. "I'm sorry."

CHAPTER EIGHT

"It's all right, Sam," he said quietly. "Why don't you tell me about your dream?"

She shook her head. It was too embarrassing. She just wanted to stand there in his arms, feel the warmth of his bare chest against her face. Feel his hand stroking her hair in comfort. Allow herself for a moment the luxury of tears and the illusion...

Illusion of what?

Love. Comfort. Not being lonely.

He was kissing her. She was kissing him back, hungrily, desperately.

She gathered her composure with an effort, taking in a deep, steady breath, still feeling his hand on her head.

She drew herself out of his embrace, raked her hands through her hair, which was a tangled mess. "I'm sorry...I...I didn't think I'd run into you." She was aware of standing there only in her nightgown.

"You're covered adequately enough," he said, as if he had guessed her thoughts. 'Not that it seems to temper my imagination."

She closed her eyes and sighed. "Please, David."

He took her hand. "Please what? Please make love to me? Please don't make love to me?"

"Please don't talk like that."

"It's what I think about, Sam. About making love to you. I think of what—"

"Don't, please, David."

He put a hand under her chin and lifted her face to his. His eyes looked deep into hers. "Why not? Is it so terrible that I want you?"

She swallowed miserably. "I don't want you to want me." It would make life so much easier if he didn't. If he were just a man living in the same house, nothing more. A man who didn't send her beautiful flowers, a man who didn't put his arms around her, a man who didn't make her blood sing and her heart dance every time he was near her.

"And what about you, Sam?" His voice was low and soft. He cradled her face in his hands and touched his mouth to hers. "Do you want me?" he said against her lips.

Longing surged through her. She closed her eyes, saying nothing.

He released her gently. "I think you do," he answered his own question. "And you don't want to want me. Am I right?"

It was no use trying to deceive him; he already knew the truth. "Yes."

He gave a crooked smile. "Well, I'm afraid we're in a lot of trouble."

"Trouble? Why?"

"Because our feelings aren't just going to go away, you know. I don't even want them to go away. I like feeling what I'm feeling when I look at you, when I think of you."

"You're leaving for Mexico in the fall."

"That's almost three months away, Sam."

Everything inside her ached to just give in. To kiss him, to make love with him, to feel the magic. Three months of happiness was three months of happiness. But just thinking of the grief she'd be left with in the end made her turn cold with fear.

"Well, we'll just have to control our feelings, then," she said, stepping back from him some more, while her whole body ached with longing. "And I think I'll make that tea now and see if I can get some more sleep." She reached for the broom, which he'd leaned against the counter. David took it before she could.

"Make the tea," he said. "I'll take care of this."

She took the kettle and ran water into it. The window above the sink offered nothing but the inky blackness of night. It was three-fifty in the morning, she saw on the clock. Remembering her fantasies of spending time with a man in the middle of the night, this scene was not what came to mind—him sweeping the floor, and her making tea.

They could have been in bed, making love.

It was time. This could not go on any longer. When morning came and Sam had left for work, David reached for the phone and dialed. "Tara?"

"David! How are you?"

"Tara, I need your help."

"Anything, as long as it's more or less legal."

"I'm not sure about that."

She laughed, and he told her what he wanted.

"You can't do that, David."

"Oh, yes, I can."

"She'll sue you."

"I don't think so."

"David, you're nuts! Are you sure you want to do this?"

"Yes." Strangely, he was. Very sure.

She gave a helpless little laugh. "All right, all right, I'll help. But you'll have to go to her room and look in her closet and her dresser drawers and—"

"I am going to do no such thing."

"Yes, you are. In love and war, etcetera."

"You met her, for heaven's sake! You saw her!"

"If you want me to do this right, you'll have to do as I tell you. Believe me, it's important."

He felt like a thief, a criminal, rummaging through Samantha's clothes while talking to Tara on the phone, following her instructions.

He stood there with a white bra in his hands, and he could not believe he was doing this. He was out of his mind.

* * *

Stop sending me chocolates, Samantha had told him after he'd had a second box delivered. He'd expected this, of course. So he stopped sending her chocolates and had ten huge red balloons delivered to the office. Each one sported a grinning happy face.

"You're not going to give this up, are you?" she asked when she came home that night, her expression one of amused exasperation.

He shook his head, his face impassive. "No. I've made it my personal mission to bring fun and frivolity into your life. Now, you told me you have no classes next week."

"Right. And—"

"And you intend to sleep for three days straight."

"I want to." She sighed. "Oh, bliss."

"How about coming flying with me on Monday?"

"Flying?"

"How about if we hitch a ride on the company plane to New Orleans, have some lunch there and..." ^^"Hitch a ride to New Orleans?" Her blue eyes were huge with amazement.

"Two of the company executives have meetings there on Monday. The plane's flying, so we can come along."

She stared at him. "On a company plane. A private jet?"

' 'Just a small one, not like these huge commercial jobs that fly from here to Paris. It's very comfortable, though."

He saw her mind work, wasn't sure what she was thinking, except her face showed a variety of emotions: eagerness, temptation, doubt, then plain old naked longing.

"We'll have a quick tour of the French Quarter, get a bite to eat, and then get back on the plane."

She asked more questions, and he answered them, as honestly as he was able to. Unfortunately, a few lies were of the essence. He was feeling guilty for not being truthful, but only a little.

She agreed.

The first part of his plan was working. The rest was more tricky. Monday morning. Sam settled in the very comfortable chair and looked at David across from her and smiled. "This is really amazing," she said, glancing around at the plane's luxurious interior. It had been fitted with plush carpeting, wood paneling, wonderfully designed furniture, including a desk. There was a computer, a telephone and a television, and the cabin looked like a cross between a sleek office and a luxury hotel room.

A smiling attendant had come and gone, bringing coffee and fresh pastries from a fancy bakery. The two men in suits sitting behind them were deep in discussion, searching through files and looking serious. They were working, clearly, and seemed not at all impressed by their surroundings. So this was how the rich and famous did business. No traveling with the masses, no waiting in noisy airports, no cramped legs.

An assortment of newspapers and glossy magazines lay on the coffee table in front of her. Fashion magazines, travel magazines, interior decorating magazines. The lush, elegant covers lured her, and while David read the paper she leafed through the pages, fantasizing about wearing the gorgeous clothes, traveling to exotic cities—Bangkok, Rio de Janeiro—and living in one of those sprawling mansions somewhere in California, or Hawaii.

The stuff of romance and fantasy. This was not her world, but she could dream for a little while. Pretend.

At the airport in New Orleans the two men went their way and Sam and David were met by a chauffeured car and had a tour of the French Quarter. She'd seen it on TV, she'd seen photographs in magazines, but it wasn't the same. Driving through the streets, Sam was truly delighted to see for herself the old-world charm of the buildings with their lacy ironwork balconies, the hidden courtyards, the tropical flowers everywhere. It was a place of romance and mystery, even in the bright late-morning hours.

It was a place very far from home, from the office, from her classes. She pushed the thought away. She was enjoying this and it was only a day.

"So, now for lunch," said David, as the car came to a stop in front of a restaurant. And some restaurant it was. Not just a little eatery to have a quick lunch. The elegance and opulence overwhelmed her and she stopped in her tracks as she stood in the door looking around.

"You said we were going to have a bite to eat," Sam said accusingly.

"So we are."

"I thought you meant a sandwich or something. I didn't think you were taking me to this...fancy place." She looked around at all the luxury and glitter, and felt uneasy. "This is too much, David, for Pete's sake!"

He took her elbow as they followed the *maitre d'*. "No objections, please. Just sit down and enjoy it."

She sat down and looked at him across the table with its flowers and candles and starched linen. He was smiling at her.

"I don't like this," she said.

He raised his brows. "You don't like this place?"

"That's not what I mean. I mean, you're doing all this, and there's no way for me to reciprocate. It makes me feel in your debt and I don't like that feeling."

"You can reciprocate."

She stared at him. "By having an affair with you? I'm not for sale, David."

He laughed. "Lighten up, Samantha. This is all just for fun, all right? You can reciprocate by giving me the pleasure of your company, in whichever way you feel comfortable. Just indulge me in my desire to show you a good time, give you a few laughs."

"Now you make me feel as if I am one of your projects. The Make-Samantha-Happy Project."

His eyes glinted with humor. "Sounds good to me."

She rolled her eyes at him. The man was irrepressible, with his flowers and chocolates and balloons, and now this. Well, if that was what he wanted, why should she object?

She had a choice. She could sit here and be offended, or she could sit here and have a really yummy lunch.

It was an easy choice.

She smoothed her napkin on her lap and met his regard. "All right," she said, "I'll indulge you. You want to show me a good time? Go for it."

He laughed. "Oh, Samantha, you are a piece of work."

Back on the plane later, she could not keep her eyes open. She was full of luscious food, and the two glasses of wine didn't do a thing to keep her alert, either. Her chair reclined to an almost horizontal position and with a sigh she closed her eyes.

When she woke up, David was not in his chair. Her eye caught the sun, very low on the horizon. She must have slept for hours. She glanced at her watch. Six-thirty. It couldn't be. In Virginia the sun didn't set until much later in July. Surely they should be there by now.

David emerged from the cockpit. He must have been talking to the crew.

"Hey, you're awake," he said with a smile. "You went out like a light."

"What time is it?"

He sat down across from her and glanced at his watch. "Six-thirty, just about."

Something wasn't right. Apprehension crept through her blood. If the sun was this low at this hour at this time of the year, they were far, far south of Virginia.

"David?"

"Yes?"

"We aren't anywhere near home, are we?"

"Not right now, no."

"What do you mean, not right now?"

"I mean we're not going back to Virginia just now."

He said it as if it was the most normal thing to say. She felt suddenly cold with anger, and fear, too. What was going on here? She glanced out of the window, but she could only see the pink-colored clouds.

"Where are we going?" She tried very hard to stay calm.

"We're going to have a couple of restful days on a tiny island in the Caribbean."

"We *what*?"

"You're going to have a very luxurious restorative mini- vacation. You can sleep all you want. Why sleep in Virginia when you can sleep on a romantic island? Sleep on the beach under the palm trees?"

She was stunned. This was surreal. This was crazy! And he was sitting there all cool and calm as if this was the most ordinary thing.

"I don't believe this! You're *kidnapping* me?"

"I think it's called abduction, actually. Kidnapping usually implies a ransom."

"You can't do this!"

"I'm doing it as we speak."

"I could sue you!" she said.

"Good idea," he said.

She stared at him.

"You could win, and be rich. All your problems solved."

"Don't tempt me." She groaned as suddenly the reality of her situation hit her. 'Oh, no, what about my grandfather?"

"He's fine. I talked to him. He thought it was a great idea."

"You told my grandfather you were *kidnapping* me and he thought it was a great idea?" It was getting crazier and crazier.

"No, I said I was taking you on a surprise vacation. He was all for it. He said it was about time for you to have a little fun. We've found someone temporary to hold down the fort while you're away." "What about my sister, my son in Florida? I can't just disappear and—"

"You're not disappearing." He gestured at a phone nearby. "Call them. But they might know already because your grandfather probably told them. Also, I changed the message on the answering machine and gave the number of the place where we will be."

"It's not going to work, you know. You can't just do this. I don't even have a passport!"

He laughed. "Don't worry. It's a very small island and they know me there."

"And I am with you. And that's enough? Do you or your family own this island?"

"Not officially, no."

Not officially. Unofficially. Well, there were other ways, she assumed.

He laughed. "Don't look so suspicious. Nothing sinister going on. The family has owned a villa on the island for years and years. Various members of the family use it during the year. We know the people who run the place and do business there. One of my cousins is married to the daughter of the—"

She laughed. "Oh, please, not another cousin!"

"Well, I've got a few—what can I say? Anyway, they'll let you in. Not to worry."

"You've thought of everything, have you?"

"So far so good."

"What about clothes? Did you think of that? I don't have a thing—clothes, shoes, toothpaste, all that stuff."

"Don't worry. I've got you two suitcases full of stuff. Clothes, shoes, toiletries, whatever. Tara bought it all for you. She conspired with me, so you can sue her, too."

For a moment she was too stunned to speak. "Tara bought me clothes?"

"I hope you like what she got you."

"This is so crazy," she muttered. "It's like something out of a movie." She straightened in her chair and gave him a hard look.

"You lied to me," she said.

"I did. But only out of the goodness of my heart. I wanted to give you a surprise vacation, so maybe I can be forgiven for that."

She glared at him, in no mood to forgive. "You've taken charge of me. You're manipulating me into doing something I don't want to do. You think this is going to make me happy?"

"You don't want to laze on a Caribbean beach for a few days? Eat great food? Drink rum punch? Get pampered? Relax?"

"Sleep with you?"

"Only if you want to." His smile was true-blue charm and she steeled herself against it.

"Well, I don't. I don't like to be forced to do anything!"

"I'm not *forcing* you. This is meant to be a nice surprise, not some awful ordeal. If you don't want to do this, I'll take you back tomorrow morning first thing."

A nice surprise. Carrying her off to some island in the Caribbean as if it was nothing. She pulled her legs under her and closed her eyes. Any minute now she was going to wake up and find she'd been dreaming this.

"Samantha?"

She opened her eyes. She was still on the plane, sitting across from David, and she wasn't dreaming. "What?"

"Look outside."

She glanced out the window, took in the green island, the white beach, the turquoise ocean, the orange sun hovering above the horizon. Wonder filled her, in spite of everything.

"It's just like the postcards and the tourist brochures— the colors, everything. I never believed those colors were real," she said.

"They are."

In the next hour there were other things she'd never believed could ever be real. Such as the fact that she herself would ever be riding around in a open car on a tiny Caribbean island, or that she was staying in a beautiful room in a villa surrounded by tropical greenery and lush blooming flowers. That she had two suitcases full of new clothes, bright, cheery summer things—shorts, tops, trousers in various lengths, long skirts, short skirts, several dresses, some sexy, one elegant. Shoes and sandals of various sorts. Two bikinis, a one-piece swimsuit, panties, bras. All beautiful, expensive garments. It Was like something out of a fairy tale.

Tara hadn't forgotten a thing. Toiletries, robe, nightgown, even a selection of make-up. And, as a touch of whimsy, two novels with very sexy covers.

Sam sat on the bed surrounded by all the color and cheer of the clothes and tried to take it all in. It seemed unreal. She didn't know what to think or feel. There was even a card, a picture of a tropical sunset.

Samantha, I enjoyed shopping for you! I hope you like my choices, and that the clothes fit you. Relax and have a wonderful time! You deserve it. Tara.

Sam drew in a deep, fortifying breath. Well, she didn't know about deserving it, but since fate had brought her here she might as well enjoy it as much as possible. She was tired of always doing what was right and sensible. Maybe this was not sensible, but the heck with it. Everything happened for a reason. She might as well decide that this had happened because she was meant to enjoy it.

She showered, slipped on a fluttery little summer dress and stared at herself in the mirror. Was this her? Wearing that flimsy, whimsical dress? She'd never have bought it for herself, but she liked how she looked—sexy, carefree,

pretty. Another deep breath and she sashayed out of the room and went to join David for dinner on the verandah.

Just indulge me in my desire to show you a good time, David had said.

David was up early the next morning, went for a run, had a swim, ate a solitary breakfast and at nine Samantha still had not made an appearance. Clearly she was catching up on some well-deserved sleep.

She'd been very quiet after they'd arrived at the villa, overwhelmed by the course of events and not sure what to say or do. Mrs Tweedie, the housekeeper, had served them a light supper on the verandah, and soon after that Sam had gone to her room saying she was tired.

He sat out on the verandah and read. It was close to ten when Samantha finally showed up, wearing white shorts and a sky-blue top that made her eyes look even bluer. She looked fresh and lovely.

"Good morning," he said. "I trust you slept well."

"Like a rock. The sound of the sea is very soothing. Is it too late for breakfast?"

"You can have whatever you want whenever you want it. Mrs Tweedie is at your service."

"I'll have whatever is easy. Coffee, some toast, maybe."

Mrs Tweedie produced a cheese omelet, fresh mango slices, fresh orange juice and warm rolls.

Samantha sighed. "Oh, my, this is wonderful."

He watched her eat. "So," he said when she was finished. "You want to go back home now?"

She gave him a deprecating look. "You think I'm nuts?"

He laughed, feeling relief flooding him. Her answer was true to form.

"What's so funny?"

"You. Being all outraged, putting up a brave struggle and then capitulating so completely."

"I'm not capitulating. I've simply reconsidered my options and made an informed decision."

He grinned. "To let me have my way?"

"Oh, no. To enjoy what fate has brought my way." She made a sweeping gesture. "This glorious place."

"Fate? I thought it was me who brought you here."

She offered him a serene smile. "You are merely the instrument of fate," she said loftily.

"Touche," he said dryly. "So I am merely a pawn in the greater scheme of things? Manipulated by higher powers to serve you."

"Something like that."

"Then I guess I'm off the hook."

"Off the hook for what?"

"Having so shamelessly abducted you. Sort of like, the devil made me do it. It's not my fault. I'm merely being used."

She shrugged carelessly. "Whatever makes you feel better. In the meantime, I'd like to go to the beach. How do I get there? Take those steps down?"

"I'll show you."

They spent time on the beach, went sailing in the afternoon, and had a wonderful dinner on the verandah. He was happy to see her enjoy herself, as if really she had left behind the realities of her life.

Just as they finished dessert, unexpected company knocked on the door. Old friends, a Danish couple who also owned a villa on the island and had heard through the coconut telegraph David had arrived on the island. Any other time David would have been delighted to see them, but he felt vaguely annoyed that they were intruding on his time with Samantha. Still, there was nothing to do but invite them in and offer them a drink.

Two hours later they were still there, and Samantha was practically falling asleep in her chair. He told her she should go to bed.

"I'm sorry," she said, "I don't mean to be rude. It's the island air, the sailing. Please, excuse me." She escaped to her room.

* * *

Samantha struggled out of sleep some time later, moaning in protest. Something had awakened her. A sound. She looked at the clock. Two-seventeen. She held her breath as she listened, hearing only the waves, and the rustling of the breeze in the palms outside the window.

Then she heard it. A noise. Something inside her room. Something making a raspy, scratchy sort of noise. She lay dead still on her back, her heart beating uneasily. Something alive and moving was scurrying around in her room, somewhere behind the dresser. Something with small claws scratching along the wooden floor.

A mouse. It had to be a mouse. Did they have mice on this island? She had no idea.

Reaching out an arm, she turned on the bedside lamp. The noise stopped. Sitting up straight, she glanced around, but saw nothing. Where was it?

She should just go back to sleep and worry about catching it tomorrow. A mouse wasn't going to do her any mortal harm. But it would keep her awake. And maybe it wasn't a mouse. Maybe it was something else, something not so harmless, although she couldn't think what. She wasn't familiar with the island fauna. She swung her legs over the edge of the bed. She wasn't staying here with that creature in the same room, driving her crazy, keeping her awake.

Tearing the sheet off the bed and grabbing her pillow she evacuated the room and tiptoed down the hall into the living room. She installed herself on the rattan sofa. The cushions were thick and fluffy and she'd be fine.

She tried to relax, taking deep breaths and letting them out slowly. The faint fragrance of the Danish woman's perfume still lingered in the air. Something fresh and herby. Nice. She sighed and stirred restlessly. A full moon decorated a patch of night sky visible between the palm fronds. Silvery light filtered into the room through the curtainless window.

She didn't get very far in her effort to relax. David's door opened and she heard his steps come down the hall. His big frame emerged into the moonlight, naked apart from a pair of running shorts. Her heart began to race and she held her breath.

"I thought I heard something," he said. "I wondered if it was you on one of your nocturnal prowls."

"I wasn't prowling," she said, her voice breathless. "Go back to bed, David." *Please*, she begged silently. *Please go back to bed*. He looked like a living sculpture standing there washed in moonlight.

He rubbed his chin. "Why are you parked here?"

"Couldn't sleep. I thought I'd try a change of scenery." If she told him she'd been chased away by a mouse, he'd really have something to laugh at. She didn't need him laughing at her any more than he was already doing.

He moved toward her. "I'll keep you company."

Her heart lurched. "Please, don't. I want to sleep." *Please don't stay*, she prayed.

He didn't turn back, but sat down at the end of the sofa, near her feet. He must have pulled on the running shorts as he'd got out of bed. He was obviously sleeping naked, or he would be wearing pajamas. This was not an image she wanted to deal with at the moment and she forced it out of her mind and scooted herself into a sitting position, trying to make distance between them.

"Samantha?" he said softly.

She looked at him. "What?"

"We've got to stop doing this."

"Doing what?"

"Have these semi-naked nocturnal rendezvous."

"I'd love to," she said dryly. "I'd love to be able to sleep through the night without waking up once. Actually, I did, last night."

"Sleep seems to be a much eluded state for you," he said mildly. Fortunately, he had the grace not to point out to her that insomnia was a significant indicator of stress.

She rubbed her face. "I can't do anything about it. I tried sleeping pills a couple of times, but they make me feel awful in the morning, and I don't want to get used to them anyway." She yawned. She was so tired she could barely keep herself upright. "I'll be fine though. I think I'll sleep now."

His arm came around her. "This sofa is no place to sleep," he said. "Are you sure you won't sleep if you go back to bed?"

She shook her head. "There are noises in my room." Dumb thing to say, she realized. She sounded like a child.

"What kind of noises?" he asked promptly.

His arm felt very nice around her. "A mouse, I think," she said, too tired and sleepy to try and make up a story.

"A mouse. Hmm." He stroked her hair. "I didn't hear you scream."

"I didn't."

"I'm very impressed."

He wasn't laughing. Was he? His hand played with her hair. How nice it felt. She let out a sigh and closed her eyes.

The sun was warm on her face when she awoke. The bed felt so good, so safe. Eyes closed, she turned over and buried her face in the pillow. Oh,

heaven not to wake up to the sound of an alarm. Her body felt wonderful, as if she'd come out of a deep, dreamless sleep.

She *had* come out of a deep, dreamless sleep.

And she wasn't in her own bed. She jerked upright, looked around her. She didn't know this room.

She was in somebody else's bed. Someone else had slept next to her, she could see from the dented pillow and the rumpled sheets.

David. Her heart lurched, thundered. She was in David's bed and she had no clue how she'd gotten there. No idea. She groaned and raked her hands through her hair.

The door stood ajar. Then it was pushed open all the way and David came in with a tray.

"Good morning, darling," he said cheerfully. "Breakfast in bed."

Speechless she watched as he put the tray on the bed. Coffee, hot croissants, a beautiful orchid in a water glass. He sat down next to her on the bed and leaned back against the pillows. He was wearing a short black robe, which looked like silk. It probably was. Classy, ritzy-looking. She swallowed.

"How did I get here?" she asked, her voice husky and uncertain. Not of her own volition, she was sure of that.

"I put you here, darling," he said gravely. "I drugged you and we made wild, passionate love, but I'm sure you don't remember it. Have some coffee." The devil danced in his eyes as he handed her a cup.

She took it from him and gave a soft groan of despair. "Please, don't give me that."

"You look lovely this morning, darling," he said.

"Oh, shut up," she snapped, and he laughed.

"I do love your hair when it's all wild like that, and that vulnerable, sleepy look on your face. Not to speak of that sexy nightgown you're wearing. It really does something for me."

She glowered at him. "Tara bought it, not me."

"Do you want to know what happened last night?"

"You told me." Not that she believed him, of course.

"I lied," he said, sipping his coffee. It smelled very good. So did the croissants.

"I know you lied."

He nodded. "You're a smart woman. Drink your coffee before it's cold."

She had a drink from her coffee. "I fell asleep sitting on the sofa last night," she said. "And I guess you carried me in here. I can't believe I didn't wake up." She remembered thinking how nice it had felt to have his arms around her. And then nothing. He'd carried her through the living room, through the hall to his room and she'd never even noticed.

"You were very tired."

' 'You could have carried me here and awakened me and I would have been putty in your hands."

He smiled. "Really?"

"You know I would have. So, why didn't you?"

"I didn't think you'd respect me in the morning," he said deadpan.

She smiled sweetly. "And that matters to you?"

"It would be pretty short-sighted of me if it didn't, wouldn't it? It may surprise you, but I do have more than sex on my mind."

"And you a man. I'm really impressed," she said.

He nodded. "I thought you might be."

She laughed. "So what else is on your mind?"

"Oh, lots of things," he said obtusely. "And have a croissant. Why not enjoy a romantic, leisurely breakfast now that we're together in the same bed?" He picked up the orchid and held it out to her. "For you. Picked it my- self."

Dewdrops still clung to the velvety petals, and the fragrance floated in the air around them. It was exquisite. Her heart made a funny little leap.

She lifted her face slowly. "David, why are you doing all this?"

He looked into her eyes and warmth and sweetness feathered through her blood. He took her hand and held it.

"Because you touch my heart," he said.

CHAPTER NINE

"I DON'T understand," she said, looking down at the orchid. "Nothing seems real to me."

"We don't have to understand something for it to be real."

She heard the smile in his voice, wasn't sure what to say. What was real? What wasn't? Here she was, sitting in bed with a man who'd swept her off to a magical tropical island, a man who made her heart leap and stumble, who made her blood sing. Was he real? Were her feelings real? Was she trapped in an illusion and was all this just theater?

On one level it all was so impossible, so full of danger and impending heartache. On another it was full of magic and delicious shivery feelings, full of wanting and needing. Of hope.

If only she knew what real was.

David watched her face, the expressions of uncertainty, of fear and longing. Sitting there in his rumpled bed in her lacy white nightgown, her hair a halo of tangled coppery curls, she looked like a lost and frightened angel. Once again he suppressed the instinct to gather her up in his arms and tell her she was safe.

Instead, he leaned forward a little and took her hand. "Sam? How about if you'll let me be your friend?" He was surprised to hear himself say the words, didn't know where the idea had come from.

Her blue eyes widened in wary surprise. "Just a friend?"

"Just? Friendship is a good thing, not a *just* thing." "I know, I know. But that's not exactly the vibes you've been sending my way. Don't tell me you don't want sex?"

"No sex," he said, trying to look solemn. "Sex is very overrated."

She stared at him, her mouth dropping open, and it took an effort not to laugh.

"You don't like...sex?" she asked, her voice overflowing with disbelief.

"Not generally, no," he said, trying to sound businesslike.

She gave him a silent, derisive look, eyebrows raised.

"It's true," he said sincerely.

"You've been after me from day one," she stated. "You carry me off to this idyllic island, serve me this romantic breakfast, give me an exotic orchid, and now you feed me this ridiculous line and you expect me to believe you?"

"Is this a problem? That I'm not crazy about sex?" It was not easy keeping his face straight.

"I never met a man who said he didn't like sex. Not that I believe you for a minute."

"What I like a lot better than sex is making love."

"Oh." Surprise flared in her eyes. Then she looked down at her hands and was silent. He wondered what was going on in her head and a sudden apprehension stirred his thoughts.

"Sam? Is lovemaking a...bad thing?"

Her head snapped up, her eyes widened. "No, oh, no. I mean, not *per se*."

"Good." He took her hand. "But what I'm saying, Sam, is that if you're not ready for that, I'd like to be your friend."

"Why?"

Well, yes, why? "Because I like you and I admire your determination and your loyalty. You have strength of character, a strong core, and I like that in people." And she was sexy as hell and he wanted to slip that nightgown right off her body and make love to her and take care of her. He knew better than to express those thoughts.

His words seemed to surprise her. She was silent for a moment, as if digesting what he had said, as if it was something she had never heard of before and wasn't sure if she should be pleased or not. An odd, hungry look suddenly came into her eyes. It made him ache for her, to think she'd deserved loving and cherishing and she'd done without for so many years.

And so have you, came a little voice.

Sam looked into his eyes. "You've only known me a short time."

"But close up." He couldn't resist reaching out and running his hands through her hair, stroking it back behind her shoulders. It felt heavy and warm on his fingers. "And sometimes a short time is all it takes."

She nodded, thoughtful again. "Well, I don't think that we can be just friends, David."

"Why not?"

She drew in a deep breath. "You know why. We...want each other too much."

He loved her for her directness and honesty. "Yes," he said.

They looked at each other and Sam felt warmth flooding through her. Every cell of her body seemed to quiver with awareness, with expectation. Around them the air was electric and it was hard to breathe. Suddenly nothing mattered but the fact that she was here in David's bed, and that she wanted to make love, and that it was all right.

She was not aware that she had moved, nor that David had moved, yet they were suddenly in each other's arms. Her face was on his shoulder and she felt the warmth of his neck against her cheek, drew in the scent of him with her breathing. She belonged here, felt all restraint and fear rush away. Turning her face a little, she reached up and found his mouth, hungry for touching and loving.

It was as if a fire whooshed to life between them—wild and hot. Her heart was racing, flames of desire licked through her body. His hands began an urgent, sensual dance over her body, then bunched the nightgown and pulled it up over her head and arms and tossed it over the end of the bed. His robe followed.

The room was full of early-morning sunlight.

Sam swallowed hard as she looked at him, his naked body sitting next to her on the bed. Her breathing grew shallower yet, her head felt light.

He looked at her, his eyes full of dark desire.

On the fringes of her consciousness she heard the joyous chirping of the birds outside the window. She took in a shallow puff of air as her gaze traveled over his lean, muscled body, beautiful and aroused, and her mouth went dry. "We need some—"

"I have it," he said. "And I'm safe, Sam. Don't worry."

"Me, too," she whispered. Safe. Such a wonderful, comforting word. She drew in a trembling breath, feeling every cell of her quivering. He reached out a finger, traced her mouth, stroked her lips as if she were something fragile and precious, looking at her...looking at her with his eyes filling her with heat and need.

"You're beautiful," he whispered.

She loved the look in his eyes, loved the sound of his voice, the touch of his finger on her mouth. She closed her eyes, felt his hands gently lower her body against the mattress, felt his hands caressing her breasts, then the

warmth of his mouth... He was kissing her breasts, teasing her nipples, setting sparks shooting through her.

"Oh," she whispered, her body arching, moving. She drew him closer, wanting to feel all of him against her. They moved together as if they'd done this together a hundred times, kissing and stroking, touching and loving. Her blood danced and her head was light with sweet euphoria. How long had it been since she had truly felt loved in a man's arms? She could not remember ever having felt the intensity, the sweet hunger she was feeling now. Had she simply forgotten? Or was this—

All coherent thought took flight in the feverish sensations that followed. She let herself go, making breathless, wordless little sounds that came from some deep, secret place. She opened herself up to all the rapture and passion David evoked in her, giving back in turn, holding back nothing— caressing him, stroking, kissing, tasting. Wild. She felt wild and delirious, intoxicated by the feel and taste and scent of him, the sounds coming from his throat.

Urgency, fever. They clung together, trembling, breathless, and tumbled over the edge together, miraculously, gloriously.

For a while they lay spent in each other's arms, wordless. Sam felt her heartbeat slow down and a delicious languor overtook her. She snuggled closer into him.

"Sam?" he asked softly, and she heard the note of tenderness and amusement in his voice.

"What?" she whispered.

"That was very...good," he said.

"Yes," she whispered. Her own passion and wildness had overwhelmed her a little, almost made her shy. She buried her face against his chest.

"Look at me."

She raised her head and met his regard. He smiled and touched a finger to her mouth. " You... surprised me."

"I surprised myself."

He laughed softly, hugging her closer. "You feel so very nice here in my arms," he said.

It was like living in a romantic movie, driving around this idyllic little island with its coconut palms, its friendly people, the hidden beach coves where you could be all alone under the stars at night. Alone with David, who made her laugh, who made her feel as if she was the only woman in the universe. They made love on the beach, in the bedroom, in the forest by a waterfall. He showed her tenderness, passion, fun, and she could not imagine ever wanting to live without it again.

They drank rum punches and champagne and wine. They ate fish they bought straight from the fishermen after they'd watched them pull in their nets. They sat in small roadside stalls and ate conch fritters and talked and laughed with the other customers. Everybody knew David, or so it seemed— shopkeepers, restaurant owners, and people in the streets. They all wanted to know where he had been and what he had done and how his family was doing. Everybody had stories. Everybody had time to tell them. Life seemed easy and casual and full of fun. It was easy to forget about home, the shop, her studies.

On Wednesday night they had dinner at Pirates' Cove, a small outside restaurant overlooking Sugar Bay. The sun had gone down and a big moon hung over the water, silvering the waves. Tree frogs cheerp-cheerped, hidden in the greenery.

"Imagine living here all the time," she said with a sigh.

"Imagine going stir-crazy in about two weeks," he said dryly, then laughed at her surprised look. "It's *very* small, No entertainment to speak of, no shopping worth mentioning. It's great for a hide-away type vacation, if you

like reading and hiking in the woods, and doing a bit of sailing, but other than that, keeping your brain stimulated would be a challenge."

"I suppose you're right, talking long-term. For now, though, I'm quite stimulated enough. Just look at the food on my plate. Tell me again what this is?"

Walking through the rainforest, she amazed herself by finding herself intrigued by the plants and flowers, the birds and lizards and weird-looking insects. For a long time she'd focused so much on her books she'd hardly looked at the life going on around her.

She felt herself more and more intrigued by David. Felt treacherous thoughts and hopes hovering at the fringes of her consciousness.

"Tell me," she said one afternoon as they sat near a mountain stream taking a rest from a long hike, "why haven't you remarried?"

He didn't respond right away. He was staring down into the water and she couldn't see his expression.

"There are a lot of reasons I could give you, I suppose," he said finally, "but I'm not sure they're valid." He looked up, meeting her eyes. "The most honest one is probably that I just never wanted to."

Later, as she lay next to him in bed, she thought about what he had said, and about his wife. He never mentioned her. She wondered why.

They stayed for the rest of the week, coming home on Saturday night.

Sunday morning. David watched Sam dozing in his arms. They'd made love and he enjoyed watching her afterward, seeing her relaxed and satiated, all soft, sensuous sweetness. It had been a long time since he had felt so whole, so profoundly content with a woman in his arms.

She gave a contented little sigh, her eyes still closed. He smelled the flowery scent of her hair, felt the softness of her skin as she stirred in his arms. How could she have lived all these years without coming across a man to love her? He looked down at her tangled curls, wondering how this was possible.

She glanced up. "What are you thinking?" she asked. "You're looking at me funny."

He grinned. "I was just wondering about you, about your life, why you've been alone for so long."

"Alone?"

"I mean, why you haven't married again."

She made a face. "It's not so easy, David," she said mildly. She sat up in bed, flipped her hair away from her face.

"Why isn't it easy?"

She shrugged. "I suppose I dress up nice, but I'm not I exactly a prize catch, you know, not where marriage is I concerned."

Her words surprised him and he frowned. "What on I earth are you talking about? You're smart, independent, beautiful—" And sexy and passionate, he wanted to add, but didn't get the chance.

She laughed. "Oh, come on, David. Be realistic." "She pulled up the sheet and tucked it under her arms, covering her breasts. He wondered why she suddenly felt the need to cover herself up. "Think about it," she went on. "I was nineteen when Jason left me and died. I was nineteen and I had a *baby*. After that I had a small child, and now I have a ten-year-old son. Not many men want to start with an instant family. Oh, they're happy to move in, have an affair, whatever. But marriage? That's not so easy. I'm not alone; Kevin is part of the deal. And, besides that, I wasn't ever likely to be able to contribute a lot to a family income, having no education or professional training, and—"

He stopped her with an impatient gesture. What was the matter with this woman? Her insecurities baffled him. "Education isn't what makes you a lovable person, or a valuable one, or a respected one—not on the human level."

He saw her body stiffen, saw the softness leave her face. "It sure makes it easier to get a good job and have a better quality of life—on the human level," she returned. "And what do you know of any of that, David?" she asked, her tone defensive. "You've never had to worry about money—wonder if you could pay the rent for another month because your fridge went on the blink and you had to buy a new one, or if you could afford a new pair of shoes for your son, or if you should cancel your health insurance because it's too expensive... You—" She shrugged. "Oh, just never mind." She moved away from him in the big bed and he grabbed her hand, not wanting her to leave.

He felt a sinking feeling in his stomach, felt the sweetness of the morning dissolve between them. "I'm sorry, Sam. It wasn't my intention to devalue your efforts, please understand that." He squeezed her hand. "You are smart and capable; you'll make it in life no matter what."

He watched her square her shoulders. She looked at him hard. "I intend to. And as far as marriage goes, right now I don't really even want to get married, even if there was somebody dying to drag me to the altar. It would complicate everything."

He couldn't imagine why. It would only make it easier for her, better. Someone to share her problems and concerns, someone to help ease the financial situation. "Why?" he asked, still holding on to her hand.

"Right now it's just Kevin and me, and with me so busy studying and sorting things out for myself I just haven't got time. I mean, I've got to get myself on a career path first." Determination in her blue eyes. "I want to know I can make a decent living myself, be independent. Marriage isn't a solution for that. I was married once, and Jason—" She bit her lip and looked away. "Well, you know where that left me." She was all coolness and distance suddenly, and it made him sad.

She swung her legs over the side of the bed. "Excuse me."

"Sam, I'm worried about you," he said, feeling strangely desperate.

"You don't need to worry about me," she said tightly. "You're not responsible for me." Yanking her nightgown on over her head, she hurried out of the room.

He knew better than to follow her. He lay back against the pillows, threw his arm across his face and cursed himself for having started the discussion, for ruining a perfect Sunday morning.

In her own bedroom Sam dragged on a pair of shorts and a T-shirt, shoved her feet into running shoes and went outside. It was no use, no use. He didn't understand her, would never understand her. She should not have gotten involved with him, should never have started an affair with him.

Sunshine. The scent of roses. It was a glorious morning. Birds chirped, flowers bloomed, trees whispered in the breeze. A celebration of life and beauty and joy. Less than an hour ago she'd made love—glorious, passionate love—and it had felt so right. Now, everything felt wrong.

The illusion was over. The dream was finished. It was better to just be realistic about it.

She ran until she could run no longer. She sat down on a tree stump by the side of the road, buried her face in her hands and wept.

David stared at the TV screen, where a balding anchorman was relaying the late-evening news of which he heard nothing. He'd seen little of Sam all day, and when he had seen her she was either aloof or pretending to be cheery, as if nothing was wrong, as if nothing had happened.

He felt like smashing a window.

His instincts told him to leave her alone, but it wasn't what he wanted to do. He wanted to make her talk. He wanted to tell her he...

He took the remote control and zapped the TV, slammed out of the house and walked down the dark country road, his body rigid and tense.

What could he possibly tell her?

Friday afternoon. Sam gave a weary sigh and leaned back in her creaky office chair. It had been an endless, miserable week, a hot, miserable day. The air conditioner had expired first thing this morning and the place felt like a Turkish steam bath. Not that she had ever been in a Turkish steam bath, but she could well imagine. She was hot, sticky and tired.

At the house, she'd moved back into her own room, was sleeping in her own bed. Actually, she didn't sleep much. Mostly she lay awake. David had tried to talk to her, but she had said she'd made a mistake, that the time on the island had simply made her stupid and she wasn't having an affair with him. He was going to Mexico and she had no time to invest in a dead-end relationship.

She was so tired.

Sam rubbed her face, then put her head down on her arms on the desk. She'd finish the sales journal for the week and then she'd be done for today. If only she could go home and relax instead of having to go to classes. Have a glass of wine with David, came the unbidden thought.

Have dinner with him on the deck.

Watch the stars and make love in the grass.

Her heart turned over. All week he had tried to be nice to her and all week she had tried to avoid him in pure self- defense.

Still, in the secret corners of her mind, she kept fantasizing about him, making up lovely stories. But fairy tales.,, were just illusions, so why waste her time with them? She should never have made love with him. Now she had the memory of those wonderful days on the island to haunt her and the terrible longing for more of the same.

A few more weeks and her summer classes would be over. Kevin would come back from Florida. She saw his freckled little-boy face in her mind. She missed him, longed to give him a big hug and tell him she loved him, that he was more important to her than anything or anybody in the whole world.

She sighed. Her head felt too heavy to lift. She heard voices in the sales room. Customers looking for a table, a sofa, a bedroom set.

A soft knock on her half-open door.

"Come on in," she said wearily. She managed to raise her head halfway and stared down at the sales journal in I front of her.

"Mom?"

Her head jerked up. Her breath caught in her throat.

Kevin.

Kevin, grinning, eyes bright with joyful expectation.

For a fraction of a moment Sam could not talk, not move.

Was she dreaming? Was she seeing things again? Then she was out of her chair and he threw himself into her arms. She hugged him hard.

"Kevin!" she said. "Why are you here? How—?"

Over his shoulder she saw her sister standing in the door, smiling.

"Hi there," said Joni, cool as a cucumber. She held up her hand. "Nothing's wrong. Just thought we'd come for a quick visit this weekend."

A quick visit. As if it was nothing.

"Mom!" Kevin had extricated himself from her embrace. "I was on a plane! It was so cool!"

"A *plane*?"

And then she saw David, just outside her office door, watching her, and her heart made another tremendous leap. David was behind this. David had brought her Kevin.

Kevin turned around and pointed at David. "It was his plane, Mom! Mr McMillan's. He came and got Aunt Joni and me! And it was so cool! He showed me everything! And when we got to the airport there was a *limo* waiting for us! A huge one!"

She looked from David to Kevin, saw her son's bright eyes and wrapped him up in her arms once more.

"There was a television in the plane, Mom!" he said against her chest, his voice muffled by her embrace. "And a telephone and everything!"

She laughed. "I'm so glad you're here," she said, and tears jumped into her eyes. "I'm so happy to see you."

And then she hugged Joni, who was laughing, and then David, who was right behind her, because it was the natural thing to do.

"Thank you," she said, her cheek pressed against his chest, her throat aching with the effort not to cry.

"My pleasure." He hugged her back, arms tight around her, as if he wasn't going to let go of her any time soon. She lifted her face and looked into his eyes, and for a fraction of a moment the world fell away, and it was just the two of them holding on to each other.

I love him, she thought, and there's no help for me.

"Mr McMillan said we can all go out to dinner, if it's all right with you," said Kevin. "And after that you have classes and Aunt Joni says I can stay up till you come home, if it's all right with you."

"Everything is all right with me," Sam said, "but I think I'll skip my classes tonight and make them up some other time." She'd call one of the other students and ask to borrow her notes.

"Are you sure?" asked David.

"No, but what the heck! I only have one son."

"So," David said to Kevin, "what would you like to eat" ^ tonight?"

"Pizza!"

Joni declined the dinner invitation, saying she'd spend the weekend with Grandpa and keep him company, see how he was doing.

So Sam, Kevin .and David took off to a nice Italian restaurant where Kevin got his pizza, and the adults indulged in *pasta tutti di mara*. It was delicious, but Sam could have eaten sawdust for all she cared about food right now. She didn't say much. She watched and listened to her son, who was totally absorbed in a conversation with David about fishing and the benefits of various kinds of bait—live worms, flies, cut-up raw meat.

It was wonderful. Sam's heart flowed over.

She found David on the deck after she'd put Kevin to bed on the sofa in Andrew's office.

"Come join me," he said. "It's a beautiful night."

"Yes, it is." She stood next to him at the railing and I looked up at the stars. She felt light and happy.

The moon was a sliver of silver in the dark sky. She I smelled the rich scent of green, growing things, heard the symphony of insect life in the grass and trees.

"I want to thank you for bringing Kevin here," she said, her voice unsteady. "We've never been apart for such a long time and you don't know how much it means to me to see him."

"I think I do." He put one arm around her and gave her a crooked smile.

Her heart began a little dance at the feel of his arm around her. "Why did you do it?"

"You didn't want flowers or chocolates or balloons. You didn't want to talk to me. I had to come up with something that would really make you happy."

"You did. It was a truly nice thing to do, David. I don't know how to thank you."

"You already did," he said, "by being happy." He looked down at her. In the moon-shadowed darkness it was hard to see the expression on his face. She wanted to reach up and kiss him, press herself against him, feel her blood sing again like it had a week ago. It was suddenly hard to breathe.

It was a terrible thing to feel so much hunger, especially because she knew it might be misinterpreted. He'd think she was just being grateful, yet what she was feeling had nothing to do with gratitude. She was very sure David wasn't looking for sexual favors in exchange for doing something nice for her. David McMillan wasn't a man who had to buy his way into a woman's arms.

He lifted his arm away from her, as if he'd read her thoughts. "Sleep well," he said. "No waking up, no dreams, no mice, no worrying."

She sighed. "No."

And so she went to bed alone and tried to sleep.

Which didn't work at all. Her mind was too full of thoughts, her body too alive with desire.

She slipped out of bed and softly made her way to David's room.

CHAPTER TEN

THE door was ajar and she nudged it open further, carefully moved into the room. The curtains were open and faint moonlight shimmered through the open windows.

She stood in front of the bed. "David?" she whispered.

"Sam?" He sat up.

"I want to be with you."

He held up the top sheet in invitation and she slipped in beside him, moving into his arms as if she'd done it a hundred times. She pressed her face against his shoulder. "I'm not here because—because of what you did, bringing Kevin here," she said awkwardly.

"Oh, Sam," he said, his voice spilling over with warmth and laughter. "I know you well enough not to even consider that for a moment."

"Oh, good." His reaction reassured her.

"So, why are you here?" As if he didn't know.

"Because I want to make love," she whispered. "I want you, I need you, and I'm so tired of denying myself." She raised her head and found his mouth, kissing him. "And I don't want to talk about it."

So they didn't.

He held her, touched her, kissed her, made her body sing. She loved him back, without thought, just relishing the feel of his warm body against hers, the pleasure and the joy of it. It was the most blissful feeling.

She loved him.

It was a happy weekend. Kevin was in awe of David, in awe of the cabin he was building. David took Kevin fishing, giving Sam several hours of time to study. Joni and Grandpa came on Sunday afternoon and they barbecued chicken. At six the limo arrived and took Grandpa home and Joni and Kevin back to the airport.

Suddenly the house seemed very quiet. Kevin wasn't big, but his presence took up space and filled the air with energy and sound.

"He's a great kid, that son of yours," said David. "You told me so, and it's true."

Pride warmed her and she smiled. "Yes, I'm lucky."

"Maybe it isn't just luck, you know. You're a good mother."

"Thank you." She felt ridiculously pleased. "I try." She'd been aware of David observing her over the weekend, of his attention. She'd felt light and shivery at times when his eyes had met hers at unexpected moments. What had he been thinking?

She knew she was in love with this man, and all she could see was heartbreak when she looked into the future. The trick was not to look into the future. At least not a future with him in it. She needed to be realistic and she was good at that—she'd spent the last ten years being realistic.

"Are you very much behind in your work?" he asked. "Should I feel guilty?"

She laughed. David feeling guilty? No way. "I'll catch up, and I'd better start right now." She sighed. "I don't feel like it, though."

"Do it anyway. And later I'll bring you a glass of wine and seduce you."

She grimaced. "That will do wonders for my concentration."

Sam twisted her unruly hair on top of her head and examined her face in the mirror. She was sleeping in David's bed, she was in love, and she was wondering if it showed. She'd slept better, felt better. Better? She grinned at herself as she put in her earrings. She felt blissfully, gloriously alive; it *had* to show in her face.

A little lipstick, some mascara. Shoes would be good, too. Glancing around, she located them, slipped them on, picked up her purse and book bag and sashayed out of the bedroom to the kitchen for a bite of breakfast.

There was no reason, she told herself, why a grown-up woman of almost thirty should not have a responsible, temporary sexual relationship with a man. Not all good relationships were destined to last and end up in a happy marriage with a houseful of children.

There was no reason why she and David could not enjoy each other. No strings attached, no expectations. A couple of months of this would do her good, remind her she was a woman with womanly feelings and needs. She *deserved* it-- a little male attention.

Taking a break with a cup of coffee in the middle of the morning, she called Gina. Gina had been on vacation for two weeks and had returned last night.

"How was your vacation?" Sam asked her, and received a full and colorful report on the joys and terrors of camping in the wilds of Vermont. Gina's fiance was an avid naturalist.

"So," said Gina finally, "how goes it with you?"

"I've taken your advice."

"What advice is that? I give so much of it I have trouble keeping track."

"I've taken a lover," Sam said solemnly, then burst out laughing.

"Be still my heart," said Gina. "I am so proud of you, I can hardly contain myself. It's David, I presume?"

"Yes." She told Gina about the island, which had her quite impressed, and about Kevin's visit, which impressed her even more.

"Sounds like a winner to me, Sam."

"I know." I also know he's leaving for Mexico in

October, so I'm going to be very cool about this, you know, just enjoy it while it lasts, no strings attached."

"Excellent," said Gina, "but don't do anything stupid, okay?"

"Like what?"

"Like quit your classes or some such foolish thing, so you'll have more time to spend with him. Remember Jason."

"I remember Jason. And I will do no such thing."

"And don't get pregnant."

"I will not get pregnant."

"Good. And may I remind you that I still have not met this paragon?"

Sam laughed. "I'm not sure I want you to. How are the wedding plans?"

"I don't want to talk about it," said Gina, instant gloom in her voice. After which she did talk about it. It was a tale full of woe. There was too much to do, too many arrangements to be made, too many arguments with her mother and her fiancé. "I just want to elope and forget the whole thing."

"You can't do that!" said Sam.

"Don't hold your breath," Gina said morosely.

She might feel sophisticated and mature in the daytime, but at night, in David's arms, that wasn't what she felt. He made her feel cherished and loved. He made her feel as if she was the sexiest woman on earth.

She started hunting for an apartment in earnest now. This was not a very uplifting experience, but she tried to keep her spirits up. Woodmont did not have a great number of rental properties, and the ones that were available were either too run down or too expensive.

"I'd like to help you," David said one day when he caught her figuring with her calculator.

"No, thank you." She was independent and she intended to stay that way.

"I knew you would say that," he said.

"Then why did you ask?"

"To open the subject for discussion."

"There is no subject to discuss."

"I'd like to help you so you can take things a little easier. So you don't have to worry so much."

"You're talking about money, I suppose," she said calmly.

"Or whatever else would help. I could find you a better job, get you an apartment, make it possible for you to take an extra year to get your degree."

"I see," she said. "I appreciate the offer, but, no, thank you."

"Why not?"

She sighed. Why was it so hard for him to understand this? "Because I don't want to be dependent on you, David, or on any other man. I want to know that I can stand on my own two feet and take care of my son."

"You have done that for ten years, Sam. What have you left to prove? Tell me, what would be so terrible about accepting a little help from me?"

She tried for dignity. "Because it's never been my ambition to be a kept woman."

He laughed. She should have known he would laugh. She glared at him, and he kept right on laughing.

"I hate you," she said, but she didn't sound very convincing. She jumped up and headed for the door.

"Where are you going?"

"To Andrew's office. To look up *poison* on the Internet."

David was working on his cabin, thinking about Sam. He thought about her too much for his peace of mind. His cellphone rang. He straightened, and reached for it and wiped the sweat out of his face. The day was overcast but hot.

"David? It's Tara."

"Hi, Tara. How are you?"

"Fine, thanks." A slight pause. "Jonathan has agreed to the divorce. It's now just a matter of paperwork."

She sounded so businesslike. "Any time you want to cry on my shoulder—"

"I'm finished crying. I should never have married him in the first place." She sighed. "To tell you the truth, David, I think I'm dealing with wounded pride more than a broken heart, so don't feel too sorry for me."

He laughed, he couldn't help it. "All right, only a little, then."

"So tell me," she said, changing the subject, "how's the cabin coming along?"

David smiled as he surveyed the work he had done, pleased with his progress. "I'm still on schedule. The building inspectors have come and gone, plumbing and electricity are in place and, barring unexpected complications, I'll have it finished by the time I get on the plane to Mexico."

"How's Sam doing?"

"She's fine. She's looking for an apartment in Woodmont."

A short silence. "Maybe she could live in the cabin."

"I thought of that, Tara. I offered it to her, but it's too far for Kevin's school. She wants to be in town, close to work and school. Close to her grandfather." He gave an exasperated sigh. "I can't for the world figure out how to help her. She's so damned pigheaded, so intent on standing on her own two feet."

"Go figure," said Tara.

"I didn't say there's anything wrong with it, for Pete's sake, but why can't she accept help when it's offered?" He could solve her problems if only she'd let him, but she wouldn't. There was a reticence about her that annoyed him severely. In some way she kept herself aloof from him, not wanting his interference, as if she was afraid of something, something he might do. Like what?

"You're a typical man, David. You see a problem and your first inclination is to fix it, and—■"

"And what's wrong with that?"

"I think Sam is one of these people who like to solve their own problems. You can't just butt in and take over, David. She's not a failing engineering project in need of management."

"Thank you for that insight, Tara. I'll keep that in mind."

"You can try and be creative about it and ask her to marry you."

His heart made a sickening leap. He swallowed, saying nothing.

"You love her, David. Don't even try to deny it."

He didn't want to hear those words. He searched his mind for something to say to shut her up.

"She doesn't want to get married." Sam had said this herself. "It will complicate matters for her, so she told me."

"Really?" Tara sounded doubtful.

"Yes," he said irritably. "She wants to get that wretched business degree before she's thirty and over the hill and she has no time for a husband. Besides, I'm not in the market."

Tara laughed. "Well, I guess you two will just have to figure it out for yourselves."

"You are a big help." He kicked a stone out of his way.

"Now, why I called," she went on, unperturbed, "is Anthony's birthday party. I wonder if you could..."

He listened to her with half his attention, his thoughts with Samantha.

"Why don't you bring Sam to the party?" Tara suggested.

"I'll ask. She might not have time."

"Abduct her again. We can send Lester with the limousine. He'll help you drag her bodily into the car if you ask him."

"You're full of ideas, aren't you, Tara?"

She chuckled. "Bye, David. See you Saturday."

David clicked off the phone, picked up his hammer and rammed in a nail.

His cellphone rang again. With a frustrated growl he tossed the hammer aside.

The chirpy voice of a project assistant at the Washington consulting firm greeted him. She was making his travel arrangements, scheduling the air freight of his meager amount of personal effects. Could he please give her some more information?

Sam wondered what drove David to build that cabin, the real reason behind it. Although at times he had the help of some other workers, most of the time he worked by himself, alone in the woods. Even at night he was usually home when she returned from her classes. She liked coming home at night and finding David waiting for her, ready to fix her something to eat or pour her a glass of wine. It gave her an opportunity to relax for a little while, enveloped in the seductive rhythms of the music he liked to play, to talk about her day, about his.

She remembered what Tara had said about David running away from himself all these years and wondered if it had anything to do with his marriage.

"Is this the first house you ever owned?" she asked one night after he had told her about the progress he had made.

He shook his head. "No. I had an old colonial in Richmond for a few years."

"I like old colonials, with their big porches and old wooden floors and high ceilings and creaky stairs. Was it nice?"

"Yes. Very nice."

He was not very forthcoming. "Was that where you lived when you were married?"

"Yes."

Her heart thundered. "You never talk about your wife and your marriage," she said softly.

He looked at her. "Do you want me to?"

"Sometimes. Why don't you?"

"It's a long time ago," he said evasively. "And...it's not easy to talk about."

She nodded. "Okay, I understand."

She would not ask him again. When he was ready he would tell her, if he wanted her to know.

Samantha found an apartment. It was small but clean, and in a decent neighborhood. She could move in on the first of October, which meant that she'd have to drive Kevin to school in the mornings for a month, and he'd have to come to the store to wait for her to finish work.

"I found a place," she told David when she came home that night. "Signed the papers and paid the deposit."

"Congratulations." He put his arms around her and kissed her. "Yours is the first face I've seen all day, and it's good to see you smile. Tell me about this new abode of yours. Can I see it?"

She sat down at the kitchen table and proceeded to tell him the little there was to say. "And what did you do all day by your lonely self?" she asked.

"Same as yesterday. Worked on the floors. I'm just about finished."

"Don't you mind being alone so much?" she asked. She imagined that when he was working on a project overseas he'd be constantly surrounded by work crews.

"I'm getting used to it," he said evenly. "However, I do feel the urge for some convivial company and stimulating conversation coming up, not to speak of some of my brother's superior brandy." He grinned. "As luck will have it, festivities are planned to celebrate his thirty-fifth birthday. Saturday night." He met her eyes. "I'd like you to come with me."

"Oh, no," she said, raising her hands in defense. "No way."

"Please. Because if you say no you'll force me to do my caveman routine—fling you over my shoulder, tie you up, carry you off." He gave an evil grin.

"You can't make me."

"I can," he said solemnly, "but please don't make me. It would be much more pleasant if you would come willingly."

She spooned some yogurt. "I don't belong at fancy parties." Not that she didn't have anything to wear. One of Pauline-the-fashion-queen's dresses would probably be perfect. The dresses she still had from her island adventure might be a little too risqué for a first visit to the McMillans' mansion.

"Why don't you belong?"

"Oh, get real, David! You know why! I don't have the know-how. I'm not sophisticated. I don't have any idea what to talk about."

"And you don't have a thing to wear," he added dryly, as if he thought she'd forgotten to mention the standard excuse.

"As a matter of fact, I do," she said loftily, "and, no, it's not that sexy black number Tara picked out for me. But even if I wear the right clothes it doesn't mean I know how to act and what to talk about."

"Do you have any trouble talking to me or to Tara?"

"No."

"Well, there you go."

She sighed. "I'd feel like a fish out of water, David. Why would I want to go to a family party with you when I don't know a soul?"

"To meet the rest of my cousins?"

She smothered a laugh. "Oh, please."

"You might even like some of them," he said blandly. "They're just people, you know, and they speak English, all of them."

"I wouldn't know what to talk about." She swallowed more yogurt.

"You've been studying business. Use it. Talk about the stockmarket, or the world market price of soy beans. They'll love you."

She rolled her eyes. "I can't wait."

David was irrepressible. Her curiosity was irresistible.

Saturday afternoon found her in the limousine with David, on her way to the McMillan ancestral home, sipping champagne.

She did not feel sophisticated and mature.

She felt like a nervous wreck.

On the one hand she was curious about the party, the people, the house; on the other hand she was terrified she'd be blinded by all that glitter and wealth and stumble and stutter. Fall on her face, say the wrong thing. Look like a fool.

However, compliments of Pauline the fashion queen, she had a great dress, sheathed in a bag, hanging on a brass rod in a space especially designed for such things. She had a glass of champagne in her hand, to calm her nerves, and David next to her, which had the odd effect of both calming her and exciting her at the same time.

She took a deep breath and decided she was going to do fine. She would listen rather than talk, smile a lot and try to look intelligent. She'd walk straight and keep her chin in the air—slightly, just enough to look confident. After all, attitude and confidence was what much of this was about.

She was going to meet his parents and see their home, the location of the party, the place where David had grown up, which bore no resemblance to the modest little house in which she and Joni had grown up, she was quite sure.

She would meet his brother, Anthony, the financial genius who bought and sold soy beans that had not yet been planted, and several of his cousins who were either involved in the business or pursuing lucrative careers in other fields. And their wives. Maybe she was more terrified by meeting the women. She was grateful Tara would be there: one familiar face at least.

As she was sipping champagne, David talked about his family, trying to convince her of the fact that they were just people. "Relax," he said.

She gulped down the rest of the champagne, leaned her head against his shoulder and closed her eyes. David was playing with her hair. It felt nice. She sighed and felt his hand move down her cheek, her chin, her throat. It felt good to be touched.

He was unbuttoning her blouse. She gave a little moan in protest and pushed his hand away. "David, the driver!"

"Can't see us. The window is closed and he can't see through the glass from the other side." He kept on unbuttoning her blouse. "Relax," he whispered in her ear, his hands now unclasping her bra.

Oh, sure. Here she was, sitting with her breasts exposed in the back of a fancy car while outside it was broad daylight and it felt as if the world could watch the show.

"There are people outside and—"

"They can't see us, Sam. This is as private as a bedroom."

"It feels..."

"It feels what?"

"Decadent, illicit."

He chuckled. "I'm all for having a little decadent, illicit dallying with you. It's a long ride; we might as well enjoy ourselves." He turned her face toward his, kissed her slowly, sensually. She gave a little moan, half-enjoyment, half-protest.

"We can talk," she said feebly. "That's enjoyable."

"We could. Only right now what I really want is you. Here. Now." He kissed her, teasing her lips with his tongue. "And there's not a reason in the world why we can't indulge ourselves."

He fondled her bare breasts, smiling wickedly and she squirmed beneath his touch, feeling a mixture of excitement and embarrassment. The driver was right behind the partition and outside cars were driving right past them. She could see the people in these cars.

"I'm noticing certain signs that you're not indifferent," David said.

"You're seducing me, and I'm helpless."

"I like to hear that."

She closed her eyes. She felt his hand on her thigh, moving slowly upward, under her skirt, slowly, slowly, teasing her.

She sighed and capitulated. He knew how to drive her wild. How to make her forget everything, even that they were traveling in a moving limousine.

She was bad. A wicked, wanton woman. It felt pretty good.

The McMillan residence was a gracious old mansion set in immaculately sculpted and manicured gardens. His parents were also gracious and well-manicured, if not as old as the house. They smiled and wished her welcome. She smiled back, feeling a little dazed, trying not to look too overwhelmed by the elegant surroundings.

Hoping they couldn't see she had been thoroughly ravished less than an hour ago.

In the back of a limousine.

By their son, who now looked perfectly composed and in control of all his senses, as if he'd spent the last hour in a business meeting rather than fooling around with her.

A maid took her to her room, up a wide, curving staircase straight out of the movies. She found her luggage waiting. The place was gorgeous. A big canopy bed, antique furniture, soft rose-colored carpeting underfoot, a breathtaking view of the lawn and the woods beyond.

Just after the maid had left, David knocked on the door that connected his room with hers—very conveniently, very discreetly.

"Everything all right?" he asked.

"I hope that's a rhetorical question," she said. "This is great. And what a view! Are those the woods where you used to roam and explore?"

"Yes." He stood next to her and glanced outside, smiling. "My father thinks if only we'd lived in a penthouse apartment a hundred stories up or so, I'd be working for him instead of draining swamps, as he calls it." There was humor in his voice, not bitterness.

Sam laughed. "They seem to be fond of you, anyway."

' Fortunately, there was Anthony to take the pressure off me."

"Didn't he play in the woods when he was little?"

"Not much. He loved riding horses and playing chess, which my grandfather taught him when he was five. In his teens he got interested in the workings of the company and he's been there ever since."

He wrapped both his arms around her. "Just enjoy tonight, Sam. There's no pressure, all right? Just be yourself."

No pressure? she almost asked. *Are you kidding?*

"Okay," she said instead.

Sam listened to the fragments of conversations around her, which were not the sort of things she heard from customers in her grandfather's store or in the supermarket.

"He's selling the house in St Tropez. He's buying an island somewhere in the Grenadines."

"...prices quoted in Egyptian pounds..."

"I'm English, darling. We don't do sexy..."

"...just inside Damascus Gate, on the left where..."

For a birthday party, it was quite a glamorous affair. She heard a few murmurings of French, and a man in a white turban, his eyes black as onyx, was holding forth on the problems of corruption in high places.

There was talk about business and politics, and someone was discussing a charity fund-raiser, a dinner for which the participants would shell out two thousand dollars per plate.

David was deep in discussion with a funny-looking bald man with big ears and no chin. David looked magnificent in his formal clothes, and for a moment she felt a shiver of trepidation. They were from different worlds, no matter that most often she saw him wearing jeans or shorts, working with his hands, building a cabin in the woods.

"So, what do you think of this?" a voice said next to her. She turned her head, seeing Melissa, wife of one of the McMillan cousins, standing next to her with a glass of champagne in her hand. She wore a gorgeous black dress, slinky and sexy in a tasteful way, if there was such a thing.

"I've never been to a birthday party like this," Sam said. Why pretend?

Melissa nodded. "I know what you mean," she said dryly. "The balloons are missing, and the Kool-Aid .. punch." She gave a crooked grin, totally without malice. "Not to speak of a birthday cake with blue frosting. It takes some getting used to, all this glitter."

Sam looked at her in surprise. Melissa was tall, dressed in an expensive gown and looked elegant and sophisticated. Not like anyone who'd come in contact with blue cake- frosting. Melissa laughed. "Not everybody in this room grew up in all this opulence. Hey, my father is a high- school teacher and my mother is a dental assistant."

Sam felt herself begin to relax. "You look like you belong here."

"Well, it takes practice, but there's nothing wrong with my IQ, so I learned. Besides, the McMillans are really nice people, in spite of all that money."

Sam laughed. "I don't suppose nice and money are mutually exclusive. How did you meet your husband?"

"In the dentist office. It was the end of the day and my mother's car had broken down and I came to pick her up in my box on wheels. Alex had just had a long session in the chair and looked a bit worse for wear, and I made some smart comment...I don't even remember what...but he seemed to think it was extremely funny. And the next day

he called me and asked me out to lunch. I had no idea who he was. All I knew was that he was drop-dead gorgeous and a free lunch was always welcome since I was in college and had very little money."

Sam decided she had made a friend. Her spirits perked up, her mood lightened and her nerves calmed down.

They talked; they laughed.

"I'll show you a picture," said Melissa, speaking of her twin daughters. "There's one of them in the library—it's real cute. Come on."

They left the room, moved through another one, down a hallway, and into a room with shelves full of books, a huge desk, and a seating arrangement in front of a big fireplace. One wall was devoted to family photographs. Melissa pointed out her two girls, dressed in Hallowe'en costumes designed as sunflowers. They were, indeed, cute, and Sam couldn't help but smile.

Then her eyes skimmed over some of the other photographs and she felt the smile freeze on her face.

There was a candid wedding photograph of a young- looking David and a pretty blonde bride. They were sitting at a table, leaning toward each other, kissing, or almost kissing, their mouths puckered and not quite touching.

Sam felt her heart lurch as she looked at the happiness on their two faces, wondering what had happened to the two of them.

And then Tara came into the room. "Sam, there you are! I was wondering where you'd escaped to. Oh, hi, Melissa."

Melissa excused herself and went in search of her husband.

"She showed me the picture of her two girls," Sam said, pointing at the two sunflower girls.

"They're adorable," said Tara. "I'm glad they decided to have fun, candid pictures in here, rather than those formal portraits. They're so stuffy."

"Yes." Sam swallowed hard. "I was looking at this one. David and his wife."

"It's a great picture." Tara stared at the photograph for a moment. "She was such a lovely person," she said then. "We were all devastated when she died, I mean, it seemed so unimaginable, so pointless."

Sam's mouth went dry. "Died?" she whispered.

There was a silence. "He didn't tell you about Celia, did he?" Tara finally asked, her voice low.

"I know he was married once, a long time ago. I don't know what happened. I thought he was divorced. David...never mentions his wife, and I sort of felt it was better not to ask."

"Divorced?" Tara's eyes widened in shock. "Oh, heavens, no." She bit her lip. "She was five months pregnant when she died—a baby boy. They couldn't save him."

Sam's heart contracted. She could barely breathe. "I didn't know," she whispered. "Oh, how awful."

"Yes. David was...in shock, I guess. He sold their house and everything he owned and took on a job in some godforsaken place I can't even remember

now. He was gone for four years before he surfaced again, looking like death warmed over. Next thing we knew, he was off again. It's been like that ever since. He was never home long, never settled again, never bought himself a place or anything. It's just in the last couple of years that he seems more like the old David when we see him on occasion. Funny, relaxed. Well, you know."

"Tara? Oh, there you are!" An older woman of impressive girth and sparkling smile came sailing into the room. "They're having a toast and David is giving his speech, come on."

They trekked back to the main room, but Sam didn't hear much of the toast or the speech, and at the first opportunity that presented itself she escaped into the garden. Behind some shrubbery she found a bench and sat down. She rubbed her face, feeling sorrow and pity. She ached to know more, an urge that was instantly squashed by fear.

What if she knew more? What if she liked what she learned? What if she fell even more in love with him?

She would not allow that to happen.

He hadn't told her for a reason. He didn't feel comfortable enough to share with her his private memories, his innermost feelings. They had a temporary relationship and, wonderful as it was, it was only that: temporary. She knew that. She should not be hurt by this, should not fall deeper in love with him. That was all there was to it.

She came determinedly to her feet, her jaws clenched, and marched back into the house. She would enjoy the party, enjoy being with David, and that was as far as it would go.

David slept with her in the big canopy bed and she sank away into the oblivion of sleep almost immediately, his arms around her.

She dreamed a colorful, noisy dream filled with bits and pieces of the party, and then she was running away from the house in her bare feet, and the next thing she was in her car stranded by the road...the old familiar dream that made her wake up terrified and crying.

"What's wrong?" David asked, holding her tight.

She took in a deep, gulping breath. "Just a stupid dream."

'Let me get you some water. Or would you rather have some tea, or brandy?"

"Water, please."

He went to the bathroom and came back with a glass and she drank it, feeling calmer. He got back into bed.

"What kind of stupid dream?" he asked lightly.

"Just irrational nonsense." She tried to sound casual, waving a hand in dismissal. "I was all alone in the world, poor little me, and I couldn't get a job and I had no place to live and I had run out of gas and was stranded by the side of the road, and Kevin was hungry and I had no money

and no shoes." She laughed. "It was truly pathetic, but it seemed quite real when I was dreaming."

"Is this a recurring dream?"

She shrugged. "I've had it before once or twice." It was a lie. She'd had it a lot more often. "Anyway, I'm fine now. Let's get back to sleep."

He drew her close against him. "I have a better idea," he whispered.

Monday Sam was back in the office and life was back to normal, including her grandfather puffing away at a cigar and coughing.

"Grandpa, I'm worried about you," she told him late that afternoon.

"Nothing to worry about, pumpkin. I'm not going to die just yet. I've got a business to run."

"Grandpa, if something happens to you, I've got nobody."

"That's a lie, pumpkin. You've got Joni and Mitch, and your friends, and that nice young man—what's his name? He'll take care of you."

"David, you mean?"

Her grandfather sucked on his cigar and nodded. Then he slowly blew out the smoke. "Right. He was in here this morning when you were sorting out that mess at the bank. I thought I'd better have a talk with him."

Sam felt her heart sink. "What kind of talk?" she asked.

"I told him you're special and not to make you unhappy or he'd be sorry."

Sam swallowed. "I see."

"He promised to take real good care of you."

Sam closed her eyes and reminded herself she loved her grandfather and that he meant well, which did not prevent her from having some other unmentionable thoughts about his interference.

And then the phone rang, which was a good thing.

Later, in bed, she asked David about what her grandfather had said.

"He's worried about you," said David.

"*He is worried about me?*"

"That's what he said. He wants you married, barefoot and pregnant."

"Oh, no," she moaned. "And I suppose he wanted you to apply for the job?"

"He said I'd better not break your heart, or else."

"Sheesh..." Then she chuckled; she couldn't help herself. "And you are quaking in your boots."

"You bet."

"Barefoot. Is that a word he used?"

"I don't remember the exact words. But the essence was that he wanted your future safe and secure."

She grimaced. ' 'And he thinks marriage will do the trick. Well, he's a bit out of date. It didn't make me safe and secure the first time around, so I will take care of my own safety and security, thank you."

"Spoken by a truly emancipated, independent woman, with shoes on her feet."

' 'I need to explain this to him, obviously. And I will tell him you are leaving for Mexico soon and that he should mind his own business."

"I love it when you talk tough," he said, and nibbled at her ear. "Of course, you could always come with me to Mexico and be my kept woman."

"Oh, sure," she said. "Goodnight, David."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"MOM, he's cool! He's so cool!"

Sam laughed. "I'm glad you had a good time." Kevin had returned from Florida two days ago and had started school again. This afternoon David had picked him up after school in his truck and taken him to buy supplies, then on to the cabin to do some work.

"He's like Dad, Mom! He's just like Dad!"

I sure hope not, came the instant, unbidden thought. She looked at her son's happy, innocent face and her heart contracted. He'd never known his father, yet in many ways he claimed him as a reality in his life. He needed a father, and from stories and pictures he'd made himself an image of Jason. He knew Jason had died when he was four months old, but she'd never told him Jason had walked out on the two of them before that. In spite of her own pain over what had happened she'd forced herself to remember the good things, the good times, so she could tell Kevin about them when he asked. Was there any use in making him feel bad about the father he had never known?

"He's like Dad? How?" she asked

"Well, he's a construction worker, like Dad was!"

Sam smiled to herself and decided not to correct him. "He's building a house," she said. "Your dad used to build houses."

"He said this is only the first house he's building, though," Kevin said, with a note of charitable forgiveness in his voice, "and that he's still learning a lot. And I told him that Dad built lots of houses and he was really good."

"What did he say?"

"He said it was important to be good at what you do, and that when you're a good construction worker you make good houses that are safe for people to live in and that it's responsible and important work." Kevin's voice had taken

on a note of pride. "I want to do important work when I grow up, like Dad and like Mr McMillan."

He chattered on and she listened, feeling warm gratitude toward David who had nourished Kevin's image of his father rather than make himself look good by telling him about his career as an engineer designing and building bridges and roads and airports in far away places.

Kevin went off to wash his hands.

A little later he came back into the kitchen and jumped up on a stool to watch her prepare dinner. ' "Mr McMillan says that tomorrow we're going into town and we're getting me a pair of work boots and a hard hat," he said importantly.

"He wants you to help him some more, right?"

"Yes! He says I'm good with my hands and my brain both." He grinned. "That's what Uncle Mitch said, too!"

"I guess they must be right." She grinned back at him and ruffled his hair. "Of course, I knew all along you were a genius. I knew it from the day you were born!"

He laughed a little self-consciously. "You did not!"

August steamed humidly into September. The nights turned cooler, but the days were still sunny and hot. One day Sam heard David talking on the phone about the project in Mexico with one of the other team members. It sounded complicated and complex—words, sentences, ideas, problems, all concerning a job and a life a world away from Woodmont, Virginia—alien and distant. Soon he would be part of that alien place, living and working every day, eating different food, speaking a foreign language, and she would no longer share his life, his bed. How often would he think of her? Would it be easy to forget her when nothing around him would remind him of her,

when his attentions would be so absorbed by his new responsibilities, new people and strange surroundings?

She felt her heart contract. Why was she doing this to herself? Why was she thinking these thoughts that made her stomach churn and her chest hurt? It made her furious with herself because she had vowed not to fall into that trap. He was going; that was that. She'd known it all along; it was no surprise, no betrayal. Still, her emotions didn't care about her common sense; they operated quite independently of it.

As the time of David's departure came closer and closer it was getting harder and harder to be sensible and realistic. She would miss him. Kevin would miss him.

The truth was, she loved him.

And knowing this made her even more miserable. But she couldn't talk about it, couldn't let him see. So she smiled and pretended all was well with her world.

"Pumpkin, it's time."

Her grandfather had a stack of papers in his hands, which he dumped in front of her on her desk.

"Time for what, Grandpa?"

"To close up this joint and look for greener pastures." He blew a cloud of cigar smoke into the air.

She stared at him. "What do you mean?"

"I've tried to keep this place going until you'd finished with school, but it's not gonna work. So, I've done some considering." He pulled over a chair and stiffly lowered himself into it.

Sam glanced down at the papers, seeing the fancy letterhead of a real-estate agency. Her heart began to pound. "Grandpa, what have you done?"

"I'm giving my house to you and I'm moving to Florida with Joni. I can help with the camps there. Plenty of work for me. Will keep me young, being around kids. Getting old is a big bore, you know, and this..." he waved his cigar around, indicating the office, the store "...this is a bore, too."

Sam forgot to breathe. "Grandpa, does Joni know this?"

He glowered at her. "I'm old, but I'm not stupid, pumpkin. She invited me, if you want to know the truth."

Joni had told her nothing. Was that what she had done the weekend Kevin had been home? Sat down with Grandpa and discussed the situation with him without telling her?

"Why are you giving me the house, Grandpa?" It was an old and gloomy place in disrepair, with a grassless yard with too many ancient trees that kept the small house in perpetual darkness.

"So you can have it—or you can sell it if you want."

"You lived in that house all your life, Grandpa," she said softly. "You want me to sell it?" For years, after Grandma had died, she and Joni had tried to convince him he should sell the old house and move into something more manageable. He had not wanted to hear of it.

"You can do whatever you like with it," he said gruffly. "I'm done with it."

"What about Joni? Shouldn't she own half of it?"

"Why? I've underpaid you for years. You deserve it all, and she knows it. It's not much of a place to start with."

Sam rubbed her face. "What about the shop?"

"We close it."

"Oh, Grandpa," she said miserably. "You've had this store all your life."

"And it's given me a living all that time, and now it's time to close it. The business is not worth anything, but the land is." She saw a dark sparkle of humor in his eyes, which surprised and worried her.

"What have you done, Grandpa?"

"I've sold the property—the building and the land. This is prime real estate, now that all this developing is going on."

"You've sold it! And you didn't say anything to me?"

He puffed on his cigar. "It's none of your business, pumpkin," he said mildly. Then he gave a wicked grin. "We've got four months to sell our stock and get out of this place."

He turned and walked out of her office.

Four months.

Sam felt as if she'd been mown down by a bulldozer. It was all too much. It would be Christmas and she'd be out of a job. But she'd have the house. She'd look into selling that. Or maybe not. She'd have to—she couldn't afford the necessary repairs. She could not think straight. She stared at the door that stood open into the salesroom full of furniture. They'd have to have a close-out sale. Four months. And in the meantime she'd have to go to class and study. She'd already signed up and paid for the next semester. «

She'd sell the house to someone looking for the challenge of a "handyman special." She might have enough money for a down payment on a small, new townhouse on the outskirts of Woodmont. They were lovely and clean and bright, with lots of other kids for Kevin to play with. Only she couldn't get a mortgage if she didn't have a steady income...

She was going crazy thinking. She called Joni in Florida. She called Gina. They told her to breathe, first of all. Then they offered help.

Afterwards, she felt better, but only a little.

She wasn't sure how she managed to make it through the rest of the day; mostly she functioned on automatic pilot.

She had no classes that evening, and after work she came home to find David helping Kevin with his homework and the smell of something delicious cooking in the kitchen. It was warm, domestic little scenes like this that made her feel even more poignantly how much she would miss David. It took all her courage and strength not to let it show, to stay cheerful and undemanding. To keep some emotional distance from him, no matter how hard.

"Hi, guys!" she greeted them. "What smells so good?"

"Jungle stew!" Kevin called out, laughing. "I helped make it. Mr McMillan showed me. He ate it in the jungle all the time. It's got snake in it and bugs...." He broke off, laughing. "Oh, Mom! I'm kidding! It's only chicken."

"Phew, I was worried there for a moment!"

"And mushrooms, too."

"I thought you didn't like mushrooms?"

"I do now. I'm gonna pretend they're jungle bugs!"

"Kevin!" She couldn't help laughing. She turned to David. "What are you doing to this child of mine?"

David held up his hands in defense. "Nothing. He wanted to know about the rainforest, so I told him."

She let it go, just rolled her eyes at him.

Later they ate together in the kitchen. The jungle stew was delicious, and Kevin was saying that Mr McMillan had told him it was important for a real man to know how to cook, so he could take care of himself. He was telling

her this as if it were important news he had not heard before, although she had told him the same thing for years. Apparently when the information came from a real man, it carried more weight. She had noticed before that when Uncle Mitch, Joni's husband, told him something, Kevin gave it great value.

It made her heart ache for him. He needed a father, a man to look up to, to teach him how to be a man. They'd done so well together, and he was a happy child, but perhaps she should have tried harder to find a husband who could be a father to him. She felt suddenly awash with guilt.

What she had done was find herself a man who would leave again, a temporary relationship with no strings attached. And here was Kevin, clearly getting attached to David. She should not have done this. She should have thought more about her son and the effect it would have on him.

And then she thought of what her grandfather had dropped in her lap that afternoon and the lightheartedness of dinner flew out the window.

"What's wrong?" David asked a while later. Kevin had disappeared to watch television and the two of them were still sitting at the table, finishing a glass of wine. "You look rather down."

So she told him about the store, which was only part of the reason she felt down, but the other she couldn't talk about.

"Maybe it's for the best," said David calmly. "You wanted him to understand the situation and apparently he does. And going to Florida and being around kids might cheer him up and give him another lease on life."

She felt suddenly selfish, having given so much thought about how this would affect her rather than seeing the positive side of it for her grandfather. "Yes, you're right," she said guiltily.

"You'll be fine, Sam," David said.

His comment annoyed her. How did he know she'd be fine? "That's easy for you to say," she said, trying not to sound too snappish. "I'm not

complaining, David, but you don't know what it means to live from pay check to pay check." She sighed, pushing her empty glass away. "I don't want to sound bitchy or—resentful, but it's all so easy for you."

For a moment he just looked at her, his face expressionless. "There's a lot in life besides money, and not everything has always been easy for me." No laughter in his eyes now. "I'm not saying that not having to worry about money isn't nice, but it doesn't solve all problems and it doesn't buy love or happiness."

She felt herself shrink in her chair, wanted to crawl into a hole. How could she have forgotten? How could she be so stupid and insensitive? No, money did not solve all problems. It had not solved the problem of Celia dying, the woman he-had loved. No amount of money or influence or

power had been able to do that. Not everything had always been easy for David.

"I'm sorry," she said. "You're right. I shouldn't have said that."

He reached for her hand. "It's okay. So, I am going to say it again, because I mean it and know it: it might not be easy, but you'll be fine, Samantha. I have every confidence in your abilities."

"Thank you," she said.

"Is there anything I can help you with?" he asked, meeting her eyes. "Anything I can do?"

She bit her lip, shook her head. "No, thank you."

What she wanted from him he wasn't able to give.

He had a pile of background reading to do about the project and he found it impossible to concentrate, his thoughts going back time and again to Sam.

He poured himself a whiskey and drank it too quickly. Poured himself another one.

He didn't want to leave her like this, go far away and not know if she was all right. But she didn't want his help, didn't want him to worry about her. What if he told her he loved her? What if he asked her to marry him?

Panic seized him, clutched at his chest. What was he thinking? He didn't want to be married. He...

He took another swallow of whiskey, saw Sam's stubborn face in his mind, the set of her chin, the fear in her eyes.

He wanted to shake her, loosen up her fear. Take her to Mexico with him. Take care of her. Keep her safe from her nightmares.

Mexico. He'd be alone again.

CHAPTER TWELVE

"I THINK you should come and visit me in Mexico," David said playfully. He couldn't resist testing the waters. Sam herself had brought up the subject of Mexico, asking if he'd been there before, if he liked it.

"That would be nice," she said blandly, snuggling her face into her pillow.

It was Saturday morning and they were lingering in bed. The more David thought about it, the more he wanted her to come with him, leave behind that dreary little office, that cramped apartment she had rented. He recognized in her all the pent-up dreams and desires of endless lonely years. He wanted to see her flower in a place where there was time and space to enjoy life, each other.

"We'll laze on the beach, eat lots of good Mexican food. It'll be wonderful." He longed to see her carefree, happy, without worries, without running herself ragged trying to do everything for herself, her son, her grandfather.

She let out a longing sigh. "Don't tempt me," she said, mimicking his light tone. "I've never been that far away from home. What an adventure."

"I can show you the Mayan ruins."

"Oh, wow. I can take pictures and show my friends."

She was playing along, not taking him seriously.

"What I really think you should do is come with me to Mexico and stay," he said, nibbling at her earlobe.

"I don't think so, thank you." She moved away. He felt her withdraw from him.

"Why not?" He tugged at one of her curls.

'My Spanish consists of half a dozen words, I have my classes to think of, not to speak of a son who needs to be in school.'

"They have schools in Mexico. And you can bring your books and do what you can, and finish after we get back in two years."

She stared at him. "You can't be serious, David. I can't just pack up, leave everything behind and follow you to Mexico like some lovesick puppy." There was challenge in her voice.

Lovesick puppy. He loved that one but tried not to laugh. "Sometimes you have to be a bit adventurous, you know, take a little risk," he said seriously, and saw anger leap in her eyes. He watched her control it.

"Oh, it's all so easy for you to say, isn't it? But I'm not going to postpone getting my degree, David, and I can't leave my grandfather in the lurch. I have to sell off the inventory, close the store, help him get to Florida, sell his house. I'll have to find a job."

"You wouldn't have to find a job if you came with me." This was not the type of incentive Sam was looking for, he should have known.

"I told you—"

"You don't want to be a kept woman." He shook his head. "Oh, Sam."

"I have other responsibilities."

"Someone can be hired to close out the store; there are ways. A real estate agent can sell your grandfather's house. You don't have to be there."

"Hiring people costs money." She leaned on her elbow and looked straight into his eyes. "You have a problem, you know?"

"I know. I want you to come with me and you won't."

"That's not the one I am referring to."

"Then, what is?"

"You think all my problems can be solved by throwing money at them." She smiled sweetly. "I have news for you, Mr McMillan. I haven't got money. And if you haven't got it, you can't spend it."

How wrong she was. "Sweetheart, the whole American economy thrives on people spending money they haven't got. It's called credit."

"So now you have me going down the deep hell-hole of financial debt. No, thank you. And don't you sweetheart me." She stared at him hard.

He sighed and offered her a regretful smile. "So, if I understand it correctly, you will not go into debt to be with me, you will not postpone getting your degree to follow me like a lovesick puppy to Mexico?"

"You understand correctly." She clambered out of bed.

He reached for her. "Are you angry?"

She raised her brows, looking at him coolly. "Angry? Why should I be angry?"

Her heart was racing as she pulled on her robe. Oh, she was mad, all right, but she wasn't going to show him. She'd once given up her education and her independence for the love of a man, a man she had trusted. A man who had subsequently left her. She was not going down that road again.

Without looking at David she walked out of the room, feeling sick suddenly. He did not understand her and he never would.

Well, what had she expected? One thing she had not expected was to be invited to go to Mexico with him.

She had expected nothing. She had expected him to leave, period, and for her to stay here, period. She'd had no hopes for the future, nothing beyond the present. In a couple more weeks she'd move into her new apartment. She

had a life full of responsibilities and he expected her to just pack up and abandon everything and follow him to Mexico like a love-drugged groupie.

Mexico. Palm trees, color, dancing, music, joy. A kaleidoscope of bright images whirled through her inner vision, leaking temptation like poison.

Two years...it wasn't so long.

The thought crept through her consciousness like a toxic weed.

And wouldn't it be good for Kevin to be exposed to another culture? To learn another language? It was easy for kids, they said: they picked it right up.

And she could learn Spanish herself, which would be very useful for building a career in business. And she'd have less stress, more time to be a real mother to Kevin.

"Stop it, stop it," she muttered to herself. "Don't be a moron." She poured water into the coffee pot, spooned coffee into the filter. There were no guarantees, no safety and security. Going to Mexico with a man she'd only known a few months would be the utmost stupidity and she'd be asking for trouble. If their situation didn't work out she'd have to go home, and she'd be up the creek without a paddle. She'd never forgive herself.

I can't do it, I can't do it, I can't do it. She kept repeating the refrain in her head, to chase away the seductive images of loving David, of free time and fun and sunshine and joy.

She didn't have to go to work. The store was open, but she'd never worked on Saturday, had always put her foot down about that. She'd been looking forward to having a relaxed breakfast before spending some time with her books, but the joy had gone out of the morning. She wished Kevin were there to cheer her mood, but he'd gone home with his best friend after school yesterday to spend the weekend with the boy's family. They were making a trip to the Air and Space Museum in Washington. He'd be full of stories on Sunday afternoon.

"I'm going for a run," said David, standing in the kitchen door, wearing shorts and a T-shirt. I'll be back in forty minutes."

She took her coffee to the deck and stared out at the woods. She was aware of a growing anger at David—at his ignorance and his arrogance and presumptions.

He was leaving in three weeks. That would mean the end of their affair. That was what she knew. Why did he have to start mentioning Mexico and seduce her with the possibilities?

It was too hot even at this early hour to be outside. The sweltering, steamy weather had been unrelenting for days. The weather report had predicted rain for the afternoon. It would be good to have some rain, she thought. The trees and bushes and flowers needed it.

I need some rain, she thought. Something to clean up my thoughts and emotions. Some sort of exorcism.

She went back inside and cranked up the air-conditioning and felt better. By the time David came back from his walk she had herself under control again. She made breakfast, acting carefree and cheerful. She was proud of herself.

It was later that day, while she was studying in her room, that she noticed that the sun had gone and the sky was dark and cloudy. She heard David come into the house, back from working on his cabin. It was where he always was, putting in windows, kitchen cabinets, painting walls.

David came into her room, dirty, disheveled and looking tantalizingly male in his old jeans and faded green T-shirt. "It's nasty out there," he commented. "I'm going to run through the shower and then I'll make some coffee. You want some?"

"Please."

An hour later the storm hit with full force, bruising the sky with inky-colored clouds, tormenting the trees with violence. Clouds swirled and

trees groaned and finally the rain crashed down on earth and vegetation. Thunder rolled through the heavens and lightning lashed and flashed.

Sam turned on the lights. The darkness in the middle of a summer afternoon was eerie. Although normally thunderstorms did not frighten her, the power of this onslaught carried with it an ominous energy. She shivered a little and wondered where David was. In Andrew's office, working or reading, probably.

She sat back at the desk, trying to study, but her mind was too occupied with the raging power display outside. She was about to get up when a knock came on her door and David called out to her. He opened the door without waiting.

"There's a tornado warning for the area," he said. "Grab a pillow and come with me."

She froze. "Tornado?"

He took a pillow from the bed, grabbed her arm and practically dragged her out of the room down the hall. The closet door stood open, the space emptied out of coats and jackets. A large flashlight beamed upward and a small radio crackled ominously.

David nearly pushed her in and she sat down on the floor of the closet, clutching her pillow, her heart pounding wildly with fear. David sat down next to her, the space so small they were pressed together awkwardly. She shifted to be more comfortable.

"I don't believe this," she muttered. "I've never done this before."

"I was watching television. The weather channel was running the warning. They've spotted several tornados in this area, and we're in the path of one of them. They said to take shelter immediately, so it seemed wise to heed that advice. With the woods all around we have no distance vision and can't see the damn thing coming."

"It sounds like a train, they say, when it comes." She clutched the pillow to her chest.

"Yes. But you might not want to sit and wait for that. Once you hear it you've got precious little time to hide."

Thunder cracked the sky. She took in a deep breath. The door to the closet stood open to make it easier to hear. She tried hard to listen for the sound of a train, not wanting to hear it.

David was turning the dial on the radio, but all they got was the vague sound of the broadcasters washed over by heavy static. He gave up and turned it off. "It's no use," he said. He leaned back against the wall.

"Have you ever done this before?" she asked, for something to say. "I mean, taken shelter from a tornado?"

"Not from a tornado. I sat through a hurricane once, when I was a boy. We were vacationing on the island when it hit."

"Was it bad?"

"Very bad. Not for us, but for many of the islanders whose houses aren't built terribly well. The devastation was unimaginable. You see pictures on television, but that doesn't reflect the reality when you see it with your own eyes, when it's literally everywhere around you, everywhere you turn."

She gave a shudder and wondered what might happen if the tornado struck the house. They'd get buried in the closet, dead, maybe, or alive. How long before anyone would find them?

She was breaking out in a cold sweat. This was so stupid. She took in a deep breath. "May I use the phone?" she asked. He'd brought in the portable phone, which sat on the floor next to him. He handed it to her.

She called Gina at work. She was on duty all weekend, ministering to the ailing. The hospital was thirty minutes away, out of the danger zone.

"I just want to let you know that I'm sitting in a closet with this phone, a pillow, and a flashlight." And David. She didn't say it.

"You're what?"

"There's a tornado warning here. It said to take shelter, so here I am, on the floor in the hall closet. I just wanted somebody out there in the safe world to know this. Call me later to see if I'm still alive, will you?"

"Are you alone?" There was concern in Gina's voice.

"David's here, too. Kevin's in DC with friends."

"David's with you in the closet?"

"Right."

Mirth won out over concern. "You're in the closet with David! How cozy, Sam! Think of the possibilities!"

"I don't think so," Sam said dryly. "The atmosphere around here is not conducive to feeling cozy. The noise outside is horrendous. Any moment now this tornado could demolish the house or one of these ancient oaks could come crashing down on the roof and bury us alive."

"Are you scared?" asked Gina.

"Hell, no," said Sam. "I'm terrified, that's all."

"You'll be fine," said Gina. "You won't die or anything, don't worry."

"How do you know that?"

"I'm a nurse. I'm gifted and know that stuff. But now I've got to go. Grandma Moses stripped naked again and is streaking down the hall."

"Ah, give her a break."

"She's ninety-four years old, Sam. It's not a pretty sight. We've got heart patients on this floor; we've got to be careful."

In spite of thunder, lightning and tornados, Sam laughed.

"I'll call you back later and check up on you, okay?" said Gina, and they hung up.

Sam handed David the phone. It made her feel better that at least one person knew of her sitting in the closet with David, assaulted by the powers of Mother Nature.

"What was so funny?" asked David.

She told him. "Gina has some great hospital stories."

"I'll bet. Tell me some."

He was trying to make small talk, to keep their attention diverted from the turmoil outside. Not so easy. Still, she tried, and made him laugh.

"Are you afraid?" she asked after a while.

He considered this for a moment. "No, not really."

"Why not? This is dangerous."

"It is, but I have a sense we'll be all right. A gut feeling, but I've learned to trust it."

Sam sighed. "I wish I trusted my instincts. My brain always seems to tell me not to, you know, to be rational and not believe my hunches."

The noise from outside was frightening. She felt his hand squeezing hers. "Have you ever been scared?" she asked. "I mean, really, really scared."

He didn't immediately answer, and she wondered if perhaps he hadn't heard her. "Yes," he said then.

"When was that? What happened?"

He shifted his position, leaning his head back against the closet wall. He looked up into the darkness above. There was another pause. "When my wife died," he said, and his voice was toneless.

Her heart made a sickening lurch. "I'm sorry...I shouldn't have asked."

He squeezed her hand. "It's all right. I...should tell you."

"No, you shouldn't. You don't have to." She was suddenly filled with dread; she didn't know why.

"I want to." He released her hand and rubbed his neck. "We were walking in the mountains," he began. "Nothing too strenuous. She was five months pregnant, but she was very fit. She was very athletic—always had been." He was still looking up into the top of the closet, as if he could see it happening again in front of his eyes. "She climbed up a rocky elevation, nothing much, and she stood there, enjoying the view over a valley, and I watched her."

His tone was even, emotionless. Suddenly he lowered his head and closed his eyes. "I can still see her silhouetted against the sky, her hair blowing around her face, her belly sticking out."

Sam sat very quiet, barely breathing.

"I remember what I was thinking. That all that really mattered in my life was right up there—my wife, my baby. I felt this...overwhelming sense of gratitude for having such happiness." The words came out with difficulty and he sucked in a deep, shaky breath.

Sam wasn't sure she wanted to hear more.

"She laughed," he went on, his voice rough, uneven. "She called out something about how glorious a day it was, and two minutes later she was dead."

Sam felt her heart crash. Her breathing came with difficulty. "Oh, David," she whispered. "What happened?"

"She shifted on her feet, took a step sideways and tripped over a loose rock or something. She lost her balance, fell, and rolled down that little slope, cracked her head on a big boulder and broke her neck." He covered his face with his hands and gave a tortured groan. "I can still see it. Still see the look of surprise on her face."

The horror of the simple little tale made her blood run cold. "Oh, David," she said, her voice breaking.

"That's when I was scared," he went on. "When I looked at her face and I knew she was dead. The terror of that moment I will never forget."

Sam sat motionless, trying to see in her mind's eye the scene he had described, remembering her own experience of seeing Jason in the hospital where they'd taken him after the accident. Jason, white and still and no longer breathing. The man who had callously left her, but was still technically her husband.

She didn't know how long they sat there, next to each other, arms and legs touching. Until she felt his arm come around her, drawing her even closer. She felt his face against hers.

"You're crying," he whispered. "Your face is all wet."

She drew in a trembling breath. "I'm okay." She hesitated. "Tell me what happened later. Tara told me you went away, that...you went on the run."

"I couldn't get far enough," he said dryly. "I spent several years building roads and airstrips on a bunch of Indonesian islands. There are thousands of them out in the ocean there, unbelievably primitive. I did nothing but work from sun-up to sundown, which is about twelve hours in the tropics. At night I did paperwork. There wasn't anything else to do but drink, play cards and read. Thank God I like to read. I had terrible nightmares and I didn't like to sleep."

Nightmares about what had happened to his wife. She didn't need to ask.

"I would go for days without sleep. Eventually, I crashed. They hauled me off in a helicopter to the nearest island with something they called a hospital, but it wasn't much. They drugged me stupid."

"Sounds lovely," she said.

"An uplifting experience, so to speak."

"Then what?"

"I got better."

"Just like that?"

"No, not just like that. It took a long time, but eventually the nightmares stopped coming and I could sleep better and I started living a more normal life."

He was absently stroking her hair and she was filled with an aching tenderness for him, for this big, tough guy whose grief had broken him. And he had told her, trusting her with his story. She lifted her face to his, found his mouth and kissed him. "Thank you for telling me," she said against his lips.

"It's a long time ago."

"Yes. But sometimes memories... they're so powerful."

"Yes, but there's a truth I've learned, and that's-that we cannot let them overpower the present. The past is gone and the present moment is what we have now to live in, to enjoy."

The present moment.

She closed her eyes, thinking about it, and a sudden stirring of mirth relieved the sadness and tension. "And in this present moment," she said, "we're sitting in a closet with a flashlight and a pillow."

He laughed softly, and it was a wonderful sound. "Yes. And listen."

She listened. The noisy racket outside had lost some of its force.

"It's going away; it has passed us over," said David. "I think we can get out."

Which they did. It was still dark and stormy outside, and the lawn was littered with broken tree branches and a collection of junk that had been picked up by the wind.

Miraculously, the electricity was still functioning. The weather channel on television confirmed their impressions: the tornado was moving away, further west, leaving a trail of destruction through the forest.

It was still raining and the temperature had dropped dramatically.

That night, in bed, he clung to her, making love to her with an unfamiliar fierceness and passion that made her blood rush hot through her body. Afterwards, she lay awake in his arms, and the terrible thought came to her that he might have been thinking of his wife. He had loved her deeply, which was a good thing. It meant he was capable of loving. But had he loved her too much ever to love again? She remembered his words when she'd asked him why he hadn't married again. "*I just never wanted to,*" he'd said.

She watched his sleeping face, peaceful and relaxed, and the pain of knowing she loved him, of knowing she would lose him soon, seared her heart. She got out of bed, wandered through the house, had a drink of water and finally returned to bed. He stirred as she quietly slipped between the sheets. His arm reached out to her, his hand gently landing on her breast.

"Sammy?" he muttered sleepily.

"I'm here," she said softly.

"Good..." He drifted off into oblivion and she lay there, feeling his hand still on her breast.

He'd been barely conscious, but he'd said *Sammy*, not Celia. She felt ridiculous tears rush into her eyes, felt such

relief that she nearly woke him up to hold him, tell him she loved him and would follow him to the moon.

To Mexico. Give up everything. Love was worth it. Love meant taking risks. She didn't want to live without him.

But she didn't wake him, and she didn't say the words.

It rained all through the night, was still raining in the morning when they got up. She loved the sound of it and she opened windows and sliding glass doors to hear the dripping and pattering of the drops on the leaves outside.

Together they cooked an elaborate breakfast, after which they sat in the living room reading the Sunday paper. The domesticity of it all overwhelmed her with longing.

Stop it! She told herself. *Read.*

She read.

It felt like such a luxury to sit here for such a long time and just read the paper—read about movies and cooking and the newest fashion trends. She tried not to feel guilty. There was so much to do.

The rain stopped a while later and slowly it grew lighter. The world was green and smelled wet and damp, foliage still dripping with water. The wind had stilled and nature seemed oddly quiet. Birds were in hiding. Now and then the sun peeked out, giving the world a hopeful, golden glow for just a minute. Slowly, birds began to venture out of their hiding places and chirped tentatively.

David folded the paper and came to his feet. "I'm going to have a look at the cabin," he said. "I won't be long."

She was peeling apples for an apple pie—the first one in at least a year—when he came back not much later.

"The cabin," he said flatly. "It's gone."

Her heart turned over. "Gone? You mean..."

"Destroyed. Not much left of it."

She could not believe it. "Oh, David." She dropped the apple and paring knife in the sink. "I want to see."

She almost ran down the muddy road, with David right behind her, reaching the clearing almost out of breath.

She looked at the scene in horror, taking in the devastation, the heap of twisted metal and broken beams, uprooted trees, the torn vegetation. Tears ran down her face. "Oh, David," she breathed. "Oh, David. It's awful."

"Don't cry," he said. "Don't cry over a house."

"It wasn't just a house..." She wasn't sure why she'd said that, but she'd had the feeling all along that it meant more to David than walls and a roof to keep him sheltered.

He took her hand and they walked back in silence. She didn't know what to say.

She noticed that the sun had come out and that the world had come fully alive again. Birds were everywhere and the air was filled with their joyful chirping. Everything gleamed with new life, even the ground soaked with water. The world around them seemed to mock them with its beauty.

"David, I want to come to Mexico with you." The words were out suddenly, as if of their own accord. "If you still want me to," she added hastily, feeling her heart pounding in her chest.

He stood still, shook his head. "No, Sam, no. I was—"

"I want to! I can take classes over the Internet. I can keep studying, even if it takes a little longer...I don't care, I—" She could hear the desperation in her own voice. Her heart was pounding louder and louder and she felt the tears run down her cheeks. "All I care about is you!"

She was crying and he put his hands on her shoulders. "Sam, calm down! Listen to me!"

"I don't want to lose you, David. I need you. Kevin needs you. I don't want him to see you go." Words followed words. Stumbling over each other, they came pouring out of her. "Please, please let us come with you."

"Sam, we need to talk." He took her hand and led her into the house and she felt herself grow cold with fear.

He didn't want her. He'd been kidding. He'd never really meant for her to come to Mexico with him.

She'd made a fool of herself. Her worst fears had come true. She'd fallen in love and now she had to pay the price.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

SHE yanked her hand out of his grip, wanting to run. She didn't want to hear his reasons, didn't need to feel any worse than she already did.

He caught her hand again, held it tight. "Listen to me, Sam. I made a decision. I'm not going to Mexico."

She was too stunned to do more than stare at him.

"I'm staying here," he said, to emphasize his point. They were still standing. He led her to the sofa and drew her down next to him.

"I don't understand," she managed finally. "What about that big project, your job?"

"I'm not indispensable." His smile was wry. "They'll find someone else who can take over. I may go for a couple of months, if necessary, to get it started, but that's it."

She swallowed. "What are you going to do, then?"

"I'll find something else to do here. They must have swamps to drain in Virginia. Or I can start my own consulting firm. Maybe do short-term projects."

Sam clasped her hands in her lap to keep them from trembling. He wasn't leaving. It was too much suddenly to absorb—feelings and needs and dreams swirled through her in a dizzy dance of hope. Calm down, she told herself. Calm down.

"Are you going to build another cabin?"

He shook his head. "No. I doubt I'll have the time, and what I want is a house closer to town, or in town."

"But you wanted that cabin," she said softly. There had been something special about it. The cabin had meant something more to him than just a place to live.

"No. It wasn't about the cabin itself, Sam, I understand that now it's gone. It was more...symbolic, about wanting a place to belong, and that's never really about a building, is it?"

"No." Her heart beat a nervous rhythm. Her body felt shivery, as if she had a fever.

"Home is about people," he went on. "And the place I belong is wherever you are. You and Kevin. I don't care where that is, Sam, only that it's a happy place where we can be together." He took her clasped hands, pried her fingers loose. "And if that place is here, so you can finish your degree and do what you need to do so you can be the person you want to be, then that's where I will be."

His words overwhelmed her, made her throat ache. She swallowed hard. "You're giving up your job in Mexico for me?"

He smiled. "No, for us. I want to be with you. You've said you don't want to be married, but I'm asking anyway. I love you. I want to marry you and have more kids and a home and a happy wife. You can be as independent as you like, work, study, anything."

She thought her heart would stop. "Oh, David."

"Oh, David, what?"

"I...I didn't expect this." She took in a steady breath. "You love me? You want to marry me? Really?"

"Yes, really."

"I thought you just wanted an affair—I mean, something temporary."

"I did. I was fooling myself, Sam. I want you for always. And I promise you can wear shoes, even when you're pregnant."

And then it hit her full force, the meaning of what he was saying, as if it hadn't quite sunk in, and the joy of it threatened to overwhelm her. She threw her arms around him, trying not to cry, and hugged him hard.

But the tears came anyway, the relief and joy too much to contain.

"Sam, you're crying," he said, his mouth in her hair. "What does that mean?"

"It means, yes. Yes, I want to marry you." She lifted her face to his. "I love you, David. I love you so much."

He let out a deep sigh. "Phew. Was it the shoes that did it?"

She drew back and laughed tremulously. "Yes, and the / *love you*. That helped, too. It was a winning combination." "

He pulled her to him, kissed her full on the mouth. "Tell me again you love me."

"I love you," she said promptly. "I've wanted to say that so many times, you have no idea." She sighed. "It hurt so much to think I was losing you. I thought you were going to leave."

"So did I." He stroked her face. "But I couldn't stand the idea of not being with you. I had to come to terms with...with my real feelings, and when I saw that cabin destroyed, well, it made me realize what a fool I was."

"I didn't ask you not to go to Mexico," she said, feeling a sudden trepidation. Would he resent her in the future, even subconsciously, for having—

"No, you didn't, Sam," he said promptly. "It's my own decision, and I take full responsibility for it. I love you, and that's more important than anything else in the world. I don't want to be anywhere without you."

"That sounds so wonderful," she said, and felt silly tears spring to her eyes again.

"You're not going to cry again, are you?" he said. "You, a tough, independent woman?"

"I tried, you know. I mean, I tried to be all cool and sophisticated about it, but—"

'Cool and sophisticated about what?"

'About us. About this just being an affair, nothing more. Temporary."

"It didn't work for you?" Humor in his voice.

She shook her head. "No. I was trying not to be naive and set myself up to get my heart broken to smithereens, but I...I couldn't help loving you."

"And I couldn't help loving you." He smiled into her eyes. "Although I didn't want to admit it to myself. I told myself that I was just trying to help you, but that didn't work very well because you didn't want my help. And you didn't want to come to Mexico with me and be my kept woman. What was I to do?"

"Go to Mexico without me, like you planned."

He shook his head. "That wasn't going to work either, because I didn't want to be without you. Believe me, I was in deep trouble."

She laughed. "Oh, David." Then she frowned. "I still don't want to be...dependent. I mean, I want to know I can take care of myself and Kevin in case... in case something terrible happens."

"Like what?"

She swallowed. "Well...if something happened to you." She didn't even want to think about it, but she couldn't help it. "I'd be stuck again. I wouldn't have my degree. I—"

"You'd be a rich widow," he said, deadpan.

She stared at him. "Oh," she managed. "I hadn't thought of that."

He laughed and hugged her closer. "Oh, Sam...I love you."

She bit her lip. "What about a prenuptial agreement?"

He drew away, looked at her with raised brows. "You want one?"

"I imagine *you* would want one."

"For what?"

"To protect your money, your assets."

"From what?"

She sighed. "Oh, come on, David. From me, from my son. In case...oh, you know why people have these agreements!" She looked away. She hated this discussion, the materialistic, grabbing, awful implications.

He put his hand gently under her chin, made her look at him. He was laughing. Laughing!

She pushed against him. "Don't laugh at me!"

"But you make it so easy."

"I don't want you to think I'm marrying you for your money!"

He laughed harder.

She glared at him, but then humor and happiness took possession of her and laughter bubbled up in her. He hugged her to him and then they were laughing together, and the joy and lightness of it was a glorious feeling.

"I love you," he said again. "And I don't want a pre-nuptial agreement. What's mine is yours, as long as what's yours is mine."

"I haven't got anything!"

"You have something better than money."

She frowned. "What?"

He smiled crookedly. "You have a son, Sam."

She stared at him, her mind in turmoil, and no words would come.

"I want to be his father, if he'll have me. I'd like to adopt him and make it all legal."

"Oh, David." She could barely get the words out and tears of overwhelming joy flooded her eyes. She buried her face against his chest. "Tell me you're for real," she said. "Tell me you're not a figment of my imagination." For a moment the image of David standing naked on the edge of the pool flashed through her mind.

"Oh, I am real," he said. "You'd better believe it."

EPILOGUE

SAMANTHA never did get her degree in business administration. She got one in early childhood education, instead. She and David had two more children, a boy and a girl, after which they decided that was enough.

The whole family spent two years in Venezuela, where David worked on another bridge-building project and Sam was a teacher at the international school. They now all speak Spanish and hope to travel more.

Kevin is growing tall and is a star basketball player at Woodmont High. He is a whiz at math and next year he's off to Cornell to study engineering. He and David built an elaborate tree house for the little ones, who love to hide there and pretend they're living in the jungle. Sam loves to play with them, sing songs, and bake jungle cookies. She does not bake bread. There's an excellent bakery right there in Woodmont.

And, of course, Sam is a love goddess in the bedroom. It's easy—David is there.