



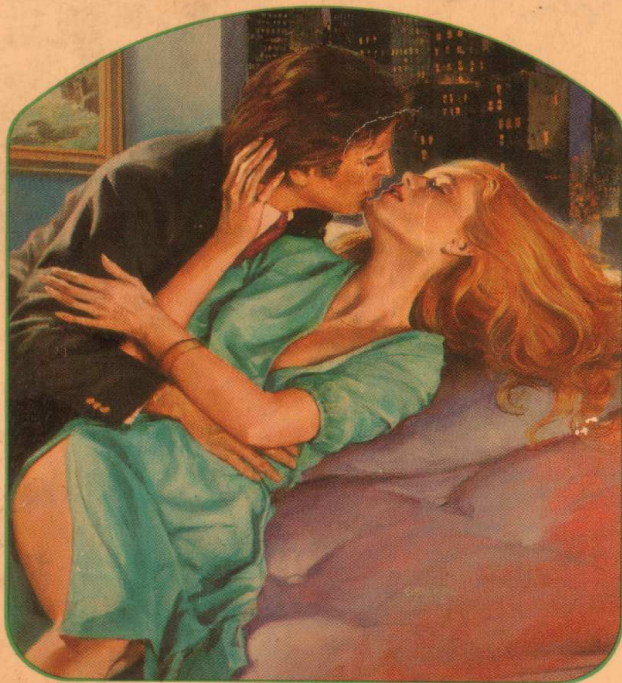
\$1.75/A SECOND CHANCE AT LOVE BOOK

103



Second Chance at Love

ENTHRALLED



ANN CRISTY

ENTHRALLED

Ann Christy

It wasn't Teel's habit to lie--but then, Chazz Herman, with his devastating golden eyes and glittery jet-set world, was a dangerous man. He'd stop at nothing to get a woman he wanted--and he wanted every inch of Teel. If he thought she was a nun--she *had* been wearing a habit when she'd been found, lost and ill on a deserted beach -- so much the safer.

But Teel needed every ruse she could muster because just one of Chazz's soul-searching gazes had the power to render her naked, dazed, and defenseless. Never, never, she vowed, would she let her heart be a playboy's plaything again!

TEEL LAY FACE-DOWN on the hot, moist earth. Ants and other insects began to crawl over her cheeks, stinging her, and she knew she had to move, though her body screamed in protest. Sweat dribbled into her burning eyes. The buzz of flies was loud in the fetid heat. Groaning, she pushed herself to a sitting position. Cross-legged, swiping at the flies that swarmed over her the moment she was still, she tried to take stock of her situation. She refused to accept the thought that she could, indeed, be utterly lost.

Somehow she had to retrace her steps to the mission and Aunt Tessa. For the hundredth time she cursed the folly of having given in to her aunt's pleas and journeyed with her to the mission outpost in Central America that was run by Aunt Tessa's friend, Sister Mary Mark. When the formidable sister had informed them that they should don nuns' habits as a safety precaution against the unwanted advances of patrolling soldiers, she should have insisted that they leave at once.

Teel's forehead burned with fever. Her lips were cracked and sore from lack of water. Still, she was determined to get herself out of this—this stupid situation.

She had only gone a short distance outside the mission area, in order to give Aunt Tessa a chance to talk alone with her old school friend. She had not meant to wander beyond the perimeter. Now she cursed her stupidity and the density of the jungle that had made her take a wrong turn, away from the mission instead of back toward it.

She stood up slowly, swaying in the heat. "You're going to get out of here, Teel Barrett," she said aloud, the sound of her hoarse voice startling some birds into flight. She blinked at an orange and blue parrot and wished she had its vantage point. She slapped at a mosquito on her cheek. "I never thought I would find a nun's habit useful" she muttered, "but it sure is a buffer against you." She blinked at the dead mosquito in her hand, then took her bearings as best she could and began walking.

An hour later she knew she was weakening from the effects of the stifling heat. She no longer spoke out loud to herself. It took too much energy.

She squinted up through the thick curtain of trees to the cloudless blue sky, listened to the cawing and squalling of the jungle creatures, and wondered if she had really heard the sound of the surf or if it was just another jungle noise.

Barely able to push the light branches aside, Tee! staggered through the underbrush toward the sound, then stared mouth agape at the sand and sea in front of her. The Pacific Ocean! It had to be the Pacific. She knew that the beaches on the Pacific side of Central America often consisted of black sand like this one. She felt a shaky sense of triumph. She didn't know exactly where she was, but she did know she was facing the Pacific Ocean. She reeled out onto the beach, trying to shade her eyes from the blinding sun, seeing nothing but beach and ocean shimmering under its flaming disc. Then, suddenly overcome by heat and fatigue, she fell forward on her face and slept.

When she awoke it was dark and she was cold, the cold that comes to anyone who has had too much exposure to the sun. She shivered and looked around her, hungry and frightened.

Sometime later she saw lights moving on the water and stared at them in disbelief. "You're hallucinating, Teel," she told herself through cracked lips. But a small, g motorized dinghy came ashore. She watched two men and a woman beach the craft and shine a flashlight across the sand in a great arc. "You're seeing things, Teel," she : said firmly, not bothering to lower her voice because she knew figments of her own imagination would pay no attention to her.

But the man holding the flashlight jerked his head up and said, "Hey, I heard a voice. We better get out of here. Chazz will be madder than hell because we took the dinghy. He said the repairs would be finished in an hour and we were to stay on board." He swung the i flashlight across the beach again, but the beam of light kept missing Teel.

"Come on, stop it, Zack," the woman said in a high, wheedling tone to the other man, who was nuzzling her. "I don't want Chazz mad at me. You know how he gets."

"Damn you, Elise, I thought you wanted a little beach party: a fire, a little wine..." The man called Zack lowered his voice to a seductive hiss as he moved closer, to the woman.

Teel watched them, her arms and legs like lead, her voice a dry croak in her parched throat. She had to get their attention. They were her only hope.

"I don't want to stay now," Elise continued. "Jim said he heard someone talking. What if we run into revolutionaries?" She shuddered, her exaggerated shadow quivering in the beam of the flashlight.

"He didn't hear anything," Zack protested.

Just then a shout reached them from the direction of the lights on the water. Teel couldn't understand the words, but the tone was angry. She watched the three people scramble toward the dinghy. They were leaving her! Desperate, she forced herself up from her knees. Her body trembled with the effort. Slowly, erratically, using every last vestige of strength and will she had left, she shambled forward, watching in mute horror as they pushed the dinghy into the water. The woman was already in the boat. Then one of the men jumped aboard. As the second man prepared to follow, Teel's feet splashed into the water. The last man let out a startled shout, but she didn't stop. She headed straight for the dinghy.

"Who the hell are you?" the man called Zack demanded from his vantage point at the motor. "Where did you come from?"

Without answering, Teel just fell forward, clutching the gunwales. She heard a woman's shriek, a shouted oath, and then blackness closed over her head.

Teel awoke to turquoise. She wasn't surprised, but she hadn't expected the afterlife to be turquoise. Long ago she had stopped practicing the religion that was so sustaining to her aunt and her friends, but Teel had retained the idea of an afterlife. She had just never thought it would be turquoise.

"So you're awake." A man's face loomed over hers, with strong planes and amber eyes. Lion's eyes, Teel mused, thinking he looked rather stern for an angel. Did angels have firm mouths that appeared to have been whittled and cheeks faintly shadowed with a beard? Angels didn't have coal black hair, did they? Perhaps this was a devil, Teel thought, too tired to really care.

"Aren't you going to speak?" the voice asked.

"No." The one word made her dry lips feel as if they'd been split. She had no idea where her voice had come from, but it was like sandpaper on raw wood.

"Who are you?" the man asked her, leaning closer.

Teel flinched and tried to pull the sheet over her head, but her hands wouldn't do her bidding.

Irritation flashed across the man's austere features. "Listen, I have to know who you are."

Teel closed her eyes to make him disappear. Sleep came as a welcome gift.

She woke again to the same turquoise, but this time she was able to turn her head and see that she was in a bedroom. It hurt to move, but she forced herself to look as far as she was able. She was incapable of lifting herself but realized she was on a boat of some kind. A large window revealed a patch of blue sky, and she felt the motion of the ship under her body even though she could not see the water from where she lay.

The door opened, and she turned her eyes to see the man who'd spoken to her earlier—the one she thought of as the devil—and another man, who looked

like a leprechaun and carried a tray with covered dishes. They stared down at her for a long time.

Every instinct told Teel to run, but she was thoroughly immobile. Every nerve ending stood at full alert. The hair on her arms prickled like tiny antennae receiving danger signals.

The larger man bent toward her and lifted her easily. All at once Teel realized that she was naked under the silk sheets. Her fingers moved futilely, unable to grasp the slipping material. The devil held the sheet around her and lowered her to a cluster of pillows the other man had provided. "Darby, get her that robe from Clare's cabin, the short one with the long sleeves." He grinned at the smaller man, making 'dimples form on either side of his mouth.

The devil has dimples, Teel thought as she lay back against the pillows, completely exhausted. Her skin felt on fire from insect bites and the burning sun. Her face, felt swollen and dry. She wanted to immerse herself in j cold, cold milk.

"She'll have my eyes if I touch her precious clothes," I the smaller man protested, frowning at Satan, his bushy brows bobbing up and down.

Satan's smile disappeared into granite. His teeth snapped together. "Tell her I want that jacket, and I don't want to have to come after it." He turned to Teel, then back to the older man, who was crossing to the cabin door. "And bring some lotion. I want good stuff. These dames spend enough of my money for the best, so I know there's some on board. I want it."

Teel struggled to shout that she didn't want the little man to leave, but all that came out was a groan.

"All right, darling, let's see if you can take some of this cold soup." Satan lifted her, his arm cradling her, but still she moaned. "This is cold cucumber soup, and I my chef tells me it's just the thing for someone suffering from heat exposure such as yours."

Teel kept her eyes on him as he edged the spoon into her mouth and let the creamy mixture slide down her throat. The cooling sensation was immediate. So was hunger. She was eager for the second spoonful and the . next and the next. Then she was tired. She closed her eyes and let sleep take her.

Teel realized vaguely that she slept off and on for a long time. In brief moments of lucidity she was aware that her swollen body was gradually returning to normal, the itching was disappearing, her appetite had increased, and her general soreness was beginning to fade. Strength returned slowly to her limbs, and she took more note of her surroundings.

The devil didn't return. After a doctor had examined her, she'd been left in the able care of the man called Darby. At last she felt strong enough to talk to him. "Darby, what happened to the other man?"

His mouth agape, Darby stared at her. "So you can talk, can you? For days all you've said is 'no'." He smiled at her, his sandy hair quivering on his head like tufts of wild grass. "That other man, as you call him, is gambling with his guests on the island of Alidad, where we've dropped anchor for a time. It was lucky for you we had engine trouble. What were you doing on that beach, anyway?"

Teel told him of losing her way in the jungle while on a visit to the mission in the jungle.

Darby shook his head and again commented on her good luck. "We didn't originally intend to land off the coast. Too much trouble in those banana republics. Chazz usually gives them a wide berth. But,"—he shrugged his thin shoulders—"bilge pumps aren't usually temperamental; so we put in for repairs."

His elfin grin made Teel smile. "You scared the be- jabbers out o' those low-class friends of Chazz's," he went on. "It's a wonder they didn't throw you into the ocean. You should have heard them excusing themselves for bringin' you. I don't know why Chazz keeps them around—they and the rest

of his 'guests'. They're not the kind of people he has business dealings with, I tell you." He pursed his thin lips as he set a tray on her knees with the ritual tonic and tea he usually gave her in the evening. The biscuits were light and flaky and running with butter.

"I often think he hangs with that bunch to somehow make up for his success. Ya see, Chazz was very poor when he was growing up. He worked his way through college, then began his own parcel service. From that he went to shipping, and now he has a fleet of planes, and—"

Teel smiled, feeling both mentally and physically comfortable for the first time. She was getting better. "I know about Chazz Herman," she said. "I read that article in *World* magazine about how he flew the flood relief plane into a remote area of the jungle after a volcano erupted. He plays polo with European royalty"—Teel ticked the facts off on her fingers—"he's a self-made millionaire, who rose from the slums of New York to become a member of the jet set..."

Darby wrinkled his nose. "Whatever that is!" He threw his thumb over his shoulder in the direction of what Teel surmised must be the guests' sleeping quarters. "Chazz is a good man," Darby explained, "but sometimes he crews around with the likes o' them." Darby looked at the glass Teel was holding, his bushy eyebrows quivering comically. "Drink all your tonic now. Tomorrow you're to go up on deck and get some air. But I won't let you go if you don't drink your tonic."

Teel made a face at him and drank the licorice-colored brew.

He smiled at her, set the tray on a table, and returned to sit on a chair next to her bed. "Now are you going to tell Darby who you are. Sister? We don't even know your name, and you haven't been strong enough for us to question you."

Teel stared at Darby in surprise. He'd called her "Sister." But of course! She had come aboard the *Deirdre*, as Darby called the yacht, wearing the torn habit. She opened her mouth to tell Darby she wasn't a nun when a warning sounded in her brain. It might be safer if she pretended to be a nun until she was safely back home in Selby, New York. After all, she really didn't know

these people, and what she had read about Chazz Herman— he'd been written up in the tabloids as well as in *World* magazine—was not encouraging. She had refrained from mentioning his shadier reputation to Darby, even though she was sure the little man was aware of his employer's propensity for well-developed blondes. Even if half of what the yellow press said about Chazz Herman were true, he was an unmitigated and unrepentant womanizer. He went out with, and undoubtedly slept with, some of the world's most sophisticated women, and some of the most common. He dined with royalty and high-priced call girls, making little or no distinction between the two. From the many takeovers he had successfully manipulated, Teel knew he was a dangerous man in his business dealings. From the many scandal sheets that gave extensive and colorful coverage of his escapades with women— including his often tearful, usually indiscreet breakups with them—she knew he was ruthless in his personal life as well. She had read too much about Chazz Herman to trust him and wasn't ready to risk becoming his next sexual coup.

"Aren't you going to tell me your name?" Darby quizzed, his pale eyes gentle on her.

Teel swallowed in a throat that was desert dry. "I'm Terese Ellen Barrett, from New York."

"New York is a big place." Darby grinned at her. "And is your convent in Manhattan?"

"I'm in charge of a school for exceptional children in Selby, New York, about sixty miles northwest of the city," Teel told him truthfully. She had no intention of revealing that she was a *lay* director of the Mary Dempsey School for Exceptional Children, that she had once been a model during a summer break from college, or that she had once been seduced by a man named Ben Windom, a New York advertising executive. She shook her head, clearing it of dark memories.

"Is this a school for smart ones, then?" Darby leaned back in his chair and tapped a round-bowled pipe on the sole of his sneaker, catching the ashes in an ashtray he held under it.

Teel smiled. "No. Our children are mentally retarded and physically handicapped. For them it is a vocational school, a school in which they learn to read and write, understand signs and count money, and generally how to survive in a world designed for people of much higher intellectual ability. We deal with children up to the age of fifteen. A great number of our pupils are then sent on to a more advanced training school."

Darby stared at her wide-eyed. "And did you train for this, Sister, this special work?"

"Oh, yes. I did my undergraduate work at Nazareth College in Rochester, New York. I also took classes during the summer at Columbia University. I—er—I also worked there to help support myself. I did graduate work at Columbia in order to get my master's. Soon now I'll be finishing my doctoral dissertation," Teel concluded, her voice a whisper.

"Oh, it's 'doctor,' is it?" Darby's eyebrows danced up and down. "Well, I'm proud to know you, doctor."

"I'm not a doctor yet, but I will be in less than a year."

"Your parents must be proud of you," Darby said, obviously fishing for more information.

Teel smiled at him. "My parents are dead. They were killed in that plane accident in Washington a few years back." Teel felt the smile slip off her face. "My Aunt Tessa, who traveled with me to the mission, is my only relative now." Teel swallowed. "I must let her know that I'm all right. She'll be so worried."

"Shhh, now. Don't upset yourself," Darby soothed her.

"But... but she doesn't know where I am," Teel protested, feeling a weakness assail her. "I... I don't know if she's all right. I'm worried about her."

"There, there." Darby patted her shoulder awkwardly. "I realize you've been worrying. When you were so feverish with sun sickness you called out to her

many times. A number of nights Chazz held you in his arms while you cried."

"What?" Teel rubbed her eyes and sat up quickly, experiencing a momentary dizziness that soon dissipated.

Darby looked surprised. "Don't you remember that either? Sure. Chazz heard you calling out. You're closer to his suite than any of the other rooms. He thought you would be disturbed less often here. The Turquoise Cabin is usually for, well..."

"His women," Teel supplied, feeling red run up her cheeks. "Well, I'm certainly well enough to be moved into another cabin now," she said coolly.

"Don't be silly, girl. This is the most comfortable cabin of them all except for Chazz's own suite." Darby rose to his feet. "You won't be moving, but you will be going to sleep."

"I'm not tired, really. Stay a bit longer."

"No." Darby grinned. "Chazz would kill me if you took a turn for the worse. He watches over you like a mother hen." Darby frowned, making his grizzled face look like a troll's. "But I'd like it better if he quit drinking and carousing with that bunch. Seems to me he's been drinking even more lately." Darby left the cabin, shaking his head.

Teel lay quite still thinking, wishing she could get the owner of the *Deirdre* off her mind. He was the kind of man she detested. Her one experience with Ben Windom had soured her on the sophisticated, womanizing type, and that was Chazz Herman in spades. Of course there were some differences between the two men. Ben Windom was a product of old money, the best schools, the most prestigious clubs. He traveled in exalted circles, yet Teel considered him an inferior person, more lacking in integrity than anyone else she had ever met.

She was sure Chazz Herman had a similar lack of morals. From now on she would try to avoid that class of men, she told her pillow, her eyes heavy with sleep.

A noise woke her hours later and she sensed immediately that it was very late. The bumping sound came again, and she sighed. Chazz Herman and his guests were staggering around outside her cabin, probably on their way to bed. Someone was saying, "Shush," but they made little attempt to lower their voices.

"Aw come on, Chazz honey, I can get you in the mood," came a woman's slurred voice. "I know you don't like us to come to your cabin, sooooo why not come to mine?" The thick voice had a familiar ring to Teel, who was suddenly wide awake as she strained to hear the conversation beyond her closed door.

"Dammit, Elise, I've had enough. Now go to bed or get off the Deirdre." Chazz's voice wasn't as slurred as Elise's, but he had obviously been drinking too. To Teel's sensitive ears he sounded like someone picking a fight.

She let her pent-up breath out in a *whush* when she heard Elise's retreating staccato steps. Her muttered expletives grew fainter and fainter.

Teel gasped as someone suddenly opened her cabin door. She slid down further under the silk sheets and closed her eyes, feigning sleep. Then she sensed Chazz standing over her, staring down at her, and knew his lion's eyes were fixed on her as though she were prey. They seemed to have the power to see through her subterfuge, to X-ray and catalogue her thoughts. Just when she was sure he would say something, or perhaps pull the sheet from her naked body, he turned and left the room. She heard a thud and a mumbled curse. He must have stumbled against the doorjamb.

For long moments she didn't move. Then, the sound of the lapping of the water on the hull that came through the large, open porthole was muffled by sounds from the larger cabin next to Teel's. Chazz seemed to prowl the cabin for hours, muttering to himself and slamming into furniture. Finally he fell quiet. For a long time the only sounds Teel heard were the creaking of the ship as it slid through the waves and the splashing of the water against the sides. She felt certain Chazz was asleep.

Teel willed the motion of the *Deirdre* to lull her to sleep. But, what seemed eons later, she was still wide awake. Suddenly she wanted to get up and move about. Though still weak, she was determined to find fresh air, to put her muscles into motion. She sat up and shrugged on a terry robe that lay on a chair next to the bed.

For a full minute after she rose, she was sure she couldn't take a step. But the stars and circles dancing in front of her eyes finally dissipated, and she was able to take a firm footing on the shifting floor. One step. Two steps. Three steps. She looked over her shoulder to see how far she had come from the big double bed. She was halfway to the door. Three more steps and she reached it. Taking a deep breath, she opened the door and stepped out into the passageway, which was wider than she had imagined. The staircase leading upward was as broad and twice as steep as any in a house. Would Chazz call it a ladder in nautical terms, Teel mused as she calculated the distance to the top, which seemed farther than the summit of Mount Everest, and determined to climb it. By the time she reached the last rung, she was breathless and reeling.

The boat seemed to sink and rise through massive swells. Teel knew she might have a rough time keeping her footing even with the full moon to guide her. In her weakened state she wasn't able to control the pull and thrusts of her body as the ship surged onward.

"You damn little fool!" Without warning two hands came round her, lifting her up and back against a man's hard chest. The fingers tightened under her breasts as Chazz sought to steady himself and hold her at the same time. "Are you trying to kill yourself? I couldn't believe it when I woke up to hear you moving around." He started to turn her away from the rail.

"No." Teel's hands flailed outward. "I want to breathe. I want to walk a little and breathe." Tears rolled down her cheeks and her head lolled on her neck. Chazz's hand loosened under her breast and came up to press her head back on a hard shoulder.

"All right." He sounded amused, and the slight slurring of earlier was gone. Chazz Herman had a hard head. He put her down but did not release his firm hold.

Teel reached out, wanting to hold onto something, her hands weak as she tried to grasp the smooth oak rail. She took deep, reviving breaths and closed her eyes in delight as she felt the salty sweep of air into her lungs. "Oh, the night is so wonderful." Teel wasn't aware that she had spoken aloud until the reedy sound was pushed back to her ears on the heels of the wind.

"It is beautiful," he agreed, his voice husky in her ear.

For a moment Teel stiffened, thinking she felt a light caress at her neck. Then she was sure she was mistaken. It was only the wind. But how strange to have her body tingle like that. She walked slow, precise steps across the undulating deck, relying on the arms around her for the support she needed. Although her legs wobbled a bit at the unaccustomed effort, she was elated when she reached the stem area. But as she began her return journey, her knees buckled. At once she was swept high into heavily muscled arms.

"Enough for you this evening, Sister Terese Ellen," Chazz murmured hoarsely. "Why the hell did you have to be a nun?" he added, ending with a muttered curse as Teel tucked her head into his broad shoulder and closed her eyes against a sudden giddiness.

"Tired," she muttered into his neck.

"Are you, angel? I wish I were. You seem to have the opposite effect on me." He buried his face in her hair.

"Hair's a mess." Teel's lips were so dry that she had to push the words through them.

"But I bet it's gorgeous when it's washed. That chestnut color must take fire." He took the stairs easily and pushed open her cabin door with his shoulder, then lowered her to the bed, pushing the now sweat-soaked terry robe away from her body.

The cool air made Teel shiver. She was hazily aware that Chazz had left her for a moment and returned with a fluffy towel. He dried her body with long, gentle strokes, soothing her. When he leaned over to brush the damp tendrils of hair from her forehead, she reached up two limp arms and clung to his

neck. His surprise at her move aided her in pulling him down. It was he who held back when Teel's mouth moved over his, her lips and tongue an invitation.

"God," he groaned, lifting his head for a moment. Then his mouth came down again, the penetrating pressure a revelation.

Teel enjoyed it for mere seconds before she fell asleep.

The next day, Teel remembered little of what had happened the night before. She'd gone up on deck for some fresh air, and then Chazz had appeared. She vaguely recalled a sensation of having his strong arms around her, then nothing.

Darby told her cheerfully that she was allowed on deck. He had asked a crewman to carry her up to a chair. "Not that you aren't as slim as a reed and as light as a feather and that I couldn't do it myself," he said, "but—" he shrugged, giving her an owlish grin—"why should I strain myself?"

"Why indeed!" Teel's tone had an amused tartness.

"You're a tall one, that's for sure, and with your hair washed and a shower behind you, you look half decent. Not that *I* like leggy gals with hair the color of a bay horse, mind you."

"Thanks."

"But your skin isn't so bad, and you have a nice long neck like a filly should. Why them nuns let you keep your hair so long, I'll never know. I always thought nuns had short hair under them wimpoles." Darby turned away to reach for a sweater for her.

She was glad he couldn't see the blush burning her cheeks. She pressed her hands there to cool them before he turned to look at her again.

"Chazz has been trying to contact your aunt on the ship-to-shore radio," Darby informed her. "Once he does, Sister, you'll be on your way again." He held the sweater out to her.

"Oh? Ah—thank you. It's very nice. Where did you find all these clothes for me? So many of them are in my size too."

Darby shrugged, jerking his head in the direction of the guest cabins. "Them." He chortled. "Chazz just burst in and took what he wanted. Why not? He paid for most of them, that's for sure."

Teel was aghast. "I don't like taking other people's clothes," she exclaimed. "Especially if they don't choose to give them up."

"You have eyes like liquid jade when you're angry, Sister," Darby commented. "Sure and you must be Irish."

"I'm everything. A little Irish on my father's side, but I'm also Swedish, German, and Dutch. My father's grandmother was Spanish, and I had an uncle by marriage who was Armenian. He sold Oriental rugs in upstate New York. So, you see, I'm a real melting pot."

Darby looked momentarily disappointed, then his brows lifted. "But the best part of you is Irish," he declared. "I can feel it."

Teel's laughter rippled across the cabin just as the door opened. The sound died abruptly as she faced an indolent Chazz Herman, a thin black cigar held in his white teeth.

"You must be making her better, Darby," he said. "That's the first time I've heard the sister laugh." He pushed himself away from the door frame and extinguished the cigar in a convenient silver ashtray. His walk, more a lope than a stride, Teel decided, carried him to her bedside in an instant. He leaned over her, a muscle in the right side of his jaw working, and she had to struggle not to dive under the covers. His lips jerked upward in the semblance of a smile, as though he had read her thoughts and fears and already dismissed them. "I've come to carry you up on deck," he told her.

"The sun is shining and the air is balmy. Before noon we'll be dropping anchor at a little island I know. You can swim if you feel well enough."

"I don't want to swim. I want to go home. My aunt will be worrying about me." She coughed to clear the dryness from her throat. "You don't have to wait," she added. "One of the crew is coming to carry me on deck." She knew her words were terse and impolite, but she felt smothered by him, threatened by Chazz Herman. It was unbearable strain to be in his company.

Chazz's mouth closed shut as though he had just bitten through bone. His eyes had a hard sheen to them as he looked down at her. She shivered under the cold heat of that look. "I'm the one who's carrying you on deck, Sister." He spat out the words, harsh mockery in his voice. Then he bent, stripped the silk sheet from her body, and stared down at her as she lay there clad in a light cotton shift.

"Now, Chazz—" Darby came forward with an outstretched hand.

"Quiet, Darby." The command ricocheted off the walls, seeming to turn the serene turquoise room an angry, metallic color. Chazz swooped down and swung Teel up into his arms, his gold eyes daring her to defy him.

She wanted to level him with insults, but she couldn't form her lips around the scathing words bursting inside her head.

"That's right. Sister, keep quiet." An alien fury seemed to emanate from him. His strong arms clasped her body.

She made a mental addendum to her previous thought. She felt not only threatened by him but downright menaced. What fuel burned him? she thought, caught between panic and anger. For some unknown reason she had roused as fierce an antipathy in him as he had in her. Perhaps anger responded to anger and grew.

Whatever the reasons, Teel knew she would never be comfortable with this man, that they could never be friends. She would be balanced precariously as if on the edge of a knife until she could escape the *Deirdre* and leave its owner behind forever.

THE DAYS THAT followed were golden, warm, and relaxing. The constant ministrations of the crew left Teel feeling thoroughly pampered aboard the *Deirdre*. After Chazz had first brought her up on deck, he had occupied himself elsewhere, which relieved her. If only she could talk with her aunt instead of getting second-hand messages through Darby, then everything would have been perfect. She knew Aunt Tessa was fine and on her way home to Albany, but Teel longed to reassure her personally of her own safety.

Often the *Deirdre* anchored at sand beaches on obscure islands whose names Teel forgot the moment she heard them. Otherwise they cruised through crystal-blue waters. Teel didn't much care where they went. Her most important concern was her returning health, her only unsettling worry that of seeing Chazz Herman. But since days had gone by without his appearance, she was at least partly successful at putting him out of her mind.

"Darby"—Teel was resting in a lounge chair on deck—"that lunch was delicious. Would you tell the chef I love fish pan-broiled in lemon like that?"

"I hate to give him any more compliments," Darby retorted impishly. "Rowan will be getting above himself."

Teel laughed, delighting in the Irishman's company.

"We're going to anchor at Moon Bay today," he told her. "It's very beautiful there. Chazz wants to do some diving." Darby lifted the tray from Teel's lap. "You won't be able to dive, but you can sunbathe and swim."

"Darby," Teel groaned. "I must get back to work soon. My vacation will be up in a couple of days. Besides, I should get in touch with my school and let them know I'm all right."

"Not to worry. Chazz took care of that after he called your aunt. He says, among other things, that he discovered you have more vacation time coming to you. He wants you to have a nice rest on board the *Deirdre*."

Teel jerked upright, wondering what Chazz had said to the school and her aunt and angry at his high-handedness. "Who said he was in charge of my life?" she demanded. "I'm not one of his lackeys."

"Aww now, Sister, you've hardly been treated like a lackey." Darby grinned at her glowering face, then ambled off with her tray, whistling out of tune.

Teel gazed across the sapphire waters. "He still has a hell of a nerve," she whispered, clenching and unclenching her hands on the arm rests. "I'm not ungrateful for his care of me," she murmured to herself, "but I'm damned if I'll allow myself to be manipulated by a... a womanizer." She took a deep breath and lay back to rest. She would need all her strength to tell Chazz Herman just what she thought of his methods the next time she saw him. Not that she wanted to see him. She did not. She yawned, not wanting to think of him.

They anchored well off the beach at Moon Bay. The crescent-shaped harbor with its swath of white sand leading to the clear blue water was a tropic jewel. As she leaned over the rail, Teel could see almost to the bottom of the bay. Fishing boats, sail boats, and power boats with water skiers swaying behind them all decorated the bay with creamy wakes.

Off to one side was a section delineated with orange flags that Darby explained was for diving. Neither power boats nor sailing vessels were allowed in this area. Only a few craft designated as diving boats moved within it.

Darby helped Teel down the ship's ladder into the dinghy, not even allowing her to carry the string bag that held her personal belongings. He assured her that Rowan had made a nice lunch for her.

Darby pointed to a cabana on the beach that several crew members had set up for her. "It's there you can sit when you come out of the water," he explained, scowling at her. "And don't be forgetting that your skin is still

sensitive, so use the lotion and don't sit in the open too long." He cocked his head. "But I will be saying that your skin has a nice golden color. Ah, but it is your hair that is the most beautiful, with them red and blond streaks in it."

"You're a flatterer, Darby," Teel accused him, laughing.

He cleared his throat, embarrassed. "Now, Sister, don't you be shy about swimming. That's a nice one-piece you have. No one will know you're a nun."

"Nuns swim, Darby." Teel smiled at him as he spread out a blanket for her. She didn't tell him that she had often posed in bikinis during her stint as a model because the photographer thought her narrow-hipped, long-legged look perfect for bathing-suit ads. Not even to Darby would she reveal that she was not a nun. As long as she was on Chazz Herman's yacht, she felt safer in the disguise.

Darby sat with her for a few more minutes, reminded her of the suntan lotion, told her to swim near other swimmers, and pointed out a crowd of people. "I'll be back later in the afternoon, Sister," he told her.

Teel called to him as he turned away. "Is Chazz diving with his other guests?"

Darby made a face at her and nodded, then left.

At first Teel just lay back on her elbows in the shade of the cabana, watching the skiers and the swimmers. She didn't want to look toward the orange-flagged area. Several times she shaded her eyes and scanned the more remote section of the beach, where several divers came in and out of the water. Could the one in the orange bikini be Clare? Was one of the other women Elise?

Finally, even with the cool breeze filtering through the cabana, Teel felt too warm. Standing up, she lifted her arms to coil her long hair on top of her head and fixed it there with two bone pins. She looked down at the almost transparent metallic green lycra suit stretched over her body, noticing the prominent hip bone that emphasized her recent loss of weight. Her firm,

round breasts strained against the material, the nipples clearly visible. No, Aunt Tessa would not think this an appropriate garment—not for her niece and certainly not for a nun. Teel smiled to herself as she thought of Aunt Tessa, then lifted the water goggles and placed them over her eyes just before entering the water.

The ocean felt cold on her overheated skin, but refreshing nonetheless. She reveled in the gentle waves. Wanting to avoid other swimmers, she headed diagonally away from the cluster of people. At first she stroked easily, content to get the exercise, but soon the colorful underwater world drew her attention, and she dove repeatedly to get a closer look. She was searching the bottom for an unusual crustacean formation she had just glimpsed when a dark shape angled rapidly down toward her. A shark! Panic engulfed her as she twisted abruptly, kicking wildly upward. As her head broke the surface, she gasped for breath.

"Hey! What is it? Do you have a cramp?" Chazz held her arm easily and pushed back wet tendrils of hair that had fallen forward on her face.

"I thought you were a shark," Teel choked out, trying to control her breathing. She pushed at his shoulders, but her hands were shaking, and she had no strength.

Chazz smiled devilishly down at her, his hair as sleek and black as licorice as he treaded water beside her. "I've been called that by several people, but I'm really quite harmless."

"A likely story!" Teel retorted, still breathing hard.

He threw back his head and laughed. "My ego will never be in danger of over-inflating from the compliments you throw me, *Sister Terese Ellen*."

Teel's skin tingled with a sense of danger as she looked into his lion's eyes. She wanted to ask him why he had emphasized the word "Sister," but some instinct kept her quiet. "You don't have to worry about getting a big ego," she said. "You have one already. Now would you please release me. I'm a good swimmer and in no danger of drowning."

"You may not be, but I am.."

"What did you say?"

"Nothing." He released her slowly. "How would you like to go snorkeling? Then you could really see the underwater life."

For a moment, in her distraction, Teel forgot to tread water. She sank like a lead weight. Immediately two strong arms brought her to the surface. But even when she was treading water once again, his hands remained at her waist, exploring it restlessly and moving upward. Teel pushed hard against Chazz, sending him backward but splashing water into her own mouth at the same time. "I told you I can swim," she gulped, coughing. Irritated, she slapped water at him, hoping he too would get a mouthful.

Chazz threw back his head, his dark hair glistening in the sunlight. "Playful?" he asked, "Good. I like to play games." He floated toward Teel, his teeth bared in a menacing grin. Years of training came to Teel's aid. Her body knifed through the water with a strong racing stroke. The surge of power surprised her, but she knew she couldn't keep up the fast pace. If only she could make the beach before she faltered.

Victory seemed a distinct possibility when she felt a sudden tug around her calf. Chazz had caught her! She stroked even harder, trying to kick her leg free, but all to no avail. She turned to face him, breathless from the unaccustomed exertion. "You—said—we—were— going—snorkeling." She put one hand on his shoulder to ward him off as he pulled her closer, his laugh a muted growl.

"And so we are." His grinning face came closer. "That was quite an exhibition, *Sister*. Do you coach swimming at this school of yours?"

Hearing the mocking inflection in his voice, Teel frowned. His glittering golden eyes dared her to question him.

She breast-stroked away from him. He swam ahead of her. She dove deep in the opposite direction—and surfaced inches from his bare chest. No matter which way she turned, he was there. She had no choice but to confront him.

"Yes, you could say I teach swimming," she told him. "I help coach our children, who compete in the Special Olympics, not just in swimming but also in the broad jump and the fifty-yard dash. In the winter I coach them in cross-country skiing and snowshoeing." Teel touched bottom as she and Chazz entered shallower water. She felt his eyes on her as they emerged but refused to look at him.

When she leaned down for her towel, he took it from her hand. Before she could protest, he was drying her off. He turned her to face him, his grin irritating her but taking her breath away just as the swimming had. "I can't allow you to catch cold," he said. "Darby would kill me."

"Your concern is touching," she retorted sarcastically, trying to pull the towel from his hands. When he wouldn't release it, she glared up at him.

"At least now you're looking at me," Chazz said, his eyes narrowing on her as they moved over her from ankle to eyebrow. "Your eyes are like green fire," he mused. His eyes turned to liquid gold, his neck and shoulders tightening with some hidden strain.

Teel opened her mouth to make a willing retort and froze. Her eyes had a will of their own as they looked at his broad, muscled body. It didn't matter how many times she told herself she didn't like the kind of man Chazz Herman was. He still exerted a powerful hold on her. He was too tall. She didn't like looking up at men. She felt more comfortable if they were on eye level... or lower. She didn't try to analyze why Chazz had such an unsettling effect on her even when he wasn't in her company, but she knew her former peace of mind would not return until she had put him behind her for good. Why in heaven's name did he wear those silky briefs? They made his thighs look even more muscular than they were already. Teel turned her back on him on the pretext of drying her hair.

"Shall we go?" The gentle question was whispered into her neck, making her stiffen.

"Ah—yes."

They crossed the beach in silence, the walk seeming even farther because of the shifting sand under Teel's feet.

"I should have gotten the dune buggy for you," Chazz said, giving her a long look.

"No. It feels good to do something as safe and sane as walking on a beach on a hot, sunny day." His arm went round her waist, an impersonal support. She watched many of the bikini-clad women stretched out on towels stare as Chazz walked past. They irritated Teel.

"Darby tells me you're quite a mixture and not the purebred Irish girl he took you for." Chazz chuckled.

"I'm not a girl at all, Mr. Herman," Teel replied. "I'm a twenty-seven-year-old woman with a very satisfying career."

"Sorry, *Sister*, I didn't mean to tread on your toes. I was just making conversation."

Teel shrugged. "I'm jumpy about my age, I guess. A few of the board members think I'm too young to handle the job adequately." She glanced at him. "I didn't mean to bark at you. I'm really very grateful for all you've done for me."

"The pleasure has been all mine." His deep, smooth voice made her skin tingle.

"Ah, you mentioned my background. Tell me about yours. What sort of name is Herman?"

"My father was Jewish—German Jew on his father's side, Sephardic Jew on his mother's side. My mother was of English descent. She and my father met at school in the Bronx. Father sold musical instruments. My Mother taught piano. They were killed in a fire at the store when I was seven. I stayed with an aunt who was kind to me but very poor. I grew up a little on the wild side, determined to be rich so that my aunt could have a few of the finer things. When things began to go well, she allowed me to move her into a

brownstone, but she won't move again. She would rather I get married and have children than provide her with a fur coat, car, or any of the other luxuries she considers unimportant."

"She sounds nice." Teel smiled at Chazz and was surprised to see him suck in his breath.

"Here we are." His voice was ragged. He went over to a large tent and brought out some equipment.

"Do you think I could try scuba diving too?" Teel asked, staring at a man near them who was sorting through a pile of more sophisticated equipment.

"No," Chazz exclaimed, glowering at her. "Scuba diving requires special training and lots of practice. You're not to attempt it until I've had the chance to teach you. Maybe in two or three weeks, when you're much stronger."

"I won't be on the *Deirdre* that long," Teel pointed out, wary and uncertain in the face of his sudden anger.

"No?" Chazz snorted. "We'll see."

Teel was about to ask him what he meant by that remark when he scooped up a mask from the blanket and fitted it to her face. She gulped at the sudden lack of oxygen. But the ringing in her ears subsided as she realized that she was in no danger. She listened carefully as Chazz explained how to breathe and soon felt ready to enter the water, but Chazz restrained her, insisting that she repeat his instructions. She did as he told her, and at last he was satisfied. Then he motioned for her to sit on the blanket and proceeded to fit the fins to her feet.

"I can do it myself," she protested.

He smiled, slipping on his own fins with practiced ease, then waiting for her.

"Oh." Teel sank down on the blanket several times before she was able to rise to her feet. She scowled at Chazz when he laughed.

He seemed to have no trouble walking to the edge of the water. To Teel it was like trudging through miles of desert. Several times she staggered and almost fell. She cursed Chazz for not telling her it would have been easier to carry the flippers to the shore before putting them on.

In the water Teel followed Chazz's example by using a breaststroke. She was close behind him, and when he pointed downward, she nodded and dove with him, remembering to blow through the tube as he had shown her.

The sparkling sea world awed her so much that at first she almost forgot to surface partway to clear her breathing tube. Then the motions became automatic. She delighted in the aquatic panorama spread below her. She lost all sense of time passing as she cruised through the sea grass and past crustacean life.

When Chazz motioned that it was time to rest, she shook her head and turned away, but steel hands grabbed her waist, brooking no resistance.

As they waded ashore, Teel yanked the mask from her face and glared at Chazz, whose hand still gripped her.

"You've been ill. It isn't wise to exhaust yourself," he explained, his voice bland.

"I'm not tired," Teel declared, but she swayed dangerously and immediately his hand tightened at her waist. She clutched his shoulders as he removed her flippers.

"You're more tired than you know," he warned her. "That's the seduction of the water world. Haven't you heard of 'rapture of the deep,' the disorientation that deep divers suffer from the combination of water pressure, lack of oxygen, and, of course, the beauty of the ocean?"

You can lose your inhibitions, your wariness, and all your good sense. Even while snorkeling a mild effect of that same phenomenon can overtake you. You're particularly susceptible, having been recently ill."

"I see," Teel answered, feeling chastened. "I didn't understand." She put her hands on Chazz's arm as he rose with both pairs of flippers in his hand. "Thank you for taking me," she added. "It was wonderful." She grinned. "And you're right, I do feel a little slow and sleepy."

She was taken aback when he wrenched his arm free of her hold and strode toward the tent without answering. Stunned, she pressed her lips together to keep from shouting that he was a capricious barracuda and she couldn't stand people who blew hot and cold. Teel watched him drag the gear into the tent. Hurt and angry, she kicked at the white sand.

"What are you doing here?"

The terse question made Teel spin around. Two women stood in front of her shedding scuba gear. Realizing that the voice was Elise's, Teel assumed that the other woman must be Clare.

"I was snorkeling," Teel explained, keeping her voice flat.

Their unfriendly stares raked her coldly. "Oh, is that where Chazz disappeared to?" Clare said. "I don't recall ever meeting a nun with such a good figure, honey. Or do I call you, Sister?" The two bikini-clad women laughed, then turned to share the joke with several men behind them.

Suddenly an arm snaked around Teel's waist. She stiffened under Chazz's tight fingers, knowing his touch and sensing his anger. When she looked up at him, she saw that his anger wasn't directed at her. Red streaks had appeared on his high cheekbones and his jaw was clenched as tight as a vise. "Darby is arranging for a plane to pick you up later this afternoon," he told the others. "I suggest you get back to the *Deirdre* and get your gear together."

"But Chazz," Elise wailed, "we were going to gamble at the casino tonight. Did you forget? Besides, Clare and I wanted to shop for some clothes, and I wanted—"

"If you don't make the afternoon plane," he interrupted, "you'll be stranded here. If you don't pack your things, Darby will fling them overboard. Good-bye."

Teel felt almost sorry for the sulking women and the truculent men, but she couldn't help but be glad that she wouldn't have to see them again.

When Chazz took her arm and led her up the beach, Elise called after them, "Fooling around with a nun is playing with fire, Chazz—even for you." The high-pitched voice had a nasty ring to it, but when the others laughed and Chazz turned toward them, a snarl on his face, they fell silent.

Chazz and Teel traversed the beach in silence, but she had trouble controlling her breathing. Elise's rude words had injected a personal note that quivered between them like a live wire.

"Would you like to swim again?" Chazz's voice was harsh.

"No." Teel tried and failed to keep her voice steady. "I think I've had enough sun. I'd like to go back and lie down."

"Good idea. I'll get Darby to bring the dinghy."

"There's no need. I can swim to the yacht."

"No!" Chazz roared.

"Don't shout at me!" Teel burst out, her chin jutting up.

"Then don't talk like a damn fool."

Teel stamped her foot on the hot sand. "I was trying to save Darby the trouble."

"Don't bother. That's his job."

She opened and closed her mouth, struggling to think of something suitably scathing. "I'll be glad to leave this beach just to get away from you."

Chazz turned his back on her, his neck red, his shoulders stiff. He strode over to the cabana, reached inside for a two-way radio and spoke into it in terse sentences.

Chazz stayed with Teel, not speaking, until Darby came ashore, then he mumbled something incoherent and strode away up the beach.

Teel was seething, angry with both herself and Chazz. She blinked back tears. She wasn't crying because he was a boor, she told herself, but because she was still a little weak from too much sun. When she was stronger, she was going to tip him over the side of the *Deirdre* with an anchor chain around his neck.

Darby brought the still-full lunch basket back with them, shaking his head and muttering that the chef would be angry. He opened his mouth, studied Teel for a long moment and finally said nothing for the rest of the short trip to the *Deirdre*.

Teel went straight to her cabin and threw herself facedown on the bed. She only meant to rest a minute, then rise and shower, but her heavy eyelids closed and sleep took her away.

Teel's first thought as she struggled out of her deep sleep was that the yacht had hit rough weather. Her whole cabin seemed to be tilting in the storm. Then, fuzzily, she became aware that the rocking was only caused by Darby shaking her shoulder.

"Come along, Sister. It's time to get dressed."

"Dinner." Teel forced the word around the cotton wool in her mouth.
"Hungry. Forgot lunch."

"Forgot? Baloney. No doubt you'd been tiffing with himself and didn't eat 'cause you was miffed." Darby ignored her glare. "Now come along. It will soon be cocktail time."

"Dinner." Teel licked her dry lips.

"Argue with me, will ya?" Darby's half grin, half growl made his bushy eyebrows go up and down. "Up you get now," he badgered her before urging her into the bathroom. "I'll lay out your clothes," he called to her through the closed door. "Not to worry."

I'm not worried, Teel thought, rubbing her hair with one of the exotic shampoos she had found in the stockpile of emollients on board the *Deirdre*. She wasn't worried about what to wear, but she was worried about how soon she could eat. If that bear of a man hadn't made her so mad, she would have eaten the lovely lunch that Rowan had fixed for her. She ground her teeth together at the thought of Chazz.

She was going to yell over the noise of the shower to tell Darby to lay out jeans for her, then decided that he wouldn't hear her anyway.

She padded out of the bathroom wrapped in a thick bath sheet that hung almost to her toes and stopped dead, her mouth falling open as she caught sight of the wisp of a dress that Darby had draped across the bed. Beside it were cobwebby undies and ultra-sheer stockings. Backless slippers in a sea-green color with medium-high heels lay at the foot of the bed.

Teel looked around the room for her other clothes, or anything else she might wear to tell Darby to find something for her. But there was nothing but her towel. She balked at leaving her cabin wrapped in that, afraid she might run into the owner of the *Deirdre*. She had no wish to watch Chazz's lion's eyes laser over her, separating her bones from tendons, muscle and tissue, disassembling her and putting her back together again. And she didn't like the all-over tingle she felt at the mere thought of him.

She shrugged and decided to put on the dress. What difference did it make what she wore as long as she could eat?

It wasn't until she had slipped the sea green silk chiffon dress with the uneven hemline over her head that she noticed the jeweler's box on one side of the dresser. Curious, she opened it and gasped. Emeralds! Drop earrings

of braided gold interspersed with emeralds and a matching thin necklace glinted up at her. The ring was a marquise-shaped emerald that fit perfectly.

Teel oohed over the cache, chuckling to herself as she thought of Darby taking these from Chazz's safe. He had often described the safe in Chazz's bedroom, where he kept the valuables. She hoped the gremlinlike little man wouldn't get into trouble because he had tried to give Teel a chance to pretend to be a gem-laden lady.

She knew she couldn't wear the jewels and maintain her pose as a nun, but she laughed out loud to think what her fellow schoolteachers would say. They had never seen their director in anything so exotic. Teel laughed to herself as well as she twirled in front of the mirror. A sense of freedom and abandon made her feel lightheaded. She had no choice but to wear the clothes even though the cut of the dress precluded wearing a bra and the combination of silky panties and dress plus very sheer stockings gave a sensuous, naked feeling to her skin. She was surprised to see that the contrast of the sophisticated dress with her unmadeup, sunwarmed skin gave her a uniquely striking look.

She gripped the green clutch bag and left the cabin, feeling like the Queen of the *Deirdre*, not just a temporary, unwanted passenger. As she traversed the ship toward the dining area at the stern, she wondered idly what her host would be doing this evening.

She stopped, open-mouthed, when she saw him, dressed in evening clothes, leaning against the rail, the rich aroma of a Corona Colorado cigar wafting toward her. She would have turned and retraced her steps, but he whirled around, like a lion at the ready and flicked the cheroot into the water.

"Ah... so here you are. Come and sit down and have some appetizers. Darby tells me you're hungry. I hope you won't eat so many canapés that you can't enjoy Rowan's specialty this evening—*truite en colere*."

Teel resisted the hand leading her to the round table laden with cold delicacies. A chafing dish bubbled nearby, and her palate was teased by the spicy aroma of deviled clams. "I don't want to intrude on your guests and your dinner," she began.

Chazz grinned at her and settled her gently into a chair. "Not much chance of that since you're my only guest."

"How come?" Teel asked, her composure deserting her.

Chazz laughed, throwing his head back in open enjoyment.

Teel stared at his exposed throat, which was strong and muscular like the rest of him, and felt her heart slip sideways. "I mean—don't you have—you must have—" She glared at him when he continued to look at her, his eyes glittering with amusement. "You know darned well what I mean," she finished lamely.

Chazz's black eyebrows rose high on his forehead. "*Sister*, I'm shocked.

"You bring out the worst in me," Teel murmured, uneasiness assailing her at the mockery in his tone. She reached for some of the gold caviar molded in ice, refusing to look at him and swallowing before she spoke. "Why do you say 'Sister' in that peculiar way?" She reached for another canape without thinking, then felt embarrassed at her greediness. But when she hesitated, Chazz served her himself.

"Do I say 'Sister' in a peculiar way?" he asked, his voice like velvet on steel. "I wonder why that should bother you." His smile looked as threatening as a shark's.

Teel tried to hold his narrowed gaze with her own, but looked away first. She was relieved when Rowan announced dinner.

The food was a delight, not only to eat but also to look at. Teel had seen pictures of the trout dish with its tail in its mouth and the attendant vegetables, but she had never tasted it. Nor had she ever tried Dom Perignon champagne.

When she finally sighed and pushed back her plate, Darby appeared with a silver tray laden with French pastries. Teel briefly tried to resist the temptation, but gave in and selected an eclair.

"That's the size of the dinghy—dipped in chocolate," Chazz commented, then grinned at Teel's glowering look as he reached over to wipe a bit of chocolate from the corner of her mouth. Just then Rowan arrived on deck to urge her to try the Napoleons as well. She felt herself redden as the three men watched her finish the sweet with broad smiles on their faces.

"These are luscious, Rowan," Teel said admiringly, determined to keep her eyes on the chef when Chazz chuckled. She couldn't help smiling, though when she glanced at Darby's delighted, grinning leprechaun face. She laughed out loud. But when the others left carrying away the last of the dishes and she turned to Chazz, her smile faded. Chazz's features looked as if they'd been etched in stone. "What's wrong?" Teel asked in a strained voice.

"I have a consuming wish to see you laugh like that all the time, *Sister Terese Ellen*." Chazz ground out the words between clenched teeth. "It would be like Christ-mas and Chanukah for me to smother you in jewels and furs."

"I—I don't live like that." Teel felt her skin tighten with fear at the glitter in his eyes. "I don't *want* to live like that," she added.

"No?" he asked softly.

"No. What's the matter with you? I don't understand why you should question everything—"

"Do I do that, *Sister*?" he interrupted.

"There you go again with that sarcastic way you have of saying 'Sister.'" Teel failed to keep the shrillness from her voice. "Why are you doing that?" she demanded. *He knows, he knows*, her mind clamored. *He knows you're not a nun.*

Chazz took a sip of cognac after swirling the amber liquid in his snifter. He took a deep breath. "Come along. Darby will have brought the dinghy around to the platform."

"Where are we going?" Teel gulped. "I don't understand you."

"Oh, but you will." Taking her arm, he lifted her from the chair. "I'm going to have a flutter at the tables. I thought you might enjoy it."

"If you mean by flutter—gambling—I don't gamble—well, what I mean is, not as a rule."

"It wouldn't fit the role of a nun, hmmm?" His dry tone stopped her dead in her tracks.

"*Now* what do you mean?" She took a deep breath, bracing herself for his answer.

"Let's go." He spat out the words like bullets from a gun. His hands gripped hers like iron bands as they descended the steep stairs leading to the loading platform.

When Teel would have balked at the side of the dinghy, Chazz's golden eyes bore into her until she fell still. Then he jumped into the dinghy, clasped her round the waist, and lifted her into the boat.

"You're certainly arrogant," she gasped out.

He stared in harsh amusement as she attempted to straighten her dress. "I'm glad you decided to put on that stole," he said. "It's not much but it covers your charms more than that dress." He turned his back on her and eased the dinghy away from the *Deirdre*; the boat shot toward shore as he gave it full throttle, throwing Teel back against the cushions in an inelegant sprawl.

CASINO ROYALE WAS a revelation to Teel, even though Chazz assured her that casinos throughout the world were pretty much the same.

"There are probably three hundred Casino Royales in the world, differing only in the degree of opulence," he explained. "Many are frequented only by the jet set. Others are notorious tourist traps, but by and large they are much the same." The gold lighter in his hand flared under his cheroot, making Teel think at once of Rudolph Valentino. Her involuntary laugh brought his eyes to her.

"Tell me the joke."

"I don't think you'd like it."

"Try me."

"I was just thinking that if you were less tall and less muscular and your hair were slicked down, you would look just like Rudolph Valentino." She couldn't stop chuckling as she said it and was unprepared for Chazz's answering laugh. She was flabbergasted by his dimples. They just didn't fit the man—but oh, how endearing they were! She felt a blush creep up her neck at the thought.

"So I'm the Great Lover, am I?" His voice was like velvet. "Perhaps I should act the part."

Teel looked abruptly away from him, feeling as though her heart had just stopped beating. She gazed around the room in desperation. "I guess this must be a jet setters' hangout," she commented tartly. She felt his golden eyes sweep over her.

"What makes you say that?" he asked, amused.

"You're here. After what I've read of your international escapades, I can't see you frequenting a second- rate casino."

Chazz shrugged and took her arm, nodding once to the maitre d' as they approached the game room. "One of the perks of having money. I like first class. Does that annoy you?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact it does. Why not try second class and give some of your money away?" She studied the huge room with its silk moirre walls and ceiling, and sparkling chandelier. She was astonished by the way the people's clothes seemed to match the room's gold and glitter.

"Don't be pompous, *Sister*." The icy voice at her ear seemed to carry a double meaning. "Perhaps we all hide... certain aspects of our life from other people." Teel's head whipped around to face him, but his eyes swept the room as he continued to speak. "Don't assume that because I live first class I have never cared for those less fortunate than myself."

She put her hand on his arm, making him face her. "I was out of line, but I still don't see you as the philanthropic type." She could have bitten her tongue at her choice of words. Everything she said came out sounding self-righteous. She was attacking him and enjoying it, she mused to herself, bewildered by her reactions to him. Why didn't she stop?

"I don't see you as a nun, *Sister Terese Ellen*," he said, ignoring her startled gasp.

He took her arm without another word and led her to one of the gambling tables where he stopped and looked down at her, a muscle tensing in his jaw. "This is a baccarat table, *Sister*. I'm going to play. You may watch or wander—or play." He dropped a roll of bills in her hand, then sat down in one of the chairs.

A dozen questions crowded Teel's tongue, but there were too many people looking at her already. She didn't relish a verbal confrontation with Chazz in this posh public place.

She wandered away, the money clutched in her fist. Nothing interested her until she came to the black-jack table. She remembered playing twenty-one with her father when she was a child, but they had played for matches. She sat down at an empty place and plunked down a bill that the croupier

changed immediately into chips. When he looked at her, his head inclined, she nodded. The fast deal mystified her. She was glad when she lost and could rise from the chair, shaking her head when the croupier gave her a questioning look.

She sighed and wandered aimlessly, startled when a glass of white wine was pushed under her nose. She looked up at a medium-tall man with thinning hair and shook her head.

"Are you sure?" he asked. "Well then, would you like to play roulette with me? You might bring me luck."

Teel shook her head, her smile cold. "No thank you. I'm with someone."

The balding man took her arm, his thin hands surprisingly strong. "Oh, come along and play," he insisted.

Suddenly Chazz loomed large at Teel's side.

"Walk while you still have two unbroken legs," he bit out, his smile grim. The balding man melted away.

Teel faced Chazz, the silver cast to his skin and the light in his amber eyes clues to his fury. Her own anger rose hot in her throat. "You didn't have to come on like the mob's leading hit man," she accused him.

"Should I have let that cheap shill strong-arm you to the roulette table?" He bit through the words as though he were chewing steel.

"I thought you only went to places that wouldn't have cheap shills," she pointed out, her chin thrust forward.

"*You* said that, I didn't." He took her arm, swallowed the contents of his glass and led her toward what seemed to be a night club with music for dancing and a small floor show. "I need a drink," he said.

"You just had one." Teel tried to pry his fingers from her arm as they followed a maitre d' to a table.

"With you I seem to drink more." His mouth was close to her ear as he transferred his grip to her waist.

"Is that possible?" she countered. "When Elise and Clare and the others were aboard you were always blitzed," she said baldly.

"*Sister*, how you talk!" Chazz seated her and ordered a double Irish whiskey, raising his black brows when Teel insisted on Perrier and lime. The waiter informed her they were out of Perrier. Teel frowned as Chazz shot her a mocking grin.

"Then I'll have Gerolsteiner Sprudel please—with lime." She explained that it was a German charge water.

"Oh Lord." Chazz regarded her in exasperated amusement. "It wouldn't hurt you to have a drink, you know." He lit one of his ever-present cheroots.

"And it wouldn't hurt you *not* to have one." Teel looked away toward the comedy act that was just beginning on the stage. She had thought she had seen and heard bawdy material, but this show brought home to her with terrific force that she was just a babe in arms. In minutes her face was flushed with embarrassment.

She had no idea that Chazz had hitched his chair closer to hers until he spoke directly in her ear. "Forgive me. I was stupid to bring you here. Shall we leave? I forgot how bad these sometimes are."

The thought of walking through all those laughing people, perhaps drawing attention to herself, perhaps having one of the comedians spotlight her with a lewd remark, sapped her strength. She shook her head, but when Chazz's arm went round her shoulder, she was glad to sink back against him. Somehow the show didn't seem so bad that way. It surprised her to realize she was sorry when the act ended and the lights came up. She hadn't wanted to move away from Chazz. As it was, even when she straightened, they weren't far apart. Chazz kept his chair close to hers.

When the band began to play dancing music, Chazz lifted Teel from her chair and led her onto the floor. "Now don't tell me nuns don't dance," he

said. "This is a unique situation and one dance won't hurt." A devilish light glimmered in his golden eyes, but Teel attributed it to the Irish whiskey he continued to tip down his throat.

Teel had always loved to dance and had taken ballet lessons when she was a child. It didn't surprise her that Chazz was a very good dancer. A man who moved as well as he did, not only walking but also swimming, had to be good on the dance floor.

"Well, well, Sister Terese Ellen has another talent," he commented wryly. "You continue to surprise me, or do you?" He swung her away from his body and Teel laughed out loud. She felt his intent gaze on her, but she was having too much fun to pay attention.

They danced slow, fast, and even waltzed. When the band played a polka, Teel moved to sit down but Chazz wouldn't let her. He whirled her expertly around the room, seeming to know all the nuances of the dance.

"Where did you learn that?" Teel gasped.

"You forget I was raised on the sidewalks of New York. We danced all the time. My father and mother and later my aunt had friends of all ethnic persuasions who encouraged me to take part." Chazz didn't seem as winded as Teel and had no trouble talking with her. That alone made her itch to get back at him somehow.

When they returned to the table, Teel reached for her seltzer water and drained the glass. Chazz had already finished his Irish whiskey, but he ordered another.

They danced again and then rested while the band took a short break. Teel was having fun, and if she had a niggling suspicion that Chazz was drinking more than even his hard head could handle, she pushed the thought aside. She was enjoying herself more than she had in years. She needed it.

Near the end of the evening the band played more slow tunes, and though they often returned to the table to quench their endless thirst, Chazz and Teel still managed to dance most of the time. When Chazz first put both arms

around her, Teel stiffened, but when she pushed at his arms, he pulled her closer. She shrugged and relaxed. Everyone else in the room was embracing the same way.

They danced and danced. Other couples left and still they danced. Finally they were the last ones on the dance floor. The music was mellow and smooth and Teel became even more comfortable with her arms looped up around Chazz's neck. Their bodies seemed fused, as though the two worked as one Teel had never felt so relaxed yet so tense with excitement. She could feel every sinew in his thighs. His arms seemed to cocoon her. His fingers seemed to touch every pore. When his mouth moved over her cheek, she began to draw back, but he wouldn't let her. "Beautiful, beautiful," Chazz murmured, his lips teasing her ear. "You're not what you seem, lady mine." His voice was thick.

"We'd better go now," Teel whispered. "You're being foolish."

"Yes."

Chazz kept her close to him as they returned to the table to retrieve Teel's wrap and clutch purse. He gulped down the last of his drink, then signed the bill without looking at it, his eyes never leaving Teel's face. She said good night to the maitre d' while Chazz still looked at her, his fingers kneading the flesh at her waist.

The balmy night sky was filled with stars. When Teel looked up, Chazz turned to face her. "I have to," he murmured, "even if you hate me for it." And in the warm darkness he pulled her into a tight embrace. His mouth was open on hers, hers open as well—in surprise. Her heart hammered in fear and excitement. She had known Chazz was as aware of her as she was of him, but she had felt safe in her guise as a nun. Now the barriers between them had been broken and she was no longer safe at all.

She struggled at first, her hands pulling at the fingers that cupped her face, but Chazz took no notice. His fingers tightened. His tongue soothed her lips, then invaded her mouth, searching, savoring.

A hot sword seemed to pierce Teel. No, it couldn't be happening to her again. No man could scale her defenses. No man could touch her!

One warm hand left her face to trail down her neck and over her shoulder, then lower to softly cover her breast. "Darling," Chazz groaned.

"No... not like this... no..."

"You're right," Chazz whispered into her neck before he swept her up into his arms. "You're so beautiful. Do you know that?"

Teel stared at him, clutching his neck, a niggling snake of panic uncoiling in her stomach. "Where are you taking me?"

"To the Deirdre."

Teel let out a sigh of relief. "Good. I'm tired."

"Are you, darling?" Chazz's voice was slurred as she'd heard it once before. The whiskey was having its effect.

Teel was determined to head for her stateroom the moment she boarded the yacht. She watched intently as Chazz fired the dinghy, his movements less precise than usual. He really had drunk a great deal this evening. Thank God she was sober, Teel thought. How horrible it would be if she had drunk something. How vulnerable she'd be if he ever made any moves toward her. As it was, her senses seemed heightened by the evening she'd spent with Chazz. Even now as they sped across the water toward the *Deirdre*, she could almost feel the warm touch of his hands on her waist and back when they'd danced.

As Chazz tied the dinghy to the landing grid, Teel hurried up the ladder. She was halfway down the wide set of stairs leading to her cabin when a hand closed over her arm. She shivered as she turned. "I'm tired, Chazz. I'm going right to bed."

"Good, so am I. But I brought you something to help you sleep." He raised the bottle in his hand. "I told Darby to leave this in the lounge for us. Just one."

Teel shook her head. "I'm too tired to go back to the lounge. I'll just say good night here." She entered her cabin and turned to see that Chazz had followed her. She opened her mouth to argue, but the glitter in his eyes stopped her. "All right," she conceded. "Just a small one. Shall we go back to the lounge?"

"Nope." Chazz grinned, then brought his other hand from behind him. He held no glasses. He sat down on the bed and poured the cognac.

Teel sat on the edge of a bench, thinking that Chazz didn't need any more to drink and certainly not the generous portion of brandy he had poured into his glass. She looked at her own glass and knew that she wouldn't be able to finish it.

Chazz raised his snifter toward hers. "To us."

"Good luck," Teel said, and she sipped the aromatic liqueur, welcoming its hot bite as a sudden chill made her shiver. She had a sense of waiting, of not being able to move because a large invisible hand held her in place. She didn't believe in destiny or Kismet, she told herself. She should just get up and leave. But her body refused to do what her mind urged.

Chazz finished his cognac, came over to her, and lifted her from the bench. "Let me help you drink that," he said, taking the snifter from her hands and tipping the contents into his mouth.

"You've had enough," Teel said through dry lips.

"Have I, darling? Then you have some." He fitted the snifter gently to her lips and let some of the liquid trickle into her mouth, then turned the glass and let his own lips drink from the same spot, his eyes never leaving her face.

Teel felt as if she were falling backward through space. Chazz was standing so close that the hairs on their bodies might have been touching. A personal electricity generated between them seemed to have fused them together. Mesmerized, Teel felt Chazz outline her lips with one finger, delineate her jaw, smooth the line of her brow, and snake toward her ear. She cleared her throat and opened her mouth to speak, but suddenly his tongue was there, moistening her dry lips and entering her mouth like a brand. Against her will, her eyes fluttered shut. She felt hot, stinging bites on her neck that came lower and lower. Her skin caught fire, and her flesh seemed to curl in the heat. She tried to protest, tried to fight the heat, but all that came out was a groan. Instead of pushing Chazz away, her hands clasped his waist as his hands and mouth made sensual forays over her body.

A sudden feeling of being swung into space made sense when she opened her eyes to find Chazz lifting her in his arms and carrying her to the bed. She met his liquid gold gaze and tried to struggle away from him. "No."

"Yes." She felt rather than heard the throbbing answer as he lowered his body to hers. "Drop the disguise and admit you're mine," he mouthed almost inaudibly against her skin.

She felt the rasp of his beard and realized that her dress was down around her hips and that Chazz was nuzzling her breasts. A hazy memory of the pain that Ben Windom had inflicted on her, both mental and physical, flashed before her, and she began to squirm in panic.

Chazz lifted his head. "Let me, darling. Let me love you." His eyes were glazed, hot and wanting. He seemed to sense her panic. "I won't hurt you, love, I promise."

Teel wanted to shout at him, to yell the question at him. How did he know she wasn't a virgin? For she was now certain of what she had suspected several times—Chazz knew she wasn't a nun. *How?* she shouted at him, but only a moan came from her mouth. She was both repelled and attracted by him. It was as though her body wanted Chazz but her mind remembered Ben.

Instead of pummeling him with her fists, as one part of her screamed to do, her hands twined into his crisp black hair. His muffled groan of satisfaction sent a thrill through her as he began to caress her breasts again, his tongue making her nipples harden. His mouth stroked over her body as though to imprint himself on her flesh.

Then he raised himself slowly over her, his mouth coming back to hers, one leg separating her thighs. "Darling. I'll always be gentle with you," he murmured.

When she would have spoken, his mouth fastened to hers once again, wet tongue meeting wet tongue. Teel's body arched as his manhood pressed against her. She felt suffused in new blood, burning with a vibrant, driving need. There was no turning back. She surrendered to him, her mouth sighing into his, their bodies melting together as if in a dream. She felt him moving over her in restless readiness, as though he could wait no longer. But he *would* wait.

"My God I've never wanted anyone like this," Chazz breathed, as if surprised. His hands skimmed over Teel again, heating and reheating her body wherever he touched. "It will be good for you, love. You'll see." His words slurred over her as his mouth moved down her body once again.

"It's good now," Teel moaned urging him closer.

"Love, oh love." His passion built and vibrated between them, yet still he controlled it. He seemed to sense she was ready for him, but he continued to minister to her, building the yearning in her to an intolerable level.

"Chazz," Teel groaned.

"Yes, darling."

She felt his penetration and welcomed it. And then the electricity between them burst into flames, and Chazz began a mounting rhythm that was like nothing Teel had ever imagined. They crested again and again, then spun away into a warm, dark well...

Teel felt as light as air. When she saw the confused look on Chazz's face as he leaned over her, she pulled his head to her again and began a velvet assault of her own. The tiny kisses over the stubble on his face stimulated her already overheated senses. She shocked herself by becoming the aggressor, her hand caressing him in excited possession.

Chazz seemed delighted to relinquish control, and his lazy grin was soon replaced with a deep groan as Teel found her way through the labyrinth of his feelings, exposing the core of the man and joining her inmost self with him.

Ecstasy took them both, and then they sank together, Chazz folding her close.

"You took me apart, beautiful lady, you took me apart." The words were barely out of his mouth when he was asleep, his hold binding her to him throughout the night.

Teel slept. When she awoke, it was still outside. Chazz's iron hands had loosened somewhat around her, but she was still within the protective circle of his arms. She turned her head on the pillow and looked at him long and hard. It brought a raw, sweet pang to realize that she loved him. God, what a mess! In love with a lecher who cruised the ports of the jet set seeking his prey. She sighed deeply, momentarily overcome by the hopelessness of her predicament. Still, without Chazz, Teel mused to herself, lifting one finger to gently trace his features, she would never have known what it meant to love. Her mouth lifted in a wry smile. Sweet irony.

As she lay there she had no sense of time passing. She knew only one thing. She was leaving the *Deirdre*, Chazz, and everything connected with his life on the next available flight back to New York—and reality. Running away wasn't usually her solution to difficult situations, but Ab line she was going to gallop. The idea of Chazz ever Saline out what he meant to her threatened to tear her apart in two.

What a paradox! She had run to the *Deirdre* for succor, for surcease from fear, for rescue from her ordeal in the jungle. Now she was enmeshed in as frightening an ordeal as before. Oh, she was no longer in danger of dying of exposure or starvation, but her spirit was in danger of being destroyed by Chazz Herman. If she stayed here any longer, she wouldn't be able to leave. She would end up being his concubine. She swallowed a bitter chuckle in the darkness. *You're a fool, Teel Barrett. Where in all of blue Hades did you find that word?* She chided herself, needing to punish herself for the weakness that kept her in bed with Chazz Herman, as if chained by love for him. How long did she think he would keep her? she scolded herself as she cuddled against the warm, hard form curved around her. He would sicken of her just as he had the rest, an inner voice promised her, the harsh thoughts freezing the blood in her veins. *Go back to your work*, she told herself. Maybe after a few years she'd forget him. Ha! She would never forget him. Maybe that was true, she argued with the voice, but her work was important and fulfilling. She would make it be enough for her.

In the dawn silence she heard the ship come awake. She knew Rowan would be in the galley, preparing breakfast, serving the crew. Teel edged out of bed, grateful for Chazz's heavy breathing, aware by the sound that he was in deep sleep. He would probably wake up with a hangover. If she hurried and was lucky, she could be well away before he even thought to ask for her.

She took a short, freezing-cold shower in an effort to remind herself of hard reality, of unrelenting necessity, while she ached for Chazz's touch.

Darby raised his eyebrows at her appearance on deck and would have hurried off to get her breakfast, but Teel forestalled him. "Didn't you tell me that Chazz had informed the State Department of my plight and that a new passport had been issued to me?"

Darby nodded and explained that the new passport was in Chazz's rolltop desk. He nodded slowly when she asked him if he could get it for her. But when she asked for transportation to the nearest port with an airport, Darby frowned.

"Please." Teel placed an entreating hand on his sleeve as he regarded her, open-mouthed. "I must return to my school. I'm way overdue. I must go

today." She tried to keep her voice from rising. "And I want to see my aunt. She must be so worried."

Darby stared at her for long moments, then nodded once. "I'll pack clothes for ya to take," he told her, "and don't waste your breath arguing 'cause you won't change my mind."

Just before noon Teel boarded the dinghy, which was manned by one of the crew. Tears filled her eyes as she waved good-bye to Darby, the captain, and Rowan, all of whom stood at the rail waving back at her.

The inhabitants of the bustling tourist town where she was let off paid scant attention to Teel. She went to the cable office and wired her aunt for money, then after picking it up at the local bank, she arranged to fly to Acapulco Airport. There she made connections to Mexico City and on to JFK Airport. In New York, tired and miserable, she booked a room at the Algonquin Hotel for one night. She knew she couldn't face even the short trip to Selby. She was exhausted.

Once in her hotel room, she dialed her friend and assistant, Nancy Weil. "Yes, Nancy, it's really me. Yes, I'm fine. Yes, of course I'll tell you all about it when I reach home." She tried not to cry when she thought of all the memories she wouldn't be able to share with Nancy. "What? No, of course I haven't forgotten the Special Olympics tryouts here in New York next month. Are the children excited?"

"Excited isn't the word I'd use." Nancy's laugh came over the phone. "Hysterical is closer. I'd say we're in for a wild but wonderful time."

"I can't wait." Teel smiled as she thought of her children at the Mary Dempsey School and some of the desperate tiredness left her. "I'll be home tomorrow," she promised.

"Good," Nancy replied. "There is some bad news."

The sweats that came for the kids aren't the ones we picked out. How would you like to make a fuss while you're in New York? Would it be too much trouble to go to the Complaint Department of Acme Sporting Goods?"

Teel assured Nancy that she'd be happy to "make a fuss at Acme," but her nerves screamed that she wanted ' to jump down a manhole and pull the top over her.

The next day, feeling physically rested if not emotionally revived, Teel stood before the glass and chrome doors of Acme Sporting Goods and stared at the modern skyscraper. Who would listen to one school director at this cool, sophisticated establishment? As Teel entered the posh but sterile main lobby, she felt as if she just walked into a chrome museum. She stared at the long index of office names and suddenly the words ran together in a dizzy blur because the chrome scroll informed her that Acme Sporting Goods was a subsidiary of C. Herman Associates, Inc. She would have run away then and there if her trembling legs had obeyed the fuzzy command from her brain.

"May I help you, miss?" a uniformed attendant asked at her side.

Teel had to swallow twice before the words came out. "I would like to speak to someone at Acme Sporting Goods about an incorrect order."

Teel hardly heard the man, but she followed his pointing finger toward the third bank of elevators where she repeated her request. She knew the man was looking at her closely, but she couldn't help moving like an automaton. She was sure there was little chance that Chazz could be in the city, let alone in this building, still she was torn inside from wanting and loving him. She felt out of breath, as though her lungs and heart weren't functioning properly. Her legs and arms ached. Her head began to throb. She had to get over Chazz Herman. She couldn't stand the agony just seeing his name provoked. What would happen if she saw a picture of him with— with one of his women?

She punched the elevator button with unnecessary force and glared at the light that moved from floor to floor, stopping at four.

The receptionist at Acme Sporting Goods was very efficient and spoke to Teel as though she were a mental incompetent. If Teel hadn't been so busy looking over her shoulder in morbid expectation of seeing Chazz, she would have straightened the woman out in a hurry.

"Now, I think we're all set, are we not, Mrs. Barrett?" the receptionist, who had introduced herself as Mrs. Eldred, asked her smoothly, handing her the amended invoice that Teel was to include with the return order of sweats.

"Ah, yes...I guess so..." Teel looked blankly at the folded paper in her hand, then stuffed it into her purse. "Ah... good-bye Mrs. Elfred." She peered through the crack in the door out into the hallway. All clear.

"It's *Eldred*," the woman called after her.

"What? Oh... whatever." Teel jerked her head toward the woman, then scurried out into the hall to the elevator. She held her breath until the doors opened on the next floor.

Two men entered, hardly pausing in their conversation. "I tell you, Bert, the Old Man has gone crazy. Max was downtown this morning and overheard the brass talking to him on a ship-to-shore. Max said he was raging mad, that he chewed everybody's..." The man glanced at Teel, who sensed his gaze though she kept her face averted. "... tail about anything at all. Max heard Teller say he'd never known the Old Man to have a *tantrum*... That's what he said—tantrum."

"What happened on that damn cruise anyway?" the other man replied. He should have come back a happy man. He took those two high-flying models with him, Clare Henry and Elise Burrell. He shouldn't be able to keep a smile off his face."

The first man laughed, throwing another quick glance at Teel. "How the hell do you know who was with him?"

"Hey, when Chazz Herman vacations on his yacht, the whole world knows who goes with him." The two men chortled.

Teel didn't hear the rest of the conversation for the roaring in her ears. She surged into the lobby when the elevator doors opened and practically ran into the street.

Teel was so confused that she plunged pell-mell through the door of a cab that had just disgorged its passengers in front of the building. She gave the driver the address of her hotel. It was just three blocks away.

THE MARY DEMPSEY School for Exceptional Children was a beehive of activity. Teel found few calm moments in her day as the time approached for the children to leave for the finals preceding the Special Olympics. Nevertheless, she welcomed the constant preoccupation with work. She was only happy when she went home reeling from fatigue and fell immediately into bed. Only then could she avoid dreaming of Chazz. Only then could she awaken without tears on her cheeks.

Her house had always given her a quiet joy and a sense of peace. She'd decorated it with potted plants against cream-colored walls and trim and cheerful blue, red and cream braided rugs to compliment the stone fireplace. Now the place seemed a veritable torture chamber. When she beat eggs to make an omelet for supper, she saw Chazz's face in the swirling mixture. When she watched dramas on TV, she saw him dashing through the air with athletic ease to rescue the damsel in distress. It did no good to tell herself that the actor wasn't Chazz, that he wasn't kissing the full-breasted blonde. She still writhed with jealous anger. She considered talking to Alison James, the staff psychologist, but she couldn't face discussing Chazz with anyone. So she buried herself in work. It didn't solve the problem, but it helped.

Teel hadn't planned to accompany the children to New York, but two days before departure one of the coaches came down with the flu. Teel crossed her fingers that it wouldn't spread to other teachers or the children and said she'd help chaperon.

"I'm so glad you're going, Teel," Nancy Weil shouted over the heads of the noisy children she and Teel were shepherding onto the bus. "I couldn't believe how much you had gone through until that man from *Day* magazine came to interview you—Stop that, Timmy. No, get on the bus, the cat can't come—It must have been horrible for you."

"It was, but I hope you don't think you and I are going to rest in New York with this crew." Teel laughed.

Nancy screwed up her face. "I don't mind the kids at all, but sometimes the parents are tough going." She shrugged as she and Teel took their seats with the other moderators.

"When the children have reached this level in sports, we don't usually have much trouble," Teel soothed. "It's the parents whose children have never done much athletically who are the most fearful."

"Well. I'm not going to worry," Nancy said firmly. "I'll just watch you and do the same."

As Nancy took a cat nap, Teel watched the rolling hills of New York state, but she was barely conscious of the pine woods, the granite cliffs, or the mountains marked with ski runs. She hardly noticed the last-ditch skiers who were taking advantage of the late spring snows.

All Teel could see was Chazz's face. It was like having a constant toothache, she thought. It was like being caught in a trap. She shook her head, trying to force his image from her mind.

They arrived in New York with few mishaps. Their hotel, the Saratoga, was past its prime but had the advantages of being able to accommodate all the children competing and being located fairly close to Madison Square Garden. Even so, they would let none of the children walk there. Teel was adamant on that point. The bus would take them back and forth, not only for practice sessions that afternoon but also to the finals at the Garden the next day.

Nancy came puffing up to Teel as she got the children ready for the trip to the practice session. "I need two huggers," she explained. "Somehow they missed the bus. Where am I going to find two people to greet each child at the end of each event with a hug and tell them well done? It's so important that they all feel like winners."

"You and I will be huggers," Teel decided. "There are already enough coaches." She slapped the door of the bus and nodded to the driver, who pulled away from the curb.

"I have to change into sweats, then we can run over to the Garden." Teel smiled at Nancy as they strode across the lobby to the elevators.

"I hope you don't mean that literally." Nancy sagged against the wall of the elevator.

Teel laughed and headed for her small single room on the eighth floor. She had no desire to share a room with someone. Since her return from the *Deirdre* she had suffered chronic insomnia. There were many nights when she tossed and turned until dawn.

In minutes she had taken a quick shower and donned the emerald green sweats with the white stripe down the sides. She could almost hear Aunt Tessa's words of approval when she'd first seen them. "Teel, my dear, the color is perfect for.. everyone." Tessa had given her niece an impish smile when Teel had laughed and called her Irish.

Teel's aunt had spent three days with her after her return from the *Deirdre*. Tessa had always been able to smooth Teel's rough edges, but this time the job had been too tough. Nothing seemed to take Teel's mind from Chazz Herman for long.

She sighed and tightened the laces on her pale green running shoes. They were as comfortable as slippers. She zipped her money and identification card into an inner pocket and took the elevator to the lobby.

As soon as Nancy joined her, they left the hotel. Despite Nancy's complaint about running to the Garden, she was an inveterate jogger, and the two women found a mutual rhythm to their running almost at once.

"I didn't believe all those stories about New York until now," Nancy huffed into Teel's ear as they jogged in place at a side street, pausing to let traffic pass.

"What do you mean?" Teel puffed back as they crossed with the light.

"A really gorgeous car has been following us for the last half block. Wouldn't it be wonderful to be accosted in a Ferrari?" Nancy quipped sarcastically.

Teel gave a breathless laugh but refrained from looking at the well-heeled stalker. "Don't pay any attention. Whoever it is probably gets his kicks from intimidating joggers. Just ignore him."

Madison Square Garden came into view. At the door the two women paused to identify themselves and were shown the door for the athletes and workers.

The next hours passed in a whirl. Both Nancy and Teel acted as huggers as well as gofers for misplaced items. When a co-worker tapped Teel on the shoulder and told her he would spell her awhile, she sagged and gave him a relieved smile. She was starving. She hadn't been hungry for breakfast, and lunchtime had slipped away, but now she realized that the day's physical activity had made her hungrier than she had been since her return from the *Deirdre*.

She grimaced at the long line in front of the refreshment stand as she passed there on her way to the ladies' room. On her return the lines were no shorter. Resigning herself to a long wait, Teel took her place. When she felt the nudge at her back, she assumed it was someone behind her getting into line and didn't turn around.

"Damn you. Trying to convince me you were a nun, then running out on me. You must have taken me for thirty kinds of a fool, lady." The silky growl in Teel's ear made the hair on her arms and neck stand straight up and sent the blood draining from her limbs. A wave of dizziness swept over her.

She reeled in shock, and her legs wouldn't accept the command from her brain to run. Her shoes felt cemented to the floor.

"Turn around and face me, *Sister Terese Ellen*." The voice had the jarring effect of a jackhammer breaking through concrete. Chazz lifted her out of line with an ease that panicked her. "So what do I call you now?" he asked in a menacing tone. "Terese Ellen? Or Teel, as your aunt and the authorities at your school call you?"

Teel licked dry lips, noting that his eyes followed the movement. "You've known since the beginning, haven't you?" she said.

"Almost. Yes. Why the hell didn't you tell me yourself? I gave you enough opportunity," Chazz exclaimed, apparently oblivious of the people thronging around them,.

"Protection." Teel felt the curious stares of onlookers free herself but to no avail. "Will you let me go?" the words out of her mouth, feeling shockwaves through her at his touch. "Many of the people here are parents of my students. I do not enjoy making a spectacle of myself in front of them."

"Damn you, you lied to me! By not telling me who you were." His teeth snapped shut like fangs.

"I told you all you needed to know about me," she retorted. "My name is Terese Ellen Barrett, and that's what I told Darby. He assumed I was a nun." She glared up at Chazz. "Why are you complaining? Why didn't you just come out and tell me that you knew who I was? You're just as guilty of subterfuge as I am. Why weren't you honest with me?"

"You began the charade. I just continued it."

"On board your yacht I thought it better to pretend to be a nun," Teel blurted out, trying not to shout yet struggling to free herself at the same time.

"As I recall, darling, your masquerade didn't work," Chazz drawled. Teel's neck and cheeks grew hot with embarrassment. "Shy, darling? It's a little late for that, isn't it?"

"You knew I wasn't a nun," Teel hissed. "You should have said something. Stop grinning, you...you bastard." She tried to kick him in the shin. She wanted to bury him up to his eyebrows in sand.

"Bastard, am I? After what you put me through in the last month, I ought to drag you out of here by your hair," Chazz snapped.

"Tough!" she threw back at him, fury overriding prudence.

He hauled her hard against his chest, knocking the breath from her body. She could only stare up at him, her eyes wide, mouth agape. His own mouth fastened on hers in a moving, searching caress that horrified her. Then his kiss blotted out all of her senses, blinding her, deafening her, drowning her in Chazz. There was no world but him. Her body betrayed her, and she moved closer to him just before he released her.

"You're mine," he gasped, his amber eyes leaping with liquid fire. "And I'm taking what is mine. You're coming with me to get something to eat now. You've been working too hard."

"I can't leave." Teel swayed, her voice unsteady.

"I'll have you back in a little while. I'll just make a call, then we'll go." He pulled her behind him, not looking left or right.

Teel was faintly aware of Nancy calling to her, but Chazz's rapid strides made it impossible for her to turn around. "Where are we going? I won't go." She struggled against his grip on her arm, but her efforts were useless. She sailed along behind him like the dinghy following the *Deirdre*.

Chazz kept Teel clamped to his side even as he dialed and spoke into the phone in terse sentences. She glanced over her shoulder and saw Nancy behind her, hands clasped anxiously.

"Should I get security?" Nancy mouthed, her throat working with concern as her eyes darted from Teel's face to Chazz's hand manacled to her wrist.

Teel had opened her mouth to say yes when she was suddenly whirled around, her back to the phone booth, Chazz at her side. "Who's this?" he growled, nodding toward Nancy.

Teel glowered up at him. "Don't you dare pull that Hitler act on Nancy," she panted, anger making her out of breath. "This isn't the deck of the *Deirdre*. You have no authority here."

"No?" he cooed, making Nancy jump.

"No!" Teel flung the words at him, using her free hand to try to pry the other from his grip. "You try your strong arm tactics here and I'll have you thrown into the slammer." She thrust out her jaw, itching to place a well- aimed running shoe into his midsection.

"Introduce your friend. Then we'll leave." Chazz transferred his grip to the left hand and held out his right to Nancy, who leaped backward in alarm. "I'm Chazz Herman and I'm taking Miss Barrett to lunch. Any objections?" he snapped.

"From me?" Nancy replied. "Hell, no."

"Nancy!" Teel cried, grimacing at her friend and jerking her head toward the uniformed security guard who was passing fifty yards away through the press of people.

"Survival. That's the key word," Nancy muttered, giving Teel a weak smile, then beginning to edge away.

"Bright girl," Chazz pronounced, giving Teel a gentle smile that had all the sweetness of a barracuda on the prowl.

Teel sagged in defeat as Nancy disappeared into the crowd. She looked back at Chazz, whose expression was serene, and hauled in a deep breath. "Mussolini," she hissed.

Once again Chazz began pulling her after him, down a long tunnel and through double steel doors to the outside. He didn't stop until he reached a Ferrari parked in a loading zone.

Teel prayed he'd been ticketed and was incensed not to find a slip of paper under the windshield wiper. "Carpetbagger," she seethed as he pushed her into the passenger seat, then hopped around the car and under the wheel before she could figure out how to open the door.

"Don't bother, love. It's locked at the wheel." Chazz smiled wickedly at her and fired the engine.

"Bandit," she growled Then something clicked in her head, and she flung herself around to face him. "Were you in the car Nancy saw following us this morning?"

He nodded. "Fasten your seat belt."

"Monster." she said. "You should be arrested. How dare you harass innocent women . "

"I didn't harass you.. I had to make an emergency trip to Singapore the week after you left the Deirdre and I just got back last night. I realized that my best chance of seeing you now was to hang around the Special Olympics tryouts. When I saw you and your friend jogging toward the Garden, I couldn't believe my luck." He shot her a quick glance as the Ferrari peeled through traffic. "Don't you know how dangerous it is to jog alone in New York?"

"I realize now that I could meet someone like you," Teel replied. "From now on I'll take an attack dog with me."

"That's what I love about you, Teel. You're so affectionate." Chazz chortled, then gave her another quick look. "Teel. That's an unusual name."

"My father combined the first two letters of my name Terese Ellen. The name stuck. I've never been called anything but Teel," she answered in stilted tones, her chin in the air.

"I like it."

"It is immaterial to me whether you like it or not."

"Ouch. That tone of voice would fast freeze a herd of elephants."

She gave him a saccharine smile. "Suspicious confirmed. You have a thicker hide than an elephant: otherwise you would buzz off."

"Never, darling. I've decided you're not getting rid of me."

"I'm not going to be one of your prostitutes." Her voice echoed loudly in the car, the fear that he might find out she loved him trembling through it.

"Wait until you're asked, love."

Teel felt as though she had suddenly swelled to twice her size. She was about to explode in withering denunciation of all things that made up Chazz Herman when he made a sudden right turn, throwing her against her seat belt. She watched open-mouthed as the Ferrari dropped down into the darkness of an underground garage. They parked in a space marked Herman. Two other spaces were marked the same way. One held a Rolls-Royce. "Lousy capitalist," she hissed at him as he came around to open her door and released her from the seat belt that refused to separate under her own hands.

He followed her gaze toward the cocoa-brown Rolls. "Don't you like the Royce?" he asked blandly, helping her from the car, impervious to the hand that tried to pry his fingers from her arm.

"You're a selfish, egotistical, manic, pompous, less- than-human amoeba." Teel scraped her heels against the concrete as Chazz half-carried, half-dragged her to an elevator in the underground garage.

"Does that mean you don't like Rolls-Royces?" He gave her an interested glance.

"Don't patronize me!" Teel said, staring up at him ready to explode as his one arm clamped her to his side while the other hand punched the number board in the elevator.

"You mustn't get so excited. It will upset your lunch," he pointed out in soothing tones.

"Louse," Teel hissed as he pulled her out of the elevator into a foyer paneled in rich oak with a shiny oak floor. A round Kerman rug in cream, green, and pink formed the focal point of the circular room. Several doors led off from it and a stairway followed the curve of the room to an open balcony on the second floor.

Teel was staring at a cut-glass lamp suspended from the two-story ceiling when Chazz tugged on her arm, urging her toward one of the doors. "Where are we?" she demanded, digging in her heels and glowering up at him.

"Where do you think? My apartment. We're going to have lunch," he explained impatiently.

"I knew it," Teel cried. "You lured me here... you... lecher."

"Will you keep your voice down. My housekeeper will think you're crazy." He frowned at her, taking her arm again, then opening the door behind him and leading her into a beautiful room that appeared to be a lounge or library.

Teel glanced around her at the book-lined walls. "I'll bet you stole these books from the New York Public Library," she muttered, gazing at the large green Kerman rugs. The same green was repeated in silk-covered sofas that were placed at right angles to the Adam fireplace. A huge painting depicting the green sea and a storm-tossed whaling ship hung over the mantel. A ghostly white lighthouse seemed to waver in the background. "It's beautiful," Teel whispered, walking closer to check the name of the artist. "Tilda Charles," she read, turning to frown at Chazz. "Wouldn't you know you'd have an original Tilda Charles!" She sniffed. "Such ostentation. This is probably the largest canvas she has ever painted, and you have to have it over our mantel." Teel looked back at the painting, craning her neck to read the title— "'Saving the Whale Off Martha's Vineyard.' Wow. I wonder if she ever saw such a thing or if she just imagined it."

"Oh, she saw it." Chazz leaned down, grazing Teel's neck with his lips. "Don't you recognize the man standing in the bow with the hawser in his hands?" His breath sent tingles down her neck.

"I beg your pardon?" Teel struggled to keep her emotional and physical balance. It was an ordeal to be with Chazz. Her eyes didn't focus, her hearing faded, her muscles became limp, her backbone seemed to disappear. He gave her headaches and gas. God, Chazz Herman was a one-man torture chamber for Teel Barrett. She took deep breaths and kept her mind on the picture. She tilted her head as the high cheek bones, chiseled chin, hawklike nose, and dark hair of the young boy depicted in the

painting all seeped into her consciousness. "You! What are you doing in a Tilda Charles painting?" she accused him, as if he had bought his place in the painting.

"She's my aunt."

"Oh!" Teel closed her eyes, then looked blankly from him to the painting, and from the painting to him.

Chazz put his arm around her waist. "She and I were staying at my place on Martha's Vineyard when a sperm whale beached itself. Some of the locals and I struggled for hours to get the animal into deeper water. It returned twice. The third time out we circled it until it seemed to orient itself and swim away. Of course we have no way of knowing if it beached itself someplace else, but I can't describe to you the exhilaration we felt when that whale began to move smoothly on its own. We celebrated all night. It was wonderful. Aunt Tilda stayed on the beach the whole day watching, and I suppose sketching too. The first I knew that she had painted the scene was when this"—he pointed upward—"was delivered to my door." He sighed. "The sea was just that color." He smiled down at Teel. "You and I will go there soon." He leaned down and pressed a hard kiss on her open mouth. "But for now, it's time you had lunch. I have to get you back. I've already volunteered my services for the afternoon, so I'll be with you for the rest of the day. Tonight, I'll take you to dinner and a show."

As Chazz spoke, he led her through double doors into a very large dining room that could easily seat thirty people. Teel looked up at him questioningly. Chazz laughed. "No, we're not going to eat here. We'll eat in the morning room. It's smaller and cozier. I think you'll like it."

"Does it matter?" Teel asked, feeling as though she were walking on air as Chazz carried her along at his side.

"Don't be testy. It isn't good for your digestion," he soothed, leading her out into another hallway, then through more doors into a circular room with a glass wall that overlooked a large terrace with a swimming pool and garden. The view of New York City was breathtaking. Teel heaved a sigh of satisfaction. The round table in the middle of the room was set for two. The

table and chairs were of rich rosewood, as was the paneling on the walls. On the floor was a round Chinese rug in deep blue and cream. Teel studied the room carefully, turning slowly. "I wonder what a psychiatrist would say about your penchant for round rooms," she mused. "It's probably your emperor complex surfacing."

"No doubt," Chazz agreed smoothly. "Won't you be seated, Empress?" He smiled at her, then turned to greet a portly woman who entered through swinging doors from the kitchen. She had salt-and-pepper hair and wore an apron that belled out around her form like a small circus tent. She clasped her hands in front of her and looked at Chazz expectantly. "Ah, Mrs. Pritchett," he said. "This is Miss Barrett. She is the lady I told you I was bringing for lunch."

"How do you do, Miss Barrett."

"It's nice to meet you, Mrs. Pritchett." Teel felt a sudden discomfiture at the assessing look the housekeeper gave her.

"I'll bring lunch right along sir. I made it light, as you ordered."

Mrs. Pritchett disappeared, but before Teel could say anything to Chazz, she was back with a tureen of soup. As the fragrance of the home-made mushroom broth reached her nostrils, she realized that she was ravenous. When she sat back a few minutes later, after finishing her bowl, Mrs. Pritchett seemed to answer some unheard signal. This time she appeared with two large bowls of julienne salad, which she placed with care in front of Teel and Chazz.

"I've added cubed chicken breasts and tuna steak instead of ham, sir. I think it makes the salad more piquant," Mrs. Pritchett announced proudly. She pointed to a cut-glass cruet. "That's my own celery seed dressing," she told Teel. "But of course, if you prefer, I also have commercial dressings."

"I would much prefer the homemade, Mrs. Pritchett. Thank you." Teel smiled as the older woman nodded once and her cheeks flushed. She looked at her employer.

"It's high time you were bringing one home. Your taste is better than I thought it would be." Mrs. Pritchett turned and left the dining room.

Teel looked at Chazz, unable to stop the laugh that bubbled up. "She's certainly an original."

He shrugged. "She worked for Aunt Tilda for years, then decided she wanted to work for me." He grinned. "I assure you I had little say in the decision. She just turned up one day and stayed. She runs the house like clockwork and handles the few parties I have here with aplomb, but she's quick to point out my faults."

"The woman must have a computer mind if she can remember them all." Teel smiled and sipped from her glass of chilled Riesling.

"Don't be nasty, love." Chazz's menacing smile appeared. "I'll have to paddle your lovely derriere." He seemed not to hear her gasp of anger as he steepled his hands and gazed toward the ceiling. "Now, let's see, where was I? Ah, yes, I was saying that Pritch is quick to point out my flaws. Did I mention that she dotes on me? That she is looking forward to being nanny to my many offspring when I marry? Interested in the job?"

"I'm interested in tipping you off the George Washington Bridge with a cement block fixed to your neck," Teel snapped, hoping to keep her face expressionless. She couldn't keep the thought of a gurgling baby with black curly hair and golden eyes from invading her mind.

Who would bear that child? The question was like an electric prod to her insides.

"I take it that means you won't marry me?" Chazz inquired, leaning forward to pour her a cup of coffee from the silver pot.

"How like you to poke fun about something as beautiful as marriage!" Teel took a mouthful of scalding coffee and tried to cool her burning tongue with a quick swallow of ice water. She coughed when the water went down the wrong way. Chazz rose to stand next to her and proceeded to slap her back with all the gentleness of a sledge hammer.

"Better?" he asked.

"Better?" Teel cried, wiping tears from her eyes. "Were you trying to break my back, slapping at me like that?" She took a deep, ragged breath, and sent him a murderous look when he sauntered back to his seat, took his chair, and smiled at her benignly.

When Mrs. Pritchett walked into the room with a cheese board and more coffee, Teel was still so furious that she could only shake her head when the housekeeper offered an alternate dessert of cheesecake.

"That will be all, Mrs. Pritchett," Chazz told her. "We have to leave shortly. Miss Barrett has children entered in the Special Olympics tryouts."

Mrs. Pritchett's interest seemed genuine, and as she left the room she told Teel that she must come again soon.

"You've made a hit with her," Chazz commented as he came around the table and held her chair.

Teel felt his breath on her neck, "I must get back," she choked.

"We still have a few minutes. Let me show you the terrace."

"No need," Teel said. "I've seen terraces before."

Chazz chuckled and led her down the hall to the room with the beautiful seascape over the mantel. He motioned her through glass doors that opened outward onto the terrace.

"Nice," Teel managed. "Large."

"Nervous, darling?"

"No."

"Good." Chazz put his arm around her and led her around a corner toward the swimming pool. "Would you like to swim?" He pushed a tendril of hair

from her forehead, then leaned down and pressed a feather-light kiss on her cheek.

"No time," Teel gasped, feeling his mouth continue down her neck. Heat curled in her lower abdomen as his lips forayed across her shoulder. Somehow the zipper on her sweat jacket had come down, and Chazz had pushed the material away from her skin. "Too soon after eating," Teel protested through cardboard lips. "Getta cramp."

"I would save you, darling," Chazz crooned into her ear.

"Gotta go. Late," Teel gasped, trying to rally her defenses and free herself from the velvet heat of his hold.

"All right, love. We'll go this time. But you won't always get rid of me this easily." Chazz chuckled, letting his hand cruise down to the end of her spine, his palm making circles on her derriere, then patting it, not so gently. "This time you get away." His voice was like a liquid chain manacling her to him. "But not the next time."

Teel looked up at him, wanting to bite his nose off, wanting the words in her throat to scorch him. Instead a pain burned behind her eyes. Drat the man! He was giving her a headache. How would she ever survive the two days in New York if he was going to be everywhere. The man short-circuited her nervous system, interfered with her digestion and de-activated her antiperspirant. He affected her like poison ivy, like the bubonic plague.

"I can't go out with you tonight. We've all made plans to see a show. The tickets are already bought. Ten coaches and teachers will all be sitting together. No ticket for you," Teel finished woodenly, her eyes on his throat.

"What show are you seeing?" Chazz asked casually, steering her from the apartment into the elevator.

Since Teel's secretary had booked the show, paid for the tickets, and already given them to Teel, the answer should have been on the tip of her tongue. But her mind went blank. She struggled to remember. "Palace Theater," she managed.

"Very good show. You'll enjoy it." Chazz took her hand as they stepped from the bright elevator to the more dimly lit underground garage. When Teel turned left, he pulled her back. "No, this way, love. See, there's the car."

"Oh." Why wasn't he fighting her on going to the theater? On the circuitous trip back to the Garden, Teel agonized over what he was thinking.

Chazz parked the car, then led her into the chaotic din of screaming children, shouting coaches and applauding spectators. Cheers and general pandemonium surrounded them.

Teel didn't believe Chazz would want to help out until she saw him observe the activities for a few moments, then whisper to one of the moderators, and go over to where several youngsters were lined up for the fifty-yard dash. She watched in wonder as Chazz coached, instructed, hugged and encouraged the young people as they competed in this event.

Again he was defeating her on her own ground. Cold perspiration coursed down Teel's back as she tried to concentrate on the broad jump, the event she was moderating. Her forehead felt hot. Now he was making her feel as though she had the flu! What in heaven's name was she going to do about Chazz Herman?

THAT EVENING SHE and Nancy returned to the hotel hot, tired, and dirty. Instead of running, they were transported in the Ferrari.

Teel knew Nancy wanted to ask her about Chazz, but she forestalled her friend's questions by saying she needed a nap before they dressed for the theater.

What a relief to throw herself face down on the bed. She was asleep before the thought could surface that she wouldn't be able to sleep for thinking of Chazz.

She awoke to the ring of the telephone. "Lo," she mumbled into the receiver, trying to unstick her eyelids.

"Were you sleeping, love? Ummm, how nice. I'd love to join you." Chazz's voice set her on fire and made her leap up in dismay, sending the lamp on the table next to the bed tottering on its base.

Chazz chuckled. "Look outside your door before you shower."

Even after the phone clicked to indicate that the connection was broken, Teel stood there holding the phone to her ear. She took a deep breath, replaced the receiver, and tiptoed to the door, opening it just a crack. A spray of white roses in a tall crystal vase was accompanied by a smaller florist's box and an even smaller parcel. Looking up and down the corridor and not seeing anyone, she reached out and pulled the items into her room one by one. "Who the hell does he think he is? Rockefeller?" she muttered as she pulled the card from the rose spray and read "Love, Chazz." She held the card with the tips of her thumb and index finger as though it carried typhoid. "I'll bet there are two dozen roses in that arrangement," she murmured, counting to herself. There were three dozen. "Plutocrat."

She opened the smaller florist box and discovered a wrist corsage of baby orchids with a thin gold bracelet lying underneath. The card read, "Love, Chazz." She unwrapped the smaller parcel slowly. The jeweler's box was marked Cartier's. Inside were drop earrings in filigreed gold interspersed

with emeralds. A pendant in a similar design hung from a thin gold chain. Again the card said, "Love, Chazz." "Damned unoriginal," Teel moaned, backing away from the array of gifts. She felt as though she were in an arena with a wise and canny bull who was slowly backing her into a corner without her cape or sword.

She bolted for the bathroom and took a cold shower. After she had shampooed her head and finished with a hot shower, she felt better. She stepped back into the bedroom, feeling more confident. She would keep the vase of flowers. She loved flowers. But she wouldn't wear the corsage. Tomorrow she would arrange to return the jewelry by messenger.

After she had put on her silk slip, it suddenly struck her that she couldn't keep such valuable gems unprotected in a hotel room for the entire evening. When she called down to the desk, they assured her that, if she labeled the package, they would arrange to send it by messenger.

Relieved, Teel put on a hunter-green silk chiffon dress that was almost the same color as her eyes. It had tailored styling and looked much like a shirtwaist, but when she moved the inverted pleats belled full and drew attention to her long, well-shaped legs. The dress just touched her knees. With it she wore black *peau de soie* slings with a matching *peau de soie* clutch bag. Her only ornaments were a pair of jade earrings, the moon shape following the curve of her ear. Of course she wore her gold watch, which had been a college graduation gift from her parents. She shrugged at her image in the mirror and thought she didn't look half bad. Over her dress she wore her satiny raincoat in steely green that had a mandarin collar and was belted at the waist.

She almost forgot the jewelry Chazz had sent and went back to the room to retrieve it. She then counted it good luck that the elevator sped her right down to the lobby. She went directly to the desk and when she had attracted the clerk's attention, said, "I'm Miss Barrett. I called a short time—"

"Never mind, darling. Don't bother the man." Chazz took her arm, smiled at the clerk, and turned her toward one of the couches in the lobby. He was wearing an evening suit with a cream silk jacket that made his shoulders

look even more powerful. The black silk trousers fit so perfectly that he might have been sewn into them.

"Go away," Teel said, taking a deep breath to calm herself. "I'm not keeping this." She held the jeweler's box out in front of her.

Chazz smiled, his eyes glinting dangerously. "You'll keep them, or I will begin sending more jewelry every half hour until your room is filled." He pulled a cheroot from a gold case and flicked a lighter under it as he held it between his teeth. "I'm getting tired of indulging your foolish whims."

"Foolish whims! How dare you patronize me!" Teel sensed the interested gazes of several passersby and lowered her voice. "I'm not one of your kept women, and I am not going to keep these gems."

"Then throw them away!" Chazz snarled, tossing the partially smoked cheroot into a receptacle. "They belong to you. Either keep them or throw them away."

"Throw them away!" Teel was horrified. She looked down at the box in her hand. "I can't do that." Her voice sounded alien to her ears. She felt the web Chazz had cast about her on the *Deirdre* beginning to tighten once again. "You can't come with me tonight." She tried to struggle free of his invisible hold. "We're going to a show. You don't have a ticket."

"I called your friend Nancy and asked her for the numbers on the tickets," Chazz explained kindly. "I... ah... was able to procure one in the same row."

"I'll bet you bribed the mayor," Teel accused him, her voice throbbing.

"Don't be silly, darling." He looked past her shoulder. "Here come Nancy and some of the others." He took the jeweler's box from her hand and slipped it into the clutch bag he had taken from her limp fingers.

"They won't have evening clothes on," Teel muttered, not looking around at her approaching friends.

"Wrong again, my dove. The three men are wearing dark business suits. Perfectly acceptable for evening," he pronounced in sonorous tones, mocking her.

Without thinking, Teel lifted her foot and kicked him in the shin. It gave her great pleasure to see Chazz flinch.

He leaned down to graze her cheek with his mouth. "Another one I owe you, darling."

Teel whirled away from him and fixed a smile on her face, ignoring the questioning look Nancy gave her. Rena Listman, another of the teachers at Mary Dempsey School, was eyeing Chazz with speculative interest. Teel felt a sudden aversion for the buxom woman. She introduced Chazz to Buz Denton, the vice principal, Clint Wills, the athletic director, and Dave Chess, the vocational director.

In minutes Chazz had explained his presence and informed everyone that he had booked a table for supper after the show at a club where the music was good to dance to.

Teel wanted to smack Nancy when she "Oooohed" right along with Rena. "We'll be too tired for that," Teel struggled to say.

"Come on, old girl, we only get to New York once in a while," Clint said, smiling down at her. He took her arm and lead her out to the street. To Teel's jaundiced eye, his face had a Machiavellian cast.

When she saw the chauffeur behind the wheel of the Rolls-Royce, she gritted her teeth. "There won't be enough room for all of us," she pointed out hopefully.

Chazz proceeded to show her the jump seats in the back. Buz and Dave were only too glad to ride up front with the driver.

Teel gave Chazz a sweet smile and wished with all her might that a piano would fall out a window when he alighted from the limousine. The thought mollified her, making her smile widen.

Chazz's eyes narrowed on her as he helped the others into the back seat. "Plotting my murder, are you?" he muttered.

Teel sniffed and turned her back on him to engage Clint in conversation. It was a tight squeeze in the Rolls but not uncomfortable for the short ride. She was annoyed when Rena spoke to Chazz and he responded readily.

They alighted in front of the theater, and the car seemed to melt away into the traffic.

Teel was very conscious of the feminine glances aimed at Chazz. Several people spoke to him. When they walked through the lobby, a uniformed attendant said, "Good evening, Mr. Herman."

Teel felt frown lines form on her forehead. When the woman usher came forward to show them their seats, she would have followed, but a strong hand gripped her elbow. "Let me go", she hissed.

Chazz smiled down at her but didn't release her arm until they were standing in the aisle the usher had indicated. "Of course, darling. Here you are. Your seat is right next to mine. Nice, huh?" Chazz purred, helping to remove her raincoat and folding it with his over the seat in front of him.

"The person who has that seat won't appreciate that you've thrown coats over the back of it," Teel said, her lips stiff.

"Relax, love. I bought that seat for the evening too," Chazz soothed.

"What?" Teel cried out, making heads turn toward them. Both Rena and Nancy leaned forward in their seats to look at her quizzically. She smiled weakly back at them, then turned to Chazz, her jaw clenched. "You— you philistine, you," she sputtered.

"No—no, love, you must have misunderstood. I'm Jewish, not Philistine." He took her hand, lifted it to his mouth, and pressed his lips to the palm.

For long seconds Teel just stared at him, horrified, while her body betrayed her by responding eagerly to his touch. She fought against falling into his

arms. "Stop that. People can see," she hissed, trying to order the hand he held to free itself.

Chazz laughed, then pulled her arm through his just as the lights dimmed and the overture began.

The show was good. Teel knew by the laughter that penetrated the lavender fog enclosing her. When Nancy leaned forward and stage-whispered, "Isn't this great?" Teel whispered back, "Marvelous," but she really had no idea whether it was marvelous or not.

At the intermission they all headed up the aisle for a cool drink. Teel looked at the glass of white wine in her hand and wondered how it had gotten there. She glanced up to see Chazz watching her. He saluted her with his glass and flashed a devastating smile that turned her knees to jelly. She rubbed her hand along her cheek, which ached from keeping her jaw clenched. She moved away and glared from a distance at the cause of all her misery, a man who seemed to hold in her in thrall much like a fox with a rabbit.

"You're awfully quiet, Teel," Rena pointed out as Teel joined her, not taking her eyes from Chazz. "Chazz said you spent a great deal of time on his yacht—alone— with him."

"Hardly alone!" Teel returned. "There was a full crew with us as well as the captain and Darby, who took care of me most of the time"

"Oh?" Rena's tone indicated that she didn't believe Teel. "I'll tell you right now, I wouldn't care if the whole world knew that I'd slept with Chazz Herman," she murmured softly, as if to herself.

"Slept with him!" Teel's sharp tone turned a few heads in her direction, including Clint's and Buz's. Nancy was busy talking with Chazz.

"You never used to be so.. .so noisy, Teel." Rena glowered at her, coin-sized red spots appearing on each cheek. "It's embarrassing."

"Tough." Teel lifted her chin and looked away from the two puzzled men. She spent the rest of the short intermission pretending to be interested in the other theater-goers.

Sitting through the rest of the musical posed serious challenges for Teel as she tried to concentrate on the show, ignore Chazz, and keep her body from overheating at his nearness. She breathed a sigh of relief when the curtain fell and applause rose like a wave. She watched in sightless concentration as the actors came out for several curtain calls, then she stood like a robot so that Chazz could put on her coat before ushering her back up the aisle toward the exits.

It gave her a measure of satisfaction to see that the Rolls was not in front of the theater.

"I'd thought we would walk from here," Chazz explained. "The club isn't far." He smiled down into Teel's stiff face before taking her arm and adjusting his long strides to her shorter steps.

Despite her agitation, Teel began to feel better, able to push the lavender fog to one side. The animated crowds moving along the sidewalk lent it a festive air, as though the show had imbued them with new life. Teel became preoccupied with looking in the windows of shops that were shut tight with latticed steel gates.

When Chazz threaded his fingers through hers, she stiffened momentarily, then, seeing that he wasn't about to release her, she shrugged and relaxed.

The club was located down some steps from the sidewalk and, when the door opened, Teel heard muted laughter and music and the underlying sound of dishes rattling.

The maitre d' appeared before Chazz could remove Teel's coat. "Mr. Herman, sir," he said, his face wreathed in smiles, "we were so happy to hear that you were joining us this evening. It's been too long."

"Good evening, Arthur. You have a table for us?"

"Of course, sir." Arthur bowed, his smile stretching wider.

"Fawning idiot," Teel muttered under her breath. Chazz's shout of laughter made her heart bump against her ribs.

Their table was oval and set in front of a curving leather banquette. As the others slid along the long bench, Chazz held one of the two chairs for Teel and sank into the one next to her.

The waiter described the entrees for the evening. "I hope you all know you are my guests tonight," Chazz announced, smiling around the table. "Teel and I are anxious to entertain all her friends." His grin widened at her gasp of outrage. He turned to her and kissed her lightly on the mouth. "Aren't we, darling?"

"I'm going to draw and quarter you and put you into a tank of piranha," Teel hissed.

"She says, of course, that's what we want to do," Chazz assured the others. "The sky's the limit," he added, holding both her hands in a tight grip as she clenched and unclenched her fists.

"Teel, you sneak." Nancy laughed, leaning forward to look past Clint. "You kept this surprise all to yourself."

"I'll bet it was his idea," Rena stage-whispered to Buz.

"You're correct there, Rena." Teel stretched her mouth in a semblance of a smile. "It was all Chazz's idea."

Buz looked at her wisely. "Ah, cut it out, Teel. We know you, how generous you are. You just wanted to surprise us."

"Surprise, surprise," Teel managed with false brightness, looking at the array of drinks that the waiter had set before them. Had she ordered something? She didn't remember. Drat the man! He was making her lose her mind. It wasn't bad enough that he caused her aches and pains. Now he was

making her mentally incompetent. She could feel Chazz's web tightening around her.

"I hope you don't mind"—Chazz glanced at the others—"I took the liberty of telling Arthur we would all like to try 'Arthur's Star,' the specialty of the house, for the first round. Of course, you must order anything you like, no need to stick to this. I just thought you might enjoy sampling what Arthur considers his *piece de resistance* of drinks." Chazz lifted his glass in a salute. The others did likewise, all except Teel, who frowned into her drink. When she noticed the others watching her and waiting, she raised her glass too. "Here's to—good relationships." Chazz clinked glasses with Teel and drank. "Try it," he urged.

Teel sipped and found that the drink had a piquant pineapple flavor. It was good. She took another swallow and blinked.

"Careful," Chazz warned, leaning toward her. "That's first-class rum."

"I was hoping yours was first-class hemlock." Teel tittered, then sat straighter in her chair. The sound coming out of her own mouth irritated her.

"Shall we dance?"

Teel was about to tell him no when he reached down and lifted her to her feet. "Don't you ever wait for an answer?" she hissed as he headed toward the dance floor. Several couples were already dancing, but it wasn't crowded.

The vigorous beguine rhythm seemed to seep into Teel's blood. Despite her determination to stay as stiff as a board in Chazz's arms, she soon found herself swaying to the music, caught up in the beguiling beat. Chazz was an excellent dancer. It was so satisfying to follow his movements, to twist and turn lightly and surely to the music.

Teel didn't know the dance they were doing by name, but the intricate steps challenged her. All at once her irritation fled and she whirled around Chazz, his hand holding hers high as she spun wildly. Glee bubbled up as she felt her body respond and answer the challenge. She forgot everything but the

fast, swaying rhythm that curved her body away from him then back to fit perfectly to his form like pieces of a puzzle. Held close to him, with his face looking down into hers, she saw the laugh lines etched around his eyes and the dark flecks that rayed out from the center. She had the startling sensation that Chazz was sending her telepathic instructions, that her body had to obey.

"You are one beautiful lady, Teel Barrett." Chazz gazed down at her, his breath coming fast. "I think I could spend my whole life dancing with you." His voice held a hint of surprise and he continued to look at her, his eyes going from her nose to her mouth to her hair to her chin.

"Wonderful way to exercise," Teel said absently, her eyes steady on him.

"I can think of many ways to exercise with you that would be wonderful," Chazz growled softly.

"Pushups are good too."

"Exactly my thought, darling," Chazz crooned, twirling her around, then back into his embrace. This time both arms encircled her. He chuckled as her cheeks grew flushed. "You're lovely when you blush."

"Don't be silly. I don't blush."

Chazz leaned down and let his tongue graze her hot cheek. "Then you have a most delightful sunburn, my angel."

"Stop doing that," Teel moaned, feeling as though she had just walked through fire.

"Doing what?" Chazz's arms clamped her close as the music changed and the room grew darker. Now his tongue was tracing her ear lobe.

"People will see," Teel protested, feeling her throat close and her heart begin to thud. "You have an awful effect on me," she whispered, trying to get enough strength into her hands to push him away. "Whenever I'm with you I feel as

though I'm coming down with the flu." She tried to focus watery eyes on him. "I think I'm allergic to you," she finally pronounced solemnly.

Chuckling softly, he lowered his head to kiss her, and her knees seemed to turn liquid. She clung to him. "Stay with me. Live with me, Teel," he whispered.

"What? What did you say?" She struggled to focus on him despite the cold symptoms that seemed to be affecting all her senses.

"Live with me." He kissed a tendril of hair on her forehead. "If you still want to teach, we'll get a house near Selby. I can commute into New York every day."

Teel looked at him blankly. "Are you saying you want to come to Selby to live with me?"

"I also have a home out on Long Island if you'd prefer that."

"Or you could bring the *Deirdre* up the Hudson, park it in some secluded waterway, and we could fool around on that," Teel said hoarsely, her throat so dry and scratchy she could hardly get the words out. She needed a doctor! "And then what would I do when you tired of me in a few weeks? I might even last a few months. If I was very, very good. Then would you tie an anchor round my neck and drop me into the Hudson? No? Too dramatic?" Strength began returning to her arms—or was it that Chazz was pulling away from her, thus removing the source of her affliction? She bit her lip and stared up into his golden eyes, which were as dull and hard as freshly mined rock. "Perhaps I would just slip back into my old routine as though nothing had ever happened," Teel went on, "as though the bulldozer called Chazz Herman had never gouged through my life. Well, speak up. Tell me how to handle being dumped by a playboy."

"Stop it!" Chazz grated, shaking her, his fingers digging into her arms. "It wouldn't be like that with us," he exclaimed. "You know it wouldn't"

"No," Teel's voice wasn't loud, but her firm tone penetrated to a few of the dancers and several heads turned toward them. "I won't be your plaything,"

she said more quietly. She stepped away from him, turned on her heel, and headed back to the table. Her hand reached blindly for the drink at her seat, and she emptied it into her mouth before sitting down, desperation making her numb to the bite of the liquor.

"Would you like to dance, Teel?"

Teel looked blindly at Buz, noting the puzzlement that replaced his smile. Before he could say anything else, she gave him a stiff smile and rose.

Just then the waiter stopped at the table and set another round of drinks in front of each person.

Teel stared at the glass, then reached for hers, taking three big gulps before setting it back down and walking toward the dance floor.

"Hey, lady, take it easy on those things," Buz said just behind her. "I've never seen you drink before. Is this some new kick you're on?"

Teel turned to face him, holding out her arms. "You could say that, I guess." Her face hurt when she tried to smile, so she turned away and rested her cheek on his shoulder. She closed her eyes, but that made her dizzy, so she kept them open. This way she didn't have to talk, and Buz couldn't see her face, which she was sure reflected all her misery.

Chazz danced by with Rena, her eyes closed, a dreamy smile on her face. His gaze swept over Teel's face, making her sinuses contract.

Without thinking, she stuck out her tongue at him and was horrified when his eyebrows arched in amused inquiry. Quickly she closed her eyes again and was at once dizzy. What was the matter with her? She couldn't re-member doing such a thing even as a child. She swallowed around her sore throat. The man was a menace. She would make him pay all her doctor's bills, and that included the psychiatrist! She would see a good lawyer, too. She would sue him for taking away her good health, her peace of mind. She would take him to the Supreme Court!

When the dance with Buz ended, Teel felt much better. Deciding on a plan of attack against the enemy was very salubrious, she concluded, arriving at her chair and reaching for her drink at the same time.

"Don't you think you've had enough?" Chazz murmured into her ear.

"Stick it in your barracks bag, buddy." Teel sounded out each syllable, looking him square in the eye.

"You're wifty now," Chazz told her, reaching to take the glass from her hand.

"Monster," Teel countered, upending the glass carefully down the front of his silk shirt.

"You little witch," he whispered ominously, grabbing for a napkin with one hand and her arm with the other. After rubbing at the wet spot, he glanced around the table. "I'm taking Teel home now," he told everyone. "The rest of you stay. I'll arrange the bill, so eat, drink, and whatever until closing." He managed to say the words ^r in a pleasant tone, but the hand holding Teel's was gripping her so hard that she was sure the circulation had stopped. "I'll also arrange for the car to be waiting for you so you'll have transportation back to the hotel or any other place you might choose to go."

Teel squinted up at Chazz, trying to read behind his tight smile. "Viper," she said, then gave a sigh of satisfaction—and was surprised when Nancy gasped.

"It's been very nice meeting all of you." Chazz added. "I'll say good night again."

"Yes," Teel said, holding out her right hand. "And a good night to you." She frowned, wishing he would release her left arm, shake her hand, and leave. She was most annoyed when he told her to say good night, then spun her around and escorted her through the supper club to the front entrance.

There he paused, said something to the maitre d', and whirled her through the door and up the stairs to the sidewalk.

Teel inhaled great gulps of fresh air—and then wished she hadn't. The sidewalk began to undulate, making her dizzy. She squeezed her eyes shut, which helped a little. A firm hand in the small of her back propelled her forward.

Once in the car, Teel wanted to open her eyes, but they seemed stuck closed. She was about to argue with Chazz about several things. One, she had not wanted to leave her friends. Two, she did not want to be sitting there enclosed in his arms. But it was too much trouble to form the words, so she said nothing.

She didn't even open her eyes when Chazz guided her into the hotel. She heard him mumble something to the driver, but she didn't catch the words. She knew she should open her eyes to walk across the lobby, but they reached the elevator so quickly that it didn't seem worth the trouble. The elevator flew up—it must be going faster than before—but Teel still didn't open her eyes. She had no desire to experience the dizziness she had felt on leaving the supper club.

It annoyed her that she was so tired she had to lean on Chazz. She took a deep breath of relief when she heard the door close behind her. At last, she opened her eyes to tell Chazz to please leave her room, that she would be fine now, but her mouth dropped open. They were in the foyer of Chazz's apartment! She rounded on him at once and almost fell. When his arm reached out to anchor her, she shook it off furiously. "You tricked me, you—you Svengali, you!" She took a deep breath and reeled.

"You have the most amazing selection of archaic epithets in your vocabulary that I've ever heard." Chazz shook his head, his voice mild.

Teel watched him unbutton his jacket, then begin on his shirt. "What are you doing?" Her voice had a faraway sound to her ears.

"Getting out of this sodden shirt, sweetheart. You aimed so well." Chazz watched her closely, his golden eyes glittering.

Teel squinted to keep in focus. "Well, you don't need me here for that. I'm going home." Damn the man for bringing her here! It was going to take so much effort to hail a cab and get to her hotel.

"You *are* home, angel," Chazz crooned close to her ear.

Teel's eyes opened wider. How had he managed to * get so close to her all at once? He was damned sneaky. "You don't seem to understand me very well," she pronounced loftily, enunciating each syllable very carefully. "I am not staying here."

"Yes, you are, my lovely. I wouldn't dream of letting you out of my sight, especially considering the condition you're in at present." He dropped his shirt and jacket on the tile floor and bent to lift her into his arms.

It seemed very natural to place her arms around his neck. She had to hang onto something. "I have to go," she mumbled into his chin, liking the velvet roughness of his beard on her nose. "You have to shave twice a day," she intoned solemnly.

"Yes." Chazz chuckled and held her more tightly.

"I have to get up early." Teel felt very sad at the thought. She sniffed, trying to stem sudden tears. "Very early. If I stay here I won't get up in time." The rush of tears made her face wet. "I can't disappoint the children."

"You won't. I'll get you up in time," Chazz soothed, pushing open the door of a ballroom-sized bedroom with a circular bed in the center. The room was decorated in cream and blue with brown accents. A hand-woven Indian carpet in blue, cream, and brown covered the entire floor and looked plush and inviting.

"Oh." Teel stared around her, momentarily diverted. "Is this where you do your womanizing when you're not on the *Deirdre*?" she asked *sotto voce*.

Chazz gave a hard laugh and squeezed her tight. "You do say the damndest things," he answered.

Teel smirked at him. "I'll bet you get dizzy on that silly bed." She widened her eyes at him. "Does it go round and round with a motor? Because if it does, you mustn't put me on it. I'll be sick," she promised.

"It doesn't have a motor," he said patiently, placing her on the bed and proceeding to take off her shoes.

Teel put her hand on his head and patted. "I do like thick hair on a man... thick black hair... thick black hair that's straight... thick black hair that's straight but with a little wave." She rubbed his hair. "But did you know that bald men are smarter?" When Chazz looked up at her and shook his head, she wagged her index finger in his face. "Grass doesn't grow on a busy street, you know." She nodded her head sagely, then stopped. It made her feel queasy to do that. "I think I'd like a shower," she told Chazz as he took off her dress and eased her panty hose down her legs. "I'm feeling just a tad under the weather." She swallowed and licked her lips. "Apple juice would be nice."

"Apple juice?" Chazz inquired, standing her up to remove the rest of her clothes.

"I'm thirsty." Teel felt sad again. "Of course you don't have to get me any." She felt new tears on her cheeks. "I can drink water." She heaved a gusty sigh as he helped her to the bathroom. She felt very comfortable, naked in his arms.

"I'll get you something refreshing to drink." Chazz set her down in the tiled shower cubicle, then adjusted the water. "Will you be all right alone for a few moments? I have to call Sibley and tell him to get the drink. I don't like to waken Mrs. Pritchett at such a late hour."

Teel stood under the stream of warm water and nodded. She reached her index finger up to tap the side of her nose. "Very smart. Don't wake Mrs. Pritchett at such a late hour."

"Sibley won't mind," Chazz said, staring at her body, then swallowing hard.

"Sibley won't mind," Teel parroted, nodding again, forgetting for a moment that such an action made her dizzy. "Good man, Sibley." She closed her eyes and let the water massage her.

A little later, when Chazz stepped into the cubicle with her, it seemed sensible for him to be naked too. She took the drink from his hand without stepping out from under the spray of water.

"You're a kind man." This time her tears mixed with the shower water.

Chazz eased her out from under the water so that she could drink the lime and lemon mixture he held for her. "I'm sorry there was no apple juice."

Teel nodded, feeling magnanimous. "Don't worry. I'm sure you'll do better next time."

"Thank you." Chazz kissed her collar bone.

"Think nothing of it." She smiled at him, then drank the lemon-lime with gusto. She stared at the bottom of the empty glass. "Oh. I was going to offer you a sip." She hiccupped a sob.

"That's all right." His voice was unsteady as he pressed her close to him and removed the cup from her hand. "I assure you, darling, that I want nothing more than to drink from your cup, but I'm afraid tonight is not the night to do it." He washed her body, then lifted her from the shower and wrapped her in a fluffy bath sheet.

"Tired." Teel yawned, her fingers fluttering to her mouth to cover the gap. She felt herself being lifted and placed between silk sheets. "Thank you," she murmured, then she snuggled closer to the warm body that curled up against her. *

She was sure it must have been her imagination when she heard someone growl, "Tonight I'm going to go out of my mind."

TEEL STRUGGLED UP through a woolly world and forced her eyes open. Her teeth ached, her eyes burned, her head throbbed. "Chazz must be nearby," she muttered, then was sorry she had voiced the thought aloud. It hurt her throat to talk. Her eyes focused. She wasn't home in her carriage house in Selby or in the hotel where she had checked in with the rest of the staff. "Oh, God," she mumbled, hazy recollections beginning to intrude. She gritted her teeth and turned her head on the pillow, but what she saw made her temples thump and her teeth clench in horror. She closed her eyes again, hoping Chazz wouldn't be there when she looked again. He was. She tried to roll away from him but found she was immobilized by a heavy arm covered lightly with black hair that was draped over her breasts.

Chazz mumbled in his sleep, and the arm tightened.

Suddenly Teel realized that they were both naked. "Oh, no!" She massaged her throbbing forehead. She had slept with him last night! What was the matter with her? She was definitely going to have to see a psychiatrist. Going to bed with a womanizer, knowing full well what that would mean to Chazz: exactly nothing. She had slept with him twice. She must be mad!

When she tried again to free herself, Chazz opened his eyes.

"Good morning, darling," he crooned, folding her closer and kissing her nose, her cheeks, her hair.

"Now listen to me, Chazz—" Before Teel could tell him what she thought of him, his mouth had taken hold of hers. She felt her heart skip out of rhythm, then begin to race.

His mouth gently teased her lips open, his tongue flicking over them before penetrating into her mouth, heat building between them at once. His hands feathered over her body and came to rest on her breasts. "You have beautiful breasts, my love. My hands remember them. Since we made love, my mind has been filled with thoughts of your body." He murmured the words against her skin as his lips slid down her body.

"No, don't," Teel protested. "Have to get to the Garden. The children." But her hands betrayed her and clung to his shoulders.

"Not to worry, angel. I'll take you there," Chazz soothed, his hands exploring her body as though he were a blind man reading braille. His mouth took hold of one nipple, and her whole being snapped bow-like into his. "Oh yes, my angel, yes," Chazz breathed. "Kiss me, Teel. I need to have you kiss me, love me." Chazz's voice was as fevered as his touch.

Teel hesitated, looking up at him, her hands caught in his hair. Her heart thumped hard against her ribs as she studied his every pore. "Chazz—I—we—"

His arms convulsed around her, and he buried his face in her neck. "Teel, don't ask me to stop now. I need you so much. Tell me you want me too."

"I want you," she whispered without thinking, then swallowed hard. A picture of burning bridges flashed across her mind, the flames shooting high into the air. She moved restlessly beneath him, and he groaned her name.

"I am going to kiss every inch of your body, woman of mine," he crooned, not taking his mouth from her breasts.

Teel wanted to laugh at such a ridiculous idea, but she was too wrapped in her own pink world to make a sound. When she felt him caressing her instep with his mouth, then feathering each toe with his tongue, she gasped with delight. Slowly, ever so slowly, and with increasing passion, he worked himself up the other leg and over her body. Teel felt as though she were being sectioned with a hot, liquid blade. When at last he reached her face, his features looked carved from stone, blood throbbed at his temples, and his breath came hard, as though he had just run up a mountain. "Darling, I can't— do you feel—" Chazz's mouth crashed into hers, making her already heated body flame out of control.

"Chazz—Chazz—please—" Teel's head rolled wildly on the pillow, and she clasped his body fiercely as he lifted himself over her.

"I have never wanted anyone the way I want you," he panted into her neck.

Her body trembled like a volcano about to erupt, the need that filled her shocking her. She sensed Chazz holding back to pleasure her further and her body writhed against him, telegraphing her readiness to him.

Their coming together awed them both, passion blinding and guiding them to a fulfillment that encompassed only them, in a world that was only for them.

Sometime later Teel opened her eyes and cursed the weakness that had robbed her of the strength to say no to Chazz. At once her headache returned. Her eyes and teeth ached. She had to get away from this man before she began to age prematurely. Already she felt one hundred and nine years old.

Chazz nuzzled her ear. "Stop it," he told her. "You're looking around in that little narrow mind of yours for a reason to call our love-making wrong. You can't do it. It was perfect—for both of us."

"I have to get to Madison Square Garden." Teel pushed the words past wooden lips and tried to edge away from him on the round playing field he called a bed. "I must get back to the hotel. My sweats are there."

"Don't worry, precious. I had Sibley go down to Acme, open the store, and get you more team sweats." Chazz leaned up on one elbow, his index finger tracing imaginary circles around the tip of one breast. He watched the path his finger made as though mesmerized by the movement. "Of course there is plenty of underwear for you to try on in the bedroom connecting to this one. The room is stocked with clothes in your size," Chazz informed her, his voice vague, his eyes still fixed on her breast.

"What did you say?" Teel whispered.

"There are clothes in the connecting room in your size and—"

"That's what I thought you said," she gritted, lifting his arm from her body and shoving him backward.

Surprised, Chazz lay prone on his pillow and stared up at her as she jumped from the bed and turned to face him, her arms akimbo.

"And you thought I would just jump at the chance to wear clothes that belong to your—your women, did you? Well, let me tell you something, buster—"

"Teel, calm down. Come back to bed, angel."

"Don't you call me angel, you—you disgusting Don Juan." She took a deep breath. "And let me tell— What are you laughing at?" Her chin rose higher as her temper reached the boiling point. "Why are you looking like that?"

"Like what?" Chazz asked casually, sitting up and throwing the covers to one side before rising. He yawned and stretched.

"Must you flaunt yourself?" Teel yelled at him, wanting to look away from his beautiful body but unable to do so.

"No more than you, my angel." He chuckled, coming round the bed toward her.

"What?" Teel put up one arm as though to ward him off and looked at the long expanse of her uncovered limb. Her eyes dropped down the front of her. "Oh, no," she groaned, closing her eyes, then opening them at once and sprinting for the bathroom. "You bastard!" she shouted just before slamming the door shut. Even through the thick partition she could hear his laughter.

"I'll get you some fresh underwear, darling," he called out.

"Drop dead," she shouted, turning the gold-handled faucets in the shower on the full blast to drown out anything else he might say.

She stared at the floor-to-ceiling array of shampoos, washing aids, and soaps of every description.

Even after shampooing her hair twice and scrubbing her body until it glowed pink, she stayed under the steam of water as if to wash the previous evening from her mind. Lord, that man should be declared a disaster area by an act of Congress!

Teel would have taken longer drying her hair and lotioning her body, but she happened to look at her watch as she snapped it to her wrist. Eight o'clock! The workers were supposed to gather and be ready to go at nine o'clock sharp. And she had to call the hotel and talk to Nancy first. What she would tell her friend she had no idea, but she must talk to her.

Teel peeked around the door of the bathroom. Chazz wasn't there, but a note was pinned to a small pile of clothes on the vanity.

Teel, these clothes belong only to you. No one else has ever worn them. Love, Chazz.

"Bull." Teel fingered the silken, flesh-colored undies and was tempted to toss them in the trash can, but an aversion to waste instilled in her by her Scottish grandmother and an inordinate love of fine lingerie stayed her hand. "Does he think I was born yesterday?" Teel quizzed her mirror image as she fastened the bra, then sat down in the dresser chair to put on the athletic anklets she would wear with the all-leather running shoes, which she had always wanted and never been able to afford. The color of the sweats was right for the team, but the texture was finer than the outfits the team wore. The sweats fit like a glove and were as comfortable as anything Teel had ever worn.

She looked at her dress draped over a chair and shrugged. She would write it off as a part reckoning for her night of foolishness, What a jackass she was! She gritted her teeth and rubbed her aching temples.

When she opened the bedroom door, Chazz was standing there, wearing a dark blue suit that seemed to have the finest gold thread running through it, bringing out the color of his eyes. A gold chain lay across his vest and, as Teel looked, he pulled a watch from the pocket and studied it. He looked every inch the successful businessman.

"Very good, my love. We have time for breakfast. I wish I could join you at the Garden today, but duty calls." He put his hand on her arm and escorted her down the stairs and through a series of doors to the morning room where they had lunched the day before.

Mrs. Pritchett smiled at Teel and recited what she would make for breakfast.

Teel didn't hear her. Embarrassment thrummed in her ears, her headache grew worse, and her eyes stung. Chazz must have ordered for her, because Mrs. Pritchett nodded and left.

"Headache, darling?"

Teel glared at him. "Of course I have a headache," she snapped. "I always have a headache when you're around. You make me ill—literally."

"I don't suppose it could be Arthur's Specials that did that?"

"Are you implying that I have a hangover?" Teel lifted her chin defiantly.

"Yes." Chazz smiled at her, then leaned over and topped her cup with fresh coffee from the pot.

"You're a boor." Sunlight shone through the sparkling clean windows, making Teel's eyes hurt.

"I dote on your archaic language, love." Chazz looked up as Mrs. Pritchett entered from the kitchen balancing a heavy tray, which she set down on the sideboard. When she'd served them, Teel stared down at her scrambled eggs in horror.

"I hope you like the centerpiece, ma'am," Mrs. Pritchett said. "Mr. Herman says you'll be doing most of the flower arranging from now on." She smiled, but Teel could hardly focus on her face.

"What? Flowers? Oh yes, I like flowers." Teel heaved a sigh of relief when the housekeeper nodded and disappeared into the kitchen again. "I can't eat breakfast," Teel added weakly.

"Here, have some toast. I'll eat your eggs." Chazz pulled her plate toward him and set a plate of toast triangles in front of her.

"Thank you," Teel said faintly. She was sure she wouldn't be able to eat the toast either, but when she looked again, the plate was empty and she felt a little better. The aches and pains remained, but the queasiness was gone.

"More coffee?" Chazz offered, lifting the silver pot.

"No, thank you. I think I'd like more of that tomato juice, please." Teel ignored his smile as he refilled her glass. Just then something that Mrs. Pritchett had said penetrated Teel's foggy head. "What did Mrs. Pritchett mean about the flowers? Didn't she say something about me arranging them? What did she mean?"

"I told her we'd be getting married soon and that you had definite tastes on everything," Chazz explained, rising from his chair and coming around to help her up. "Time to go if you're not going to be late."

"All right," Teel replied. She was out of her chair when his words hit her. "You told her *what*?" she cried, turning to face him. Chazz took hold of her arm to steady her. She wrenched free. "What did you tell her? Did I hear right? Are you out of your mind? How dare you say such a thing?" Her voice rose with each question, becoming more and more shrill.

Mrs. Pritchett poked her head through the open door. "Is something wrong with the food, sir?"

"Not at all. Tell Mrs. Pritchett how good you thought it was, Teel darling."

"Good. Good, Mrs. Pritchett." Teel spoke through teeth clenched so tightly she was sure she would have lockjaw. The older woman disappeared, and Teel turned again to face Chazz. He was gone. "Where are you? You—you Svengali." She stormed out of the morning room and down the hall to the foyer, where Chazz stood with her sweat jacket over his arm.

"Ready, darling?"

"Don't you 'ready darling' me." Teel slipped one hand into the jacket sleeve that Chazz held out for her. "How dare you tell Mrs. Pritchett that we're getting married, you liar."

"We *are* getting married." He took hold of her arm and piloted her out the door. "And please don't call me a liar. I don't lie unless I have to, which isn't often. So don't call me a liar."

Teel faced him in the elevator as it took them to the underground garage. "I would never marry you. I'm not masochistic enough to tie myself to a womanizer."

"That's all behind me now. You can keep me happy in bed, just as you did this morning." His eyes roved from her head to her toes, sending a hot flush to her cheeks. "You have a lovely body, my angel, and I loved making love to it and to you."

"Stop that." Teel gasped, feeling her sinuses fill.

"Never. I'll be making love to you when I'm ninety." Chazz looked smug.

"Me—or a reasonable facsimile thereof," Teel snapped, fighting the insidious languor that seeped into her limbs. "There's no way I would spend my life with a dedicated ogler like you."

"Ogler?" Chazz looked pained as he gestured for her to precede him from the elevator.

"Yes—and worse." She thought of him chasing other women down a street, a white beard flowing over one shoulder. "No," she moaned, reaching for a tissue as her nose began to run. "I'm not a masochist. My life would be one long series of colds and flu, headaches and backaches. No, I refuse to live like that. It would be an ordeal."

"It would be beautiful." He drove out of the underground garage into bright sunshine. New York looked magnificent on this beautiful spring morning.

But the sun hurt Teel's eyes, so she closed them and leaned back against the cushioned headrest. "No, no. Don't talk like that. I'll never marry you."

"You *will* marry me," Chazz promised.

"You're crazy." She made plans to escape to Kenya. He would never find her on the Serengeti Plain. No, Teel changed her mind, with her luck a lion would eat her— a lion with golden eyes.

"I'd like to have children. Would you?"

His question brought her up short. "No," she said out loud. *Of course. I would love your children*, she moaned inside. What a beautiful boy they would have—and maybe a little girl. No, she told herself. There she'd be, taking care of their beautiful children, who would be asking where Daddy was and she would have to tell them that he was out that evening with a busty blonde, or a curvaceous redhead, or a lissome brunette—or all three! "Never. I'll never be your wife," she murmured.

"Do you want a large wedding? I'd like a small one."

"Drop dead."

"A small wedding it is then, as long as I'm doing the planning." Chazz eased the car to the curb at a side entrance to the Garden and leaned across to open Teel's door. "I'll say good-bye now, love. I have a meeting in ten minutes. See you tonight."

"Go suck an egg." Teel poked her tongue out at him, then started to get out of the car. Suddenly a muscular arm whipped her body backward and she was looking up into Chazz's face.

"I need to kiss my fiancée good-bye."

"Turn blue," Teel retorted, watching his face come closer until it blotted out the light. She groaned against his open mouth.

When he released her, her body seemed to slide forward out of the car. She almost landed in the gutter, she was so weak with longing, but Chazz's chuckle behind her stiffened her spine. She walked away without looking back.

"Wish the kids good luck for me, darling," he called; then she heard the Ferrari shoot away from the curb.

The day was chaotic, and Teel's headache didn't help. More than once her posting of the medal winners was wrong and, though it wasn't the end of the world to make a mistake, Teel felt Nancy and the others staring at her. She sensed the questions they were dying to ask and knew they could hardly contain their curiosity.

Nancy joined Teel for a lunch break. They sat on folding chairs in the crowded snack area, waving to friends between bites and speaking to acquaintances, officials, and parents. The dry-as-dust sandwich Teel was trying to eat seemed to match the way she felt inside.

"I don't think they can get one more person in here," Nancy said, grimacing as she shifted to a more comfortable position. She was about to take a sip from her milk carton when her eyes widened. "Good God, what's that? Did someone win the first race at Aqueduct?"

Teel turned to see what had astounded her friend and gasped at the huge spray of white roses coming toward them. It was impossible to see around the mountain of flowers, but Teel assumed someone was carrying them. A weak, grabbing sensation assailed her stomach.

A capped head poked around the spray. "One o' you Miss Barrett?" the red-faced carrier inquired. "Teel Barrett?"

Teel had the strongest desire to say she was Minnie Brown, but Nancy pointed to her without taking her eyes off the roses. "She's Miss Barrett. Those sure are beautiful flowers."

"Yep." The sweating attendant set them down and regarded them with pride. Then he whipped out a pad and pen and handed both to Teel. "Sign here, please."

"No," Teel whispered through dry lips.

"Lady." The attendant gave her a long-suffering look. "You can't have the flowers \yithout signing. So sign."

"Give them to a hospital." Teel shook off Nancy's pinching hand.

"Now look, lady, I got a lotta deliveries to make and I don' wanna play games." He cocked his head and shifted his weight to the other hip.

Teel stared at him, then nodded and scrawled her name at the bottom where the x indicated.

"Open the card, Teel," Nancy hissed, trying to smile at the gathering crowd. "Just a little congratulations for the team," she improvised when a curious woman looked from the flowers to the card clutched in Teel's hand. "Open the damn thing, will you?" Nancy muttered out of the side of her mouth. "See who it's from."

"I know who it's from," Teel whispered back, ignoring a man who was trying to ask her about the flowers.

"Open the card or I will." Nancy snapped her teeth together over the last of her sandwich, then glared at a matronly woman who had begun to pull one of the roses from the spray. "Stop that!" Nancy stood up and grabbed the rose from the woman's hand. The woman sniffed and walked away.

Teel opened the small white envelope and looked at the card as though she had just drawn the black marble in a gladiator's arena.

Thank you, my darling, for a beautiful evening. Always yours. Chazz.

Teel's head thumped. "I'll kill him," she said as .Nancy pulled the card from her lifeless fingers and read it.

"Wow!" Nancy looked at Teel, shock and envy warring in her eyes. "You're a dark horse on the field of love." Her exaggerated sigh penetrated Teel's haze.

"Give me that," she raged at her friend. "You had no business reading that drivel, those lies."

"You're a regular Jekyll and Hyde, ain't ya?" Nancy laughed and stepped out of range when Teel would have poked her in the arm.

"Nancy," Teel fumed, "if you want to continue to be my friend, you will say nothing more about this disgusting flower arrangement."

"It may be disgusting to you, but it's sexy to me." Nancy's face fell. "Why doesn't something like this ever happen to me?" She studied Teel, grim-faced. "I'm telling you right now, if I thought I could find someone like Chazz in a banana republic in Central America, I'd be on a plane in a minute."

"Be quiet," Teel pleaded, then rose and left the flowers where they were.

By the end of the day, everywhere Teel looked, she saw people with a white rose in their hair or pinned to their shirts. The sight made her ill.

That night when the other moderators gathered with Nancy and Teel in the hotel lobby, Teel kept looking over her shoulder expecting to see Chazz coming up behind her. She knew he had planned to pick her up at the Garden and would be angry when he arrived and found the place closed and Teel nowhere in sight. "Ah, listen group," she said, "I've decided to fly back to Selby tonight and not wait for the finals."

Everyone looked surprised. Nancy stepped close and whispered "Chicken." Teel ignored her.

"But why do you want to go back now?" Buz asked.

"There are a lot more helpers for the games than we figured," Teel explained, "so it's just as well that I get back and tackle some of the paper work that has been accumulating."

"But we were planning such a nice dinner at that French place Chazz told us about," Clint said. "Sure you won't change your mind?"

"Do change your mind," Nancy cooed.

Teel glared at her. "No, I think I'll see about getting an evening flight. I can eat at home."

"If you're sure you won't change your mind," Clint urged.

Teel shook her head, anxious to be gone. She hoped she had time to pack her belongings and leave before Chazz caught up with her. Once back in Selby on her own turf she would be able to rebuff the great Chazz Herman quite easily. The thought cheered her as she rode the elevator to her room. It sustained her during a call to the airline to ask for a reservation and then to the desk to say that she was checking out.

When she'd finished packing, she slung her garment bag over her shoulder, picked up her purse, and balanced a small bag in the other hand. All the time she was at the desk checking out she expected to feel a hand on her shoulder. Her back began to itch in anticipation. The desk clerk stared at her as she wiggled trying to alleviate the annoyance.

"I have an itch," she explained.

"Oh." The desk clerk looked suspicious'

Teel considered taking the Port Authority Bus to La Guardia but decided the walk to the terminal was too long. She didn't want to take a cab for such a short hop either, so she decided to take a cab directly to La Guardia instead.

She leaned back against the seat, feeling safe for the first time, until the ride began. Her breath caught in her throat as her driver caromed off the wall of

the tunnel and zoomed up the ramp. Teel felt as though she were on a roller coaster ride.

"I don't like tunnels," the driver explained, chomping on a big wad of bubble gum and grinning at her in his rear-view mirror. It seemed to Teel that he looked at her too much and at the road too little. She was about to mention this when he careened around a truck with much horn-blowing, yelling, and shaking of fists. "Some of these guys think they own the road," her driver informed her, blowing a huge bubble that Teel was sure obscured his vision. "Trying to quit smoking," he explained tersely.

"Admirable," Teel answered finally, when he continued to look at her expectantly.

"Yeah. The way I figure it, you gotta do something else close to smoking, so I chew bubble gum." Another bubble began forming on his lips.

"Marvelous."

During the rest of the ride the driver expounded at length on religion, politics, and his deep reverence for capital punishment. When Teel at last stepped out of the cab at La Guardia, she had to restrain an urge to kneel and kiss the cement. She tipped the driver ten dollars. "That's for flowers in case you have an accident."

"Thanks, lady. You sure have a weird sense of humor."

"So I'm told." Teel escaped into the airport lounge, glad that she had to wait only half an hour for her flight. Between watching the doors for Chazz's appearance and trying to fight the blues at leaving him, she was feeling a little sad by the time she boarded for the short trip to Selby.

She sipped a Coke the air flight attendant served her and gobbled down a small package of peanuts. Her stomach protested at not having had lunch or dinner, but after seeing the roses arrive at the Garden, she had been unable to finish her lunch. Right now the rest of her group would be sitting down to dinner.

Teel's thoughts of Chazz didn't stop even on that brief plane flight. She missed him as though he had been a limb attached to her that someone had amputated. She swallowed and blinked away the sting of tears. She would just have to work hard and force herself not to think of him. Sure, an inner voice chided, don't think of him— for maybe fifteen minutes out of every twenty-four hours. No, it wouldn't be like that, another inner voice insisted. Time was a great leveler. Maybe she wouldn't forget him altogether, but there would be long periods of contentment in her life. Her work was satisfying mentally and physically, and spiritually uplifting as well. She couldn't be around her students long and still feel down; they always buoyed her spirits. She took a deep breath. She would be content with that.

It was raining when the small jet landed in Selby. Teel stood at the empty cab stand and sighed. She would have to wait. It was too long a walk to her house, and she didn't want to disturb any of her friends during what could be their dinner hour. Binny's was the only local taxi service. No doubt Monica Binny would be the driver. Teel settled down to wait in the dingy waiting room and listlessly flipped the pages of some year-old, dogeared magazines that had been flung on a rickety coffee table. The cab arrived forty-five minutes later. She stowed her bag in the trunk and got into the back seat to listen to Monica Binny's long list of complaints.

"My bunions are killing me," Monica wailed. "All the hard work I do." She glared in the rear-view mirror as if daring Teel to disagree with her. "I'm going to Florida for a vacation. Boy, do I need the rest. I'm going to Disney World."

"Oh," Teel replied, wondering how Disney World would help Monica's bunions.

Monica drove through the center of town and began the circuitous climb up the narrow road that led to Teel's house, the old stone carriage house on the Minder estate just outside of town. The estate had been sold years ago.

The big stone mansion had been converted into the town historical museum and renamed the Selby Museum.

Just inside the stone walls—the iron gates had been removed many years before—stood the carriage house that Teel had purchased shortly after arriving in Selby. The town fathers had decided that the sale of the unused carriage house would bring revenues they could use on the mansion-museum.

Teel had been delighted with her purchase, despite the fact that it needed a thorough cleaning and lacked every modern convenience except electricity. With great enthusiasm, she had wangled a home-improvement loan from a local bank and proceeded to remodel the inside. She had hired a couple of college kids to paint and clean the stone work outside and had planted a small garden on the quarter acre of land that the town fathers had staked out as her property. It had taken Teel five years to refurbish the cottage. Though there was nothing fancy about it, she was happy there.

The downstairs consisted of one large room that served as a combined living room, dining room and kitchen. At the carpenter's suggestion, she had added a tiny but convenient powder room with a shower cubicle.

As Teel unlocked the front door, she looked around her and sighed with pleasure. Everything was just as she had left it. The round, braided rugs in red, cream and blue looked bright and colorful when she turned on the light. She glanced up the steep stairway that hugged one wall and smiled at the braided rug oblongs in the same red, cream, and blue colors on each step. She left her garment bag and suitcase at the foot of the stairs. She would carry them up when she was ready to go to bed.

She walked into the small kitchen, which was separated from the lounge area by a long counter topped in azuelos tile that her aunt's friend had sent her from Central America. She was leaning on the counter eating a peanut butter sandwich and drinking a glass of milk when the doorbell rang. She frowned as she walked across the room to answer it, wondering who it could be.

She threw the door wide open, not fearing intruders, and gasped when she saw who was standing there.

"Hello, darling. You have peanut butter on your mouth." Chazz stepped inside and pulled her into his arms, his mouth covering hers, his tongue licking the peanut butter from her lips.

Immediately Teel's head began to ache, and a sweet lassitude invaded her limbs. Chazz had found her!

THE KISS DEEPENED before Teel could rally her defenses and fend Chazz off. His tongue teased the inside of her mouth, lighting small fires wherever it touched.

Teel heard someone groan his name, then, as her arms came up to hold him, she realized it had been her own voice. Sanity returned in a cold wave, and she tried to thrust Chazz away. She succeeded in wedging only a centimeter of space between them.

"Stop that! Just where do you think you are?" she huffed, getting crosseyed from staring at him so closely.

Chazz nodded and swept Teel off her feet. "You're right. It's too cold here to make love. We'll close the door and do it inside."

"We will not!" she shouted at him, struggling to get free. It irritated her that he managed to hold her and close the door with his shoulder at the same time. "This is my home... and... you... have no rights here." She continued to push at him even when he sank down onto the couch next to the fieldstone fireplace.

Chazz held Teel in his lap and looked around him. "This is very nice, Teel. I think we'll be very comfortable here."

She looked at him, mouth agape, anger pulsing through her. "You have a few slices missing in your loaf, man, if you think I'll let you stay here."

"I'm staying. You owe me for all those days and nights on the *Deirdre*, all those great meals Rowan cooked for you. Good chef, isn't he?"

"Yes." Teel tried to wriggle out of his lap.

"Darling, when you move like that you make me forget everything but how good we are together in bed." Chazz feathered her forehead with tiny kisses.

"Stop that," she hissed, glaring up at him, cursing her blood pressure that was steadily rising. "If I owe Rowan for those meals, then I'll pay *him*. Just make out a bill."

"I'm Rowan's employer. You owe *me*."

"Then make out the bill," Teel repeated.

"You couldn't afford it. But since I'm a magnanimous—"

"Balderdash and twaddle," Teel interrupted, taking in deep breaths, trying to keep her fury in check. "You're a Sephardic rug merchant who intends to take me to the cleaners."

"You got it," Chazz agreed simply, kissing her under the chin.

"Stop that." Teel glowered. "I'll get a loan. I'll pay you back."

"You aren't listening, sweetheart. You couldn't afford it." Chazz leaned back on the couch, taking her with him, keeping her pinned to his chest. "Yes, it's nice here. I like it. And it's just a short flight from New York."

"Is that how you got here? There wasn't another flight before or after mine." Teel's eyes narrowed on him.

He chucked her under the chin and kept a firm grip on her. "I flew my own plane, love."

"Oh, no!" Teel closed her eyes. "You're disgusting."

"Love, I wish you wouldn't call me names. Think how upset our children will be."

"We're not having children."

"Of course we are. You're not the kind of woman who would want to be childless. But we won't discuss it right now, if you'd rather not." Chazz lifted

her hand to his mouth and sucked on each of her fingers in turn. "You taste good, Teel."

She took advantage of his absorption and wrenched her body away from him. In her scramble to be free of him she almost tumbled to the floor, but finally she staggered to her feet. She stood in front of him, her fists on her hips. "If you think I'm going to listen to my children bewailing the absence of a father out gallivanting with assorted women, you're one brick short."

Chazz leaned back against the cushions, his arms folded across his chest, a smile lifting the corners of his mouth. "I love your expressions, angel. What did you do? Take a crash course in archaic English?"

"Don't mock me, you—you—international woman chaser, you." Teel sucked in a deep angry breath.

"Angel, did you know that your breasts look wonderful when you do that?" Chazz's voice held a soft promise.

Teel hunched forward, suddenly remembering that she was braless. "Don't change the subject."

"What was it?" Chazz took off his jacket and leaned down to slip the short tooled boots from his feet. "Ah, that's better. Courting you is exhausting. You'd think you'd take pity on a hard-working man and not hop all over the state."

"Take a walk," Teel said unfeelingly.

"I'd love to, but not tonight. I'm tired."

"Then get a motel," Teel said between gritted teeth.

"No. I'm staying here. I've already left orders for Sibley to pack more of my things. Darby will drive them up here once I phone and give him more specific directions." Chazz grimaced. "You might have given me a more detailed idea of my destination."

"Leave."

"No." He met her gaze without flinching. His voice was still bland, but a metallic glint shone in his golden eyes.

"I'll call the police." Teel fought down her growing panic. She had to get rid of him, she just had to.

"Go ahead. I'm not leaving. And if they try to take me forcefully, I'll call the newspapers and give my side of the story."

"Which is what?" Teel demanded, her voice hoarse.

"Only that you promised to be mine and now you're intent on dumping me. That I'm pining with a broken—"

"Stop that. Stop it right now." She tried another tack. "How can you want to stay where you're not wanted?"

"Oh, I'm wanted, love, and by you. Shall I show you just how much we want each other?"

"No!" Teel shouted. "You can't sleep in my bed."

Chazz shrugged. "I'll sleep in another room if you insist."

"I don't have another room," Teel said, triumphant. "You'll have to go to a motel."

"No." Chazz's voice was like steel rivets. "I'm staying here." He looked around. "If worse comes to worst, I'll sleep here, on this couch."

"You can't. You're too tall. You'll be cramped," Teel argued desperately.

Chazz pulled up the cushions. "This is one of those hide-a-bed things, isn't it?"

"Yes, but it's a regular size, not a king size. Your feet will hang off the end." She watched him. When he turned a speculative look on her, she hurried on. "My bed is queen size. It would be too short for you, too."

"But better than the double bed."

"I'm going to use my bed—alone." Teel prayed he wouldn't try to change her mind. She knew she would take very little coaxing, despite all her intentions.

"All right," Chazz conceded. "I'll take this bed." With that he was on his feet, making Teel jump backward like a scalded cat. He pulled the cushions from the couch and placed them neatly on a nearby chair. "Where are the sheets?"

Teel stood staring at him, her hands clasped into tight fists.

"Well?" Chazz asked.

"What? Sheets. Yes, I'll get them." She rushed up the narrow staircase, taking the steps as fast as she could.

At the top of the stairs she tried to catch her breath, feeling disoriented. *I'm going to marry that man*, she moaned silently. *I'm not going to resist him at all*, she groaned, her teeth coming together so hard that she wondered briefly if they'd cracked. *He's holding me in a velvet trap! The more I struggle and yell at him, the tighter the trap gets. Why don't I fight harder?* she grated to herself.

Because you want to marry him, *her inner self pronounced like a death sentence*. You want him, no matter what the cost, despite the pain.

I'll keep fighting, she moaned to the voice.

Save your strength for when you're married to him, *crackled the unfeeling person deep inside her*. You'll need it.

Teel plunged her hand willy-nilly into the shallow linen closet, grabbing whatever she found, tumbling several neatly folded sheets and towels onto the floor. "Damn,damn, damn," she muttered. "He makes more work for me. And he's ruining my health." She refolded the linens that had fallen and returned them to their proper piles. "Why should I put up with this? I'll hire a body guard. No, a guard dog would be cheaper. I'll get a killer Doberman," she told the lace-edged pillow case that Aunt Tessa had embroidered for her.

Teel ran gentle fingers over the beautifully worked lace, remembering how her aunt had told her to save the pillow cases and sheets that she had embroidered for her own hope chest.

Teel blinked, then grabbed two sheets, two pillow cases, and a blanket from the pile and started pell-mell down the stairs.

Chazz's voice froze her in her tracks. "For God's sake, Teel, be careful." He frowned up at her from the bottom of the stairs. "Do you always come down the stairs in that headlong fashion? You need me in more ways than I realized." A smile spread slowly over his face. "Come down the rest of the way. Don't just stand there."

Teel lifted her chin defiantly. "I'm just waiting for you to get out of my way."

"Oh, is that what you're doing?" Chazz grinned, stepped back one step, and cocked his head inquiringly. Then he stepped back another smaller step and looked at her again.

Teel began to descend slowly, walking in her most sedate way. When she reached the bottom step, Chazz flashed forward and locked his hands around her waist.

"I like this," he crooned. "Being face to face, nose to nose with you, I mean." His grin widened as her cheeks burned. "Did you know that you have tiny little gold flecks that ray out from the center of your eyes?"

"Yes," Teel answered tersely.

"Did you know that the gold flecks match those in my eyes?" he whispered, his tongue touching her lips in a quick caress.

"What?" Teel said.

"Don't you think our children will have beautiful eyes?" he murmured into her neck.

"Maybe."

"How many should we have?"

"The national average is two and a half, I think," Teel answered, dazed.

"Don't you think three would be better than two and a half?" Chazz chuckled into her throat.

Then she realized that her head was thrown back to expose all of her throat to his swift, hot kisses. She wondered vaguely who had pushed her head back. "Three is an odd number," she said vaguely.

"True. Would you like four, do you think?"

"That's a nice round number. Not too big, not too small."

"Right."

Teel's eyes refocused. She blinked at a grinning Chazz, her words repeating themselves in her mind. "Stop that," she told him, pushing his hand away from her thigh. "You're a menace," she hissed, shoving the sheets, pillow slips, and blanket at his chest. "Here. Make up your own bed."

"Yes, ma'am. I think that's only fair. Since we both work at demanding jobs, we should share the chores." He shifted the bundle of linens under one arm and took her elbow, leading her down the last step and across the small foyer into the living room. "What days do you want me to do the cooking?" he asked, setting down the bedding and glancing around the room. "You forgot the pillows," he said softly.

"Oh." She had been thinking about what he'd just said about cooking. "I'm sure you can't boil water." She whirled and rushed back up the stairs.

"Don't be too sure, love," he called up after her.

She ignored him, reaching up to the top of the linen closet to get her extra pillow. She looked at the striped ticking without seeing it. What if he liked two pillows? She ran into her own room, took one of the pillows off the bed, stripped the case from it, and carried both down the stairs.

Chazz was standing where she had left him, holding a pillow slip out in front of him. She noticed that the sheets were already on the bed. He watched her closely as she walked toward him. "This is beautiful work." He gestured toward the lace-edged linen. "It looks hand done."

"It is," Teel whispered, wondering how she had come to take Aunt Tessa's hand-embroidered pillow slips from the linen closet.

"The sheets match the pillow slips, but there's a tiny difference in the edging." •

"Yes." Teel stared wide-eyed at the sheets that her aunt had made so lovingly, sheets that she intended to use only if she ever got married. She had been fairly sure that she would never use them. Now she had given them to Chazz. She really had to get her act together.

He grinned at her. "I'm flattered that you let me use such treasures, darling. Are they from your hope chest?"

"Yes—no!" she corrected as his grin widened and his golden eyes took on a speculative look. "They're just some old things I had around the house. I generally use them for drop cloths when I paint," she lied, gulping a silent prayer that Aunt Tessa would never know she'd spoken such blasphemy.

Chazz chuckled. "Liar," he told her softly. He reached for one of the pillows, catching it under his chin as he fitted the case to the bottom and let the pillow slide inside. "We'll have to take very good care of these. We'll want our girls to have them one day."

"Never," Teel snapped.

"Why darling, I never imagined that you would be selfish with our girls," Chazz reproved her, his eyes bright with mischief.

"You know damned well that wasn't what I meant at all," Teel hissed, her fingers curling into fists.

Chazz yawned. "Let's not fight now, love. I need my sleep." He looked at her sideways, watching her gnaw at her lip. "Are you going to get my hot milk?"

"Take a jump off a bridge!" Teel fumed, whirling and running up the stairs two at a time. She heard him laughing as she slammed her bedroom door shut behind her.

She stood against the closed door, her hand covering her mouth. That man! Now he was giving her stomach trouble. She, who had an iron digestive tract, was probably getting an ulcer, she decided as her stomach churned sickeningly.

She strode into the bathroom, stripping off her clothes and scattering them every which way behind her. She would take a long, hot shower. That would help her sleep.

The soothing warm water was sluicing over her and she'd just soaped herself thoroughly when the water turned ice cold, making her shriek.

Shivering, wrapped in two fluffy bath sheets, she rushed out of the bathroom, stalked across her large bedroom, and yanked open the door. "You hog!" she shouted down the stairs. "You took all the hot water! Who told you you could use my shower?" she demanded. "I'll bet you can't fit into the powder room, much less take a shower in it!" She was still shouting down the stairs, bent double, when Chazz appeared at the bottom, rubbing his wet hair with a towel.

"Did you want me to shower up there, darling?" he inquired pleasantly.

"What?" Teel snapped erect, fumbling with the slipping terry-cloth bath sheets. "Up here? No, of course I don't want you showering up here."

"Well, then." He shrugged, staring up at her as if X- raying her through the towel. "Shall I come up and kiss you good night?"

"Certainly not!"

"Okay, you come down here and kiss *me* good night."

"No!" Teel's voice was frigid. She whirled away, her chin in the air, and stumbled over the end of the towel. She stubbed her toe on the edge of the door and staggered into her room on one foot, then slammed her bedroom door closed and shouted through it, "And don't you dare take all the hot water again!"

She returned to the bathroom, rinsed herself quickly, cleaned up after herself and dropped the wet towels down the laundry chute. As she sprayed the bathroom tiles with cleaner and wiped around the sink, she muttered imprecations. "No doubt he left my powder room a mess," she grumbled into the cupboard under the vanity where she replaced her cleaners and sponges.

Once she was settled in bed, Teel tried to read. First she tackled some school work that needed her attention. When she couldn't concentrate on that, she reached for the novel she'd borrowed from Nancy, who'd told her it was well written, but steamy. Teel was able to picture the hero quite easily.

Before the first chapter ended the author had described him as Nordic with blue eyes. Teel saw him as dark with a slight hook to his nose and expressive gold eyes. She thought the blonde heroine was rather insipid and, as she read further, she was happy to see that the heroine's hair was darkening to chestnut.

By the third chapter she was yawning and blushing, picturing Chazz and herself in the panting corkscrew positions of the passionate duo in the book. "What am I going to do," Teel whispered. "I can't get him out of my mind."

She yawned again, making her jaw crack. She lay down and couldn't get comfortable. But eventually sleep overtook her, soothing her. She dreamed she was held close in Chazz's arms. For once, her inner voice of caution was silent. She felt thoroughly relaxed.

When Teel opened her eyes and heard birds singing outside her window, she knew at once it was Saturday. Ahhhhh! She lay back and closed her eyes.

They snapped open again. Chazz was downstairs! Her body sprung into a sitting position. She listened. Nothing. Maybe he had left. No doubt he worked on Saturday. That would be a relief. He would be away all Saturday. She could rest.

She swung her feet out of bed and stretched, then went to the bathroom, where she brushed her teeth and hair. She padded back to her room, naked, not bothering with her robe.

Every morning, before she dressed, Teel ran in place for ten minutes, then slipped on her sweats, took the pressed clothes that she intended to wear that day with her, and drove to the local high school. There she would swim forty laps in the Olympic-sized pool. If the weight room was unoccupied, she worked out on the Universal Weight Machine before swimming. If the room was crowded, she skipped that portion of her physical fitness for the day. On weekdays she showered and changed there and drove directly from the high school to the Mary Dempsey School for Exceptional Children, skipping breakfast. On weekends she treated herself by having the special at the local Greek diner.

Now, out of breath from running in place, she made her bed before returning to the bathroom and splashing her body with cool water, then wiping herself dry and slipping on her sweats. She put a skirt, vest, blouse, pantyhose and sling backs into her canvas carryall.

Teel skipped downstairs, whistling—and stopped dead. Chazz stood there in a pair of slacks, his chest bare, holding his folded bedding. The bed was

back in its original position as a couch. "What are you doing here?" Teel demanded.

"Did you forget that I slept here last night, darling? Where are you going?"

"No, I didn't forget. I just thought you might have left to go to your office."

"Never on Saturday, love, not unless it's an emergency."

"I'll pray for an emergency," Teel retorted frostily, grabbing her car keys from the hook near the door and opening the front door.

"Where are we going?" Chazz asked behind her.

"I don't know where you're going. *I'm* going swimming, then for breakfast." She held her nose high in the air.

"Suits me," Chazz replied, lifting a leather bag from the floor next to the couch. "Just let me get into my sweats." He pulled cocoa brown sweats from the bag, slipped off his slacks, and put on his sweats before she could protest.

Teel gulped and averted her eyes. "You don't have a swim suit."

"Yes, I do. Sibley always packs this bag with essentials. I'm ready. Let's go."

Teel discarded several scathing remarks that came to mind as they headed out the door. None seemed destructive enough to suit her mood. "I'm sure you won't like the diner," she said.

"Smug, darling? That's not like you." Chazz cocked his head at her Chevy Camaro. "Shall I drive?"

"Certainly not." Teel felt a ray of hope. "If you don't like being driven by a woman, then stay here. I like to drive my own car."

"That's fine with me." Chazz stepped into the carport that Teel had had built onto the carriage house and held open the door to the driver's side. When she

had slipped behind the wheel, he closed the door and went around to the other side, then eased into the bucket seat next to her and smiled. "All ready."

Teel gunned the motor and shifted into reverse. The gears ground. Her annoyance soared. She had always prided herself on never grinding the gears. She loved to drive a shift car and knew she was both careful and confident. She ground her teeth as Chazz turned to look at her. "It may interest you to know," she began, "that I have never ground the gears on this car before this moment." She spun the wheel, making the car rock and spew stones.

"Of course," Chazz agreed, grinning wickedly at her when she threw him a glowering look.

Teel decided her best course was not to speak to him at all. That way she wouldn't be tempted to run her car up a tree.

Teel lived only a mile from the high school, which they reached in short order. She nodded and waved to the students who had Saturday duty at the door to the pool, then she and Chazz separated at the locker rooms. Since the weight room was filled with students, Teel decided to skip it.

There was only one person other than Chazz in the pool. Teel slipped into a lane next to his, admiring the slick, clean strokes that carried him rapidly through the water. Soon they were both creaming up and down the pool. Though Teel put everything she had into her swimming in an effort to pull ahead of Chazz, she couldn't keep up with his powerful strokes. After fifteen laps she was panting. Chazz stopped next to her, his own breathing scarcely affected by the vigorous exercise.

"Macho man," Teel breathed as she hoisted herself up on the edge of the pool. She felt rather than saw Chazz heave himself up next to her.

"I'll see you when you're dressed," he told her, laughing.

Teel crashed around the locker room, slamming the door, dropping her key, and nearly scalding herself in the shower. "Now he's going to burn me to

death," she seethed, shampooing her hair with a vengeance. "Owwww!" Damn, she'd gotten soap in her eyes. It took a long rinse to relieve the sting.

Teel stalked away from the shower room muttering to herself, intent on dressing as fast as she could. Instead of soothing her, as her swim usually did, it had left her more frazzled than when she'd first arrived. And she hadn't even lifted weights. That man! He was even attacking her mind. Now, when she went out to the lobby, he'd be waiting for her—to do more damage. She straightened slowly from in front of her locker. Why should she hurry out there to him? Let him wait.

Suddenly Teel had an idea. The sauna! She rarely used the facility, but today she would—if only to keep him waiting.

Since the school had only one sauna, which was used by both men and women, the rule was to wear a bathing suit and shower afterward.

Grimacing at her soggy, cold suit, Teel pulled it on again and shivered. After grabbing a towel, she slammed her locker door shut and hurried through a short tunnel that led to where the sauna was situated, equidistant from the men's and women's locker rooms.

Teel stepped into the wooden cubicle and immediately felt suffocated, as she always did in it.

"Hello, love," Chazz said behind her.

Teel jumped in surprise, her heart pounding like a trip hammer.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded.

"It occurred to me that you might find some excuse to keep me waiting, so I thought of this. When I saw you run down the tunnel, I went back and got my own suit," he explained, stretching out beside her on the upper level.

When she sat erect and put her feet on the next level down, Chazz moved closer and put his head in her lap.

"Stop that." Teel tried to lift his head. Ignoring her, he turned his face into her abdomen and hooked one arm around her body. Teel felt his mouth on her navel. "I— I don't want to stay in here too long," she said. "Too hot."

"Right." He spoke into her body. "I'll be ready to leave when you are."

Chazz's hand burned into her spine. She shook her head to keep the perspiration from running into her eyes. Her blood pressure was rising, she was sure of it. "I want to leave now," she announced suddenly, standing up so quickly that Chazz almost tumbled off the wooden bench.

Good reflexes saved him from a hard fall, but he clutched at Teel to right himself. "Would you mind giving me a little warning when you decide to do things like that?" he suggested, both amused and perturbed.

"Sorry. Hot." Teel jumped down to ground level and pushed open the wooden door.

"See you in the lobby, angel," Chazz called.

Teel grumbled continuously as she sluiced herself with cold water, redried her hair, and brushed it into a gleaming chestnut fall. After dressing in her panty hose and a denim skirt and vest with a pale silk blouse, she studied herself in the mirror. She ignored the fact that the color of her blouse matched her eyes and was a perfect foil for her hair. She barely noticed her long, shapely legs and trim ankles and looked instead at her low-heeled sling backs, which were as comfortable as slippers. Most of all, she studied her face carefully for signs of defeat by the determined assault of a man called Chazz Herman.

"Don't you dare think he has defeated you," she admonished her mirror image as she pouted her mouth to apply lip gloss. "Tell him to go to hell." She nodded at the image, slapped the lip gloss into her shoulder bag, picked up her carryall, and left the locker room.

Chazz was waiting for her in the lobby, his hair still damp and curly from his shower. He wore beige slacks with a beige shirt in a deeper shade and a tan suede vest that he had left open. His shoes were beige loafers in finest

suede. He looked like what he was, a modern Croesus, Teel decided grudgingly.

Chazz seemed to sense Teel's presence, and he looked around, his face lighting up when he saw her. "Ready, darling?"

Teel had no intention of smiling at him, but she couldn't help it. She just stood there and grinned and nodded. Maybe she really was coming down with something!

The change in Chazz was electric. He snapped erect, his own smile fading as he strode toward her.

Teel almost collapsed when he leaned down and kissed her mouth—not a light kiss, but a searching, passionate caress. "That's the first time you've smiled at me since we left the *Deirdre*," he whispered, his mouth just above her own.

"Hello, Miss Barrett." Teel instantly recognized the cold, stiff voice. Miss Daisy Butler, teacher, spinster and member of the board at Mary Dempsey School, was staring at them in shock and amazement.

"Miss Butler." At Teel's stricken look, Chazz's eyes narrowed warily. He turned to Miss Butler, placing an arm around Teel's waist, and smiled at the tight-lipped woman. "Miss Butler, you are the first to congratulate me," he said. "Teel has just promised to marry me— next week."

"What?!" Miss Daisy's cry was louder than Teel's protest. The older woman's eyes darted to every corner, as if looking for someone to tell. Teel knew Miss Daisy loved news, yet was rarely the first to hear any.

"Yes." Chazz held a struggling Teel at his side. "I finally convinced her, and since neither of us can take another vacation now, we're going to get married right away and honeymoon later." His smile seemed to mesmerize Miss Daisy. "Of course the wedding will be small." Chazz had to tighten his hold on a now moaning Teel. But Miss Daisy took no notice of her. Her birdlike eyes snapped in anticipation of Chazz's next words. "But we'd like all of Teel's many well-wishers to join us for the reception.

"Never," Teel promised.

"Delightful," Miss Daisy exclaimed. "Where will you marry? Here in New York?"

"Never."

"We've haven't settled that yet," Chazz said over Teel's answer.

"Lovely. How romantic!" Miss Daisy clasped her hands and looked heavenward. Teel kicked Chazz in the shins, but Miss Daisy didn't seem to notice.

"And we hope," Chazz continued through gritted teeth, "that you'll tell everyone you meet. Teel and I are so happy—we want the world to know—owww."

"Oh, dear. What happened? Do you have a stitch in your side?" Miss Daisy focused her attention on Chazz's middle, giving Teel the chance to pinch his rear end. But Miss Daisy apparently forgot her question in the more delightful prospect of informing the town of Selby that Miss Barrett was to marry—"Oh dear, I don't know your name."

"Charles Herman, Miss Butler, but everybody calls me Chazz."

Miss Daisy looked over her glasses at him, frowning. "I shall call you Charles. I can't abide shortened names."

Chazz smiled and bowed gallantly from the waist, endearing himself to Miss Daisy for life, Teel was sure.

"I really must go. There are many people to see," Miss Daisy said vaguely, and she fluttered across the lobby and out the door.

"The old dear can really move when she wants to," Chazz commented wryly as he watched Miss Daisy skip across the parking lot to her Edsel.

Chazz was still watching her when Teel kicked him again. "Love, I wish you wouldn't do that." Without releasing her, he bent down to massage his ankle.

"Now you've done it," Teel accused him. "By nightfall she'll have everyone in the county talking about our marriage. How could you?"

"Don't be so surprised." Chazz looked down at her, his smile gone. "I'd do anything to get you, angel. I thought you knew that." He kissed her mouth again, paying no heed to curious onlookers. "Come on. I'll buy you breakfast."

TEEL PROTESTED CHAZZ'S high-handedness day and night. She was furious with him for going out of his way to inform anyone he thought might not know of their coming nuptials. She seethed when Nancy placed a copy of *The New York Times* on her desk, folded open to the proper page, and she saw the photographs of Chazz and herself.

"I'm giving you a shower," Nancy said, then ducked out the door when Teel took a firm grip on a paperweight.

The phone rang just then, distracting Teel from the newspapers. She reached for it absently and said, "Hello?"

"Hello, darling. How are you this morning? I'm sorry I had to leave before you—"

"How *dare* you put those pictures and that write-up in *The New York Times*?" she cried.

"Actually I'd have liked a full-face picture of you better, but there wasn't one, so we used the profile."

"You know what I mean." Teel took a deep breath and lowered her voice. She rubbed her forehead. "You're giving me another headache. I never had headaches until I met you," she complained. *Lord, I want to marry him. I'm a masochist*, she thought.

"You're too tense, that's the problem," Chazz told her. "Just stop fighting me, darling, and your ordeal will be over. Once we're married, you'll be in excellent health."

"*Bull.*" Fight him harder, you fool, *Teel's inner voice argued*. Drop dead, *Teel moaned to herself*, I want to marry him.

"Oh, before I forget," Chazz continued, "I talked to Aunt Tilda this morning. She's relieved that her errant nephew is settling down—"

"Tell her to think again," Teel snapped, determined to go down fighting.

"—and ready to marry the woman of his dreams—"

"Twaddle." God forbid he should ever know how much she wanted to be his wife.

"—so of course I told her we'd be delighted to attend a party at her studio that she'll be hosting for some of our friends tonight."

"What?" Teel shouted. "What do you mean *our* friends? We don't have any friends together." Again she tried to rally her defenses.

"We will," Chazz soothed. "All my friends will be your friends, and all your friends will be mine," he instructed as though teaching kindergarten.

"Balderdash."

"Do you never run out of archaic epithets, my dove?" Chazz crooned, continuing on without waiting for her answer. "I'll stay in town to dress here and I'll send the plane for you. We can fly back home after the party. Bye, love."

Home! Did he really consider her house in Selby home?

She set the phone back on its cradle and stared into space.

Nancy entered the room with several application forms in her hand. For the rest of the day Teel was kept busy studying the forms and checking to see which pupils would be best suited for the facilities at Mary Dempsey School. But she had trouble concentrating on her work— thoughts of Chazz crept repeatedly into her mind—and the hours dragged. Finally, sometime after five o'clock, she cleared off her desk and headed home.

Her phone was ringing when she unlocked the door.

Because she had stayed later at work than she had intended, she was running behind schedule. She dropped her key, cursed, retrieved it, pushed

open the door, and picked up the phone on the fifth ring. Somehow she knew it would be Chazz. She didn't wait to hear him identify himself.

"Do you have a cold?" Teel asked, a little out of breath, trying to wriggle out of her coat.

"I'm so glad you remember my voice so well, sweetheart." The laugh was too high—not Chazz's voice at all.

"Who is this?" Teel demanded, her body stilling into alertness.

"Darling, why are we playing games? It's Ben Windom. Didn't I just tell you that?" His voice lowered. "I've missed you, angel."

"Don't call me that!" Teel exhaled, her sudden, explosive anger surprising her. "What do you want? I'm in a hurry."

"I just wanted to wish you well. I'm sure we'll be seeing more of each other now that you're engaged to such a powerful man. Herman and I move in the same circles, you know."

"Crap. Chazz wouldn't travel in your circle because he doesn't frequent sewers. Good-bye, Ben."

"Wait—Teel—"

Teel slammed down the phone. She didn't feel elated by putting him down; she only felt relief that she would never have to see Ben Windom again. For a fleeting moment, she wondered how he had gotten her phone number. Perhaps he'd gotten her address from the newspapers and simply called information. She shrugged, then rushed up the stairs two at a time. Chazz's pilot would be sending the taxi for her soon and she wasn't anywhere near ready.

Teel showered and shampooed her hair in record time. While she blow-dried it, she pondered how she would wear it, finally deciding to leave it hanging free, the way Chazz liked it.

Her dress was a sea-green silk, almost the color of the ocean in the painting above Chazz's fireplace. Teel turned slowly in front of the mirror. She loved the feel of the silk material, which was caught under her breasts in an Empire fashion. The dress had puff sleeves and a hem that just touched her ankles. The square neck was low cut in the Regency style. The dress had a piquant, old-fashioned look that enhanced Teel's long neck and legs. The fabric fell straight, but when she moved, a side pleat parted to reveal a slit from ankle to mid thigh. One of Teel's friends from her college had gone into fashion design and made a respectable living in New York running a small boutique in Greenwich Village. She had designed the dress for Teel, who had then modeled it at the boutique's last fashion show. Teel's shoes were *peau de soie* sandals, the same color as the dress.

Teel frowned at her image in the mirror. Her hair was wrong for the dress and the jade earrings and pendant she was wearing. She recalled that Charine, the designer, had wanted her to wear her hair pulled into a topnot with a fall of curls on one shoulder.

Teel glanced at the clock and groaned but decided to take a chance that she would have time to arrange a more intricate style.

Clutching the curling iron in one hand, she proceeded, grim-lipped, to curl several locks. Then she twisted her pile of straight hair into a coil on top of her head and pinned it tightly. Again she used the curling iron on the remaining locks of hair, twisting them into two curls that fell down one side of her face. "Good grief, I'm a giant," Teel whispered at her image, but as she turned in front of the mirror she had to admit that the style suited her, giving her a Junoesque grace.

The taxi honked twice as Teel fumbled for her clutch purse. She threw a short evening jacket in white velvet over her shoulders and ran down the steps, praying she wouldn't trip.

"The feller at the plane sez we wuz to be there in fifteen minutes.. .thirty minutes ago." Monica Binny, the taxi driver, glowered at Teel. "I hope I get a good tip for this."

"Monica, don't try to con me," Teel told her. "You've been tipped already."

Monica shrugged. "A girl's gotta make a living."

During the rest of the trip Monica regaled Teel with gossip about Selby inhabitants. As they pulled into the small landing field, Monica glared at her in the rear-view mirror. "It was Daisy Butler what told me about you gettin' married. You mighta told me yourself, Teel. That Daisy acts so uppity if she knows something first."

"Next time I'll arrange for you to know first," Teel promised.

Monica whirled in the seat, her face reddening from the strain of heaving her bulk around. "Ya mean it ain't gonna last? This one, I mean. You got another one on the line, Teel?"

Teel snapped alert, her eyes focused warily on Monica. "What? No—of course I haven't—oh, never mind. I have to go. The pilot's waiting outside the building."

Monica faced front again, looking slightly crestfallen. "Yeah, that's him. 'Bye, Teel."

Teel had never before flown in a Lear jet. She found the sensation exhilarating. Before taking off, the pilot doffed his cap and handed her flowers, a lovely nosegay of violets, the green of the leaves and purple of the flowers a perfect foil for her dress.

Teel was amazed. "How did Chazz guess what I was going to wear?" she asked, bemused, pressing her face into the flowers.

"I don't know," the pilot answered, smiling as he disappeared into the cockpit. Soon they were airborne.

The landing at La Guardia took longer than the flight itself, but Teel didn't mind circling the field. She was growing more nervous by the second about meeting Chazz's only relative.

When the plane taxied close to a small hangar, she saw Chazz, dressed in a silk evening suit, step from the building, the wind ruffling his hair. He spotted her in the window almost at once, and smiled and waved.

The plane came to a halt and an attendant opened the door for Teel. Chazz was waiting at the foot of the steps, grinning up at her, his eyes a leaping, liquid gold in his tanned face. "I've missed you," he said simply.

"Don't be silly," Teel said, feeling out of breath despite her protest.

When Chazz didn't move from the bottom of the step, she was forced to pause. They stood face to face Teel felt a silken net drop over her. "You just saw me this morning," she whispered, nonplussed by his nearness.

"So I did. I've grown accustomed to coming home to you when I leave work. I like that. Tonight I didn't go home to you. I didn't like that." Chazz rubbed his nose against hers.

"Oh!" She felt all her senses stir and come to life.

"I want my kiss." His nose moved alongside hers, his lips coming to rest on hers. When his teeth nipped her bottom lip, Teel groaned. "You look beautiful, my angel. I'm going to buy you a fur coat." Chazz nibbled her ear.

"No," Teel murmured, her hands clenching and unclenching on his shoulders. "Don't wear real fur. Save the seals."

"Right." He groaned and kissed her again.

"Ahem... sir... I should get the plane into the hangar." They looked up to see the pilot watching them from the door of the plane.

Chazz laughed and nodded. Teel reddened and thanked the man for flying her to Chazz.

Chazz was still chuckling as he led her to the Rolls- Royce. Behind the wheel sat Darby, dressed in an official uniform and cap. To Teel's delight, he bounded out of the car and came toward her, his arms outstretched.

"So, Sister Terese Ellen is no more, is it?" His elfin face was wreathed in smiles as Teel hugged him and kissed his cheek.

"Darby, please forgive me for deceiving you," Teel begged, glancing warily at Chazz. "It seemed like a good idea at the time." It surprised her when he looked grim instead of smiling.

"Well, all's well that ends well, isn't it?" Darby shot a searching look Chazz's way, then said, "I just got back from a trip to Ireland to see my folks. Had a lovely time."

"Oh, it sounds wonderful. How old are your parents, Darby?"

"My dad's ninety-seven and my ma's ninety-five, and both of them as chipper as the day they were married fifty years ago."

Teel's eyes opened wide. "Amazing."

Darby helped Teel into the back seat, then resumed his place behind the wheel. It startled Teel when Chazz closed the glass partition between them and the driver. "Ah, I like the violets," she told him. "How did you know what color to get?"

"I remembered this from when I went through your clothes the other evening and thought it might be the dress you would wear." Chazz stared at the back of Darby's head, his voice terse.

Teel was bewildered by his sudden anger. "What's the matter with you?" she asked. "Is something wrong?"

Chazz turned toward her, his eyes glittering fiercely. "I damn well don't enjoy being jealous of Darby."

Teel's jaw dropped. "You have an empty room in your upper works, buster," she breathed, watching his black eyebrows form a stiff bridge across his forehead.

"That I know," he growled. "You've never once come up to me and put your arms around me and kissed me, have you?" He looked furious. She was flabbergasted.

"No," she admitted.

"Damn you." To her surprise, Chazz hauled her into his arms. "One day you will." His mouth punished her. She felt his teeth against her lip; then all at once his lips softened, coaxing her, warming her. Teel forgot Darby, forgot that they were riding in the Rolls-Royce, forgot that she was nervous about meeting his aunt. She was annoyed when Chazz released her and she kept her arms around his neck. The frown melted off his face.

"Wait, darling, I have something for you." All at once he was serious again.

Teel looked down just as he pushed a square-cut emerald onto her third finger. "Chazz!" Her voice came hoarsely, and she tried to pull her hand free.

"This is yours," he told her, his voice solemn. "If you try to give it back to me, I'll throw it down the nearest sewer."

"At least sell it and give the money to the poor," Teel offered in a dazed voice, not taking her eyes from the ring.

"Keep it. Wear it. If you do, I promise I'll give the equivalent of what it cost to the poor."

Teel's eyes flew to his face. "That's bribery," she cried.

"You're damn right it is." Chazz kissed the ring on her finger. "Do you like it?"

"Who wouldn't like such a beautiful ring? I can't believe it's real."

"It's real." Chazz chuckled. "It matches your eyes perfectly. That's why I had to buy it."

He pulled her into his arms, and she cuddled close to him for the rest of the trip into Manhattan. She didn't even try to move away. She was a prisoner of her own emotions. One moment she rebelled at his high-handedness. The next she melted at his tough, romantic streak. The ambivalence weakened her resolve to fight him.

When the car pulled up in front of a brownstone with a patch of grass and an old-fashioned iron street lamp in front, Teel's fears returned.

Seeming to sense her hesitancy, Chazz practically lifted her from the car and told Darby to return at midnight.

"Won't that be too late to fly back to Selby" Teel asked.

"Yes. We'll stay at my apartment tonight. You have clothes there. I'll have you flown back in the morning."

"I don't have clothes here," Teel mumbled, regarding the front door with its ornate knocker as though she were facing a rattlesnake.

"You do now, angel. I gave your measurements to Madame Delmar."

"My friend, Charine, designs my special clothes," Teel protested, trying to rally as Chazz opened the door.

"Fine. Next time you can get Charine." He paused. "I don't think I know the house."

"Snob," Teel sniffed as he led her into a small foyer decorated in gilt and a soft cerise color. It was both elegant and comfortable.

A woman who looked like an aging Barbie doll tottered toward them on the highest heels Teel had ever seen. Her makeup gave her a pale clown face. Two perfect circles of rouge drew attention to her high cheekbones. Her lips were bowed in cherry red, her eyebrows penciled thin, black, and arched. Her lashes looked as though they had been dipped in black mud. Her amber eyes twinkled with delight as Teel watched her approach. Her all-over curls were dyed a terra cotta red.

"You mustn't try to mask your shock at my appearance, my dear," the woman said. "If you don't look suitably laid low, I shall think I don't have enough makeup on." She stretched to press a kiss on Teel's cheek, her silk caftan, which was threaded with gold and silver, billowing around her.

"You have more than enough makeup on, Tilda," Chazz mocked as he leaned down to lift the woman into his arms and kiss her.

Tilda tapped him playfully on the cheek with a finger.

"Don't be naughty. You know I must preserve my image.

"Why?" Chazz grinned, setting her back on her feet and putting an arm around Teel to bring her forward. "This is Teel Barrett."

Tilda Charles put one saberlike cherry-colored nail to her front teeth and tapped, her eyes narrowing on Teel. "So this is the woman who has taken the wind out of your sails, eh? She's a beauty. Would you mind if I painted you, my dear?"

Teel gasped. "But you don't do portraits!" She reddened when Tilda and Chazz laughed. Chazz squeezed her waist and whispered, "Nut."

Tilda took Teel's hand in both of hers, her eyes warm. "Yes, that's true—most of the time. But I have done a few people." She glanced quickly at Chazz. "This ne'er-do-well of mine insisted that I would want to paint you the moment I saw you, and he's right. So, for a wedding present to my nephew, I would like to paint you. Will you mind?"

Teel shook her head, bemused, knowing she should tell this woman that a marriage between Chazz and herself was impossible, that it couldn't possibly work.

"Thank you, darling," Chazz murmured, bending down to kiss her lightly on the mouth.

Teel reddened even more. Tilda Charles beamed and took hold of Teel's free arm. "Come with me," she said. "I want you to meet some friends and"—she

shrugged, a tiny frown appearing on her penciled brow—"some hangers-on, I call them. I wonder how these people find out when one is going to entertain," she mused as if to herself. "You can't really throw them out." She shrugged to Teel. "But I resent their being here on such a... a personal occasion."

"I have no qualms about removing anyone, Tilda," Chazz said. "Just point out the ones you want gone and I'll take care of it." He looked grim as he scanned the cluster of people, many of whom had turned in their direction.

Teel heard many calls of "Hi, Chazz," and "Chazz, how are you." She would have hung back, but a warm hand on her arm guided her forward.

Tilda Charles stopped, her hand on her cheek. "Chazz, my dear, we are both a couple of fools. Neither of us took Teel's lovely jacket from her. Here, dear, let me hold your violets while Chazz takes your jacket. Monroe will hang it up." Tilda gestured to a tall, thin woman dressed in black with a salt-and-pepper bun screwed tight to the back of her head.

Teel felt the jacket being lifted from her body; then she returned to retrieve her violets from Tilda, who was looking at her with wide eyes. "Dearest girl, that dress is gorgeous. You look like a sea nymph. I shall paint you in that dress."

Teel heard other comments as if through a thickening haze, for one look at Chazz's tight, angry face made her pulse race with fear. She looked down at the violets to hide her anxiety. What was wrong with him?

"Chazz, old man, you've snared the most beautiful woman in New York." Teel glanced up to see a sandy-haired man coming up to clap Chazz on the back.

"Yes, I have, haven't I?" Chazz's voice was like hot steel hitting cold water.

"Hello." The sandy-haired man sketched a slight bow toward Teel, who held out her hand. Instead of shaking it, he kissed the back. "I'm Trevor Mahon. Chazz and I attended Columbia grad school together. I'm a much better

engineer than he is, and I'd would make a much better husband. Reconsider, o beautiful one."

Teel relaxed, letting her laughter bubble over, enjoying Trevor Mahon's nonsense.

Both men stared at her, unsmiling. "Trev, old man," Chazz mocked, "I'd hate to see your body mangled."

Trevor, who was inches shorter than Chazz but of equal breadth, said, "She'd be worth the risk." He smiled back at Chazz, then at Teel. "That dress is simply stunning on you."

"Yes, isn't it." Chazz folded her closer to his side and bent his head to her ear. "I love looking at your breasts, darling, but if I'd known this little number was cut so low, I'd have made you wear something else. Tell Charine I want higher necklines next time."

Teel looked angrily up at him and her lips barely moved, when she said, "I wear what *I* choose." She almost cried out as the pressure of Chazz's fingers on her waist increased tenfold. She bit her lip, then turned to Trevor Mahon. "You're not a native New Yorker," she guessed.

Trevor looked pained. "And I thought my New York accent was perfect." He smiled. "I was born in Sydney, Australia, but I've been in this country since my undergraduate days at Rensselaer."

"I visited Sydney with my parents," Teel commented. "It was a graduation present. I thought it beautiful, and the people were very friendly." She grinned. "Even though the topless bathing shocked my mother... and intrigued my father."

Trevor threw his head back and laughed, and even Chazz's frown disappeared in a reluctant grin.

Soon they were bantering easily back and forth, and Teel felt as if she'd known Trevor for ages. She began to relax and even enjoyed the attention when other guests crowded around to meet her and admire her ring.

Sometime later, she realized that she'd been separated from both Trevor and Chazz for several minutes.

Suddenly a voice seemed to come to her out of the past. "Hello, darling. Do I say congratulations or best wishes?" She turned to find Ben Windom looking her up and down, his pale blue eyes boldly assessing her figure, lingering provocatively on the swell of her breasts.

Surprise and discomfort assailed Teel. One of her first thoughts was to wonder what she'd ever seen in the milksop standing before her in a black evening suit, his blond hair thinning but not gray. "Are you a friend of Chazz's?" she asked coldly.

Ben cocked his head. "I know him. Let's just say I'm better acquainted with Tilda Charles."

"Oh, then you must be one of the hangers-on she mentioned earlier," Teel replied, her voice hard. She watched with very little feeling as Ben's neck flushed red. She wanted to be rid of him as quickly as possible.

"You'd better be careful, Teel," Ben warned her, his features set in an angry line. "How do you think that fiance of yours would like it if I were to tell him I was the one who deflowered the virgin Teel Barrett at the tender age of eighteen?"

Teel was so angry that she decided immediately to call his bluff. "There he is," she said, "right over there. Why don't you wander over and tell him?"

Ben put his hand on her arm, his smile reappearing. "Now, now, angel, you know I wouldn't do that. I'm hoping we can all be good friends. I have some people who want to do business with your fiance, and they'd like you—"

"Drop dead, creep."

Ben Windom's mouth fell open and his face twisted with anger as Teel turned away from him, thoroughly disgusted by his vile behavior. But she had only taken two steps when his voice rose behind her.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the newly engaged lady is too shy to tell you that she's a most accomplished musician, but I'm sure you would love to hear her sing and accompany herself on the piano."

Teel turned to see Ben's hard smile and fought to control the sudden fear that gripped her. Once, long ago, a very young Teel Barrett had confided to her hero, Ben Windom, that the reason she had never continued with a music career was that performing in front of people filled her with terror that rendered her immobile. "You bastard," Teel whispered through lips that had suddenly turned icy cold.

Ignoring her, Ben continued, his mouth twisting in amusement at her epithet, "I knew Teel the summer she modeled in New York. Sometimes I could persuade her to play and sing for me." He began to applaud, looking straight at Teel. Soon others followed suit.

Teel looked desperately around the room. The only face that registered on her was Chazz's, which seemed carved from white fury. Her eyes flew over the others blindly, then back to Chazz. His expression changed, and then he was pushing his way toward her, propelling people out of his path.

"Come on, Teel, play," Trevor said from somewhere.

Play. Play. Play. Teel heard the words repeated over and over as if in a dream and shuddered. She seemed to hear her first teacher telling her mother that the only cure for Teel's shyness was to make her play in front of an audience. She heard her mother's doubtful voice replying that she didn't want to force her daughter. Teel remembered her teacher's words later, when they were alone. "Think how disappointed and unhappy your parents will be if you don't play, Teel," she had said. Teel had played—and hated it. And as the years passed, she realized that Mrs. Curtin had forced her to play not from a love of music but because she hadn't wanted to lose a pupil—or the pupil's money. By the time Teel had reached college she was proficient in both voice and piano. It seemed natural to gravitate to the study of music at Nazareth College. But by her junior year she had switched to special education and was much happier. She still played for herself—and sometimes a few friends—but she had never played in front of so many people as were gathered here. Everyone was looking at her expectantly, yet

she felt rooted to the spot, incapable of moving to the piano bench, much less making the ivory keys produce beautiful music. Panic engulfed her. She was trapped, humiliated.

"You're frightened, darling." Suddenly Chazz was there, putting his arm around her. "Tell me what's wrong," he murmured for her ears alone. "I don't want anything to frighten you ever." His deep, soothing voice penetrated her numb brain, warming her and unlocking the ice that seemed to encase her limbs. Chazz's touch generated new life in her, making her blood flow once again and firing her resolve.

"I'll play—if you stay with me," she whispered, biting her lip to still its trembling.

Chazz's eyes leaped with golden fire. "Oh, angel, why do you say such things in front of a roomful of people? Of course I'll stay with you." He kissed her lips gently, rubbing his mouth back and forth in a way that left her yearning for more of his touch and taste. "But you don't have to play if that's what's making you afraid. Is it?"

"Stay with me."

"Always." Chazz hooked her close to his side with one strong arm and turned to follow the assembled group, who were moving toward the grand piano by the floor-to-ceiling bow windows.

As Chazz pulled out the bench and seated her carefully on it, Teel felt as though she had crossed some invisible bridge. He released his hold on her and she swung around on the bench to look up at him. She needed him near her. "Will you put your hand on my shoulder while I play?" she asked quietly.

"Darling! Of course I will." Chazz's gaze remained fixed on her. The excitement she saw there, the golden fire, warmed her to her very core, releasing her from the fear.

His touch on her shoulder was her impetus. She bent over the keys with relaxed absorption and Rachmaninoff spilled from her fingers. She barely

heard the 'Ohhs' and 'Ahhs,' as she switched to show tunes. Even after five songs she didn't sing, the whispered pleas from the onlookers failing to touch her.

Finally Chazz squeezed her shoulder and leaned close.

"Will you sing a song, love?" he asked. "Everyone's been asking you to sing, but you don't have to if you don't want to."

Teel nodded, her fingers picking out the notes before she knew what she would sing. The song, "I'll Always Choose You," had poignant lyrics and, as she sang them, some part of her seemed to stand outside herself and judge the quality of her singing. Her phrasing was good, she decided, her low register pleasing, even seductive, she realized with surprise. But why had she chosen this song? For Chazz. The answer came without volition. She paused, then finished, "... for the one to share my life with, I'll always choose you." And then she looked up into his face.

Absolute silence filled the room as Chazz looked down at her. The others seemed to fade away, and they were alone. Teel felt protected and cared for, as safe as she had felt on the *Deirdre*. For a moment she seemed to float free of the room, free of the planet.

Then Trevor said, "Well done, well done." He began clapping. The others joined him, and Teel's awareness of her surroundings returned. The old fear began to sneak over her once again.

Chazz helped her up from the bench. "You're so beautiful, and I'm so proud of you. I want you so much." His voice was hoarse with emotion, and he leaned down and closed his mouth over Teel's as if they were alone in the room.

Why hadn't he said he loved her? Teel sighed sadly to herself as her arms slipped up and around his neck. She held him fiercely, desperately. She could never hold him forever, but she would hold him for this one moment.

"Release her, will you, old man?" Trevor's sardonic voice broke the spell.

Teel pushed away from Chazz, and he lifted his head, his irritation at the interruption clear on his face. "Your aunt's guests," Teel reminded him.

"Damn them." Chazz kissed the tip of her nose and allowed Teel to push back from him, but he didn't release her entirely. One strong arm still fastened her to his side.

Teel accepted the congratulations of the guests, knowing that she could never have played for them if Chazz hadn't supported her.

Finally she met Ben Windom's malevolent gaze and flinched.

She sensed Chazz's eyes on her as her body tensed in rejection of her former lover. She felt Chazz's intent look follow the direction of hers. "What has Windom to do with you, Teel?" he demanded.

"I'll tell you later," she promised, looking up at him. "He's only a minor irritation."

"Is he? Is that why you looked so stricken when he announced that you would sing and play?" Once again Chazz's face appeared to be carved from marble, his flesh resembling the unfinished form from a sculptor's chisel.

Teel studied his expression, and was unable to read it. But she recognized his implacable desire to know the answer to his question. She nodded and sighed. "All right, I'll tell you, but first I must—" She glanced at the people around them.

"Yes, speak to them. You deserve their accolades. You are a most talented lady."

Trevor was there kissing her hand as Chazz melted into the crowd. Others took his place. Tilda appeared with tears in her eyes. "My dear, my dear. That was just beautiful. You love my boy, and you told him so, *so* sweetly." Despite her tears, Tilda Charles studied Teel with shrewd eyes. "You mustn't worry about it," she added confidentially. "He's too in love with you to read the signs."

Teel gasped. "He isn't in love with me. He—he just wants me," she blurted out, then pressed her fist to her mouth, cursing her gaucherie.

Tilda Charles studied her critically, her sparrow eyes snapping, making the clotted lashes look even more unlikely. "Well, well." She nodded. "So the two of you are playing hide and seek with your feelings, eh? Perhaps that's best." She reached up and kissed Teel's cheeks. "I'm going to my studio to make some sketches of you. Come along in thirty minutes or so." She shrugged toward her guests. "They can take care of themselves. Monroe can handle everything for a while." She frowned. "I wonder why Chazz is being so chummy with that Windom fellow. I really don't like the man and can't imagine what he's doing here. He's such a fool. Thinks people don't realize that he looks down on them. Pluperfect jackass." She patted Teel's cheek, then tiptoed away on her ridiculously high heels.

For a moment Teel watched Chazz moving from guest to guest, then she wandered over to the small bar and poured herself a Perrier and lime with lots of ice.

Suddenly Chazz was looking down at her, his eyes conveying a fierce warning that he would stand for nothing but the truth. "Now tell me why you're afraid of that man," he demanded.

TEEL STARED UP at Chazz, assailed by an unexpected feeling of fate taking control of her life. Chazz might look at her with scorn and contempt, but there could be nothing but the truth between them. She would never allow a man like Windom to hold anything over her head. Let the sword of Damocles fall.

"I'm not afraid of him, Chazz," she answered quietly. "I despise him."

Chazz ran an anxious hand through his hair, tousling it in a way that made Teel's heart ache with yearning and led her to a bow window in the dining area, where there was some measure of privacy. "Were you in love with him?" he asked.

"I thought I was." She kept her eyes steady on him. "At eighteen my standards were high, my judgement low. I was just starting a summer modeling job when I met him. I thought he was the man of my dreams."

Chazz swallowed. "I see."

"I let him make love to me, thinking that we were going to get married. I was a virgin and fully intended to keep my virginity for the man who would be my husband." She felt her chin tremble and bit down on her lip. "I suppose most women feel that way."

"I suppose." Chazz's mouth hardly moved.

"Tonight he wanted me to intercede with you so that you would do business with colleagues of his. I told him to drop dead. That's why he introduced me as a musician—"

"You're a fine musician," Chazz broke in.

"—so that he could use my pathological fear of performing in front of people to humiliate me." Teel felt her face crumbling. "You gave me the strength to perform."

Chazz reached out to grip her forearm. "Windom tried to intimidate you?"

"Yes"

"I see."

"Do you believe me?"

"Of course." His voice was flat, almost vague.

Teel's stomach churned. "Tilda wants me to go to her studio," she told him, unable to stay with him a moment longer.

"What? Oh—all right." Chazz led her through an archway out to a hallway and pointed to a door at the end of the corridor. "There. If she's ready for you, she'll open the door. I'll be along in a few minutes. I have some calls to make."

Teel walked down the short hall like an automaton. Chazz hadn't looked at her with hatred, but after years of dealing in the business world he was adept at hiding his feelings. Her hand reached out to turn the knob, a numbness spreading through her body, mind and spirit.

Wasn't she getting her wish? Now that he knew all about her shameful relationship with Ben Windom, Chazz would leave her alone. Wasn't that what she had wanted all along?

She pushed open the door to see an engrossed Tilda Charles, a sketch pad on her knee, her small hand flashing rapidly across the page, then flipping to a clean sheet in rapid motion.

Teel stood there for long moments, staring at the woman without really seeing her. By the time she focused on where she was and realized that she should leave Tilda to her work, the woman looked up.

"Teel, dear, just the person I wanted to see. Would you step over to that platform? It will only take a few minutes."

Teel nodded, glad that no words were required of her. Her jaw seemed to be locked into place. She was almost sorry when, several minutes later, Tilda told her to come down from the platform.

"Ah—I wasn't sure about the eyes. I should have known they would be green, like that exquisite emerald Chazz has given you." Tilda smiled at her as she darted quick looks at Teel, then back at her sketch book. "You're bringing out the romantic in that tough boy of mine," she said, pausing for a moment, her pencil falling still. "You know you're the first woman to break through that barrier of his. For many years I thought I'd be the only one ever to really know him." Her face took on a dreamy look. "He's much like his father. What a wonderful man Itzak was. I think that's why I never married. I could never find a love like my sister had. How they loved each other! It was extraordinary to see. They seemed to mold each other with their love." She nodded once, her birdlike eyes snapping. "It was sad when they died, but I was glad that they died together. I don't think one could have lived without the other." She smiled at Teel. "I knew my boy would love like his father if he ever found the right woman."

"And he did find the right one," Chazz said from the doorway, making Teel jump and Tilda laugh.

"How many times have I told you not to creep up on people in that fashion?" she scolded her nephew, her eyes crinkling in amusement as he came over to Teel, bent down, and kissed her with an intensity that demanded a response.

Teel kissed him back with all the love she could never express directly until, through a warm haze, she heard Tilda chuckling. "Stop it," Teel gasped, pulling her mouth free and hiding her face in his shoulder. She felt Chazz's warm mouth on her neck. "Chazz, please behave," she told him, not really meaning it.

"Let's get married tonight," he murmured into her ear.

"What?" Teel exclaimed.

Tilda chortled. "I knew he wouldn't be able to wait once he'd made up his mind."

"We can't," Teel whispered, reeling.

"Why?"

"Shower." Teel blinked, feeling anesthetized under his probing gaze.

"What does she mean?" Tilda continued to sketch as she questioned Chazz.

He laughed "She means that a friend of hers has arranged a shower for her tomorrow evening in Selby, and she has to be there. Is that right, love?"

Teel gulped and nodded, wishing with all her heart that they could get married that very minute. Was she really going to marry him at all? It seemed impossible, yet Chazz had a talent for making things happen the way he said they were going to.

Chazz sighed. "All right. I'll wait until next Thursday when we can get married in that little church with your Aunt Tessa in attendance"—he smiled gently—"even though you don't practice that religion any more."

"Chazz," Teel began, an idea flashing through her head that surprised her, "I'm going to ask the rabbi from Temple Beth David to take part in our wedding service."

Both Tilda and Chazz looked startled.

"Don't be so shocked." Teel felt laughter bubbling up inside her. "You've taken complete charge of this wedding—and—well, I want to do this for you. You don't mind, do you?"

"No, I don't mind, love. I'm glad you've reconciled yourself to the fact that you belong to me." Chazz frowned for a moment. "I wasn't raised in any religion. My parents wanted me to choose when I reached an age when religion would interest me." He shrugged, a half smile on his face. "I guess I was too busy to bother."

"I should have made him go to the Episcopal Sunday school at least." Tilda tapped the sketching pencil against her cheek. "You know, Chazz, I think having the rabbi there is what your father would have wanted."

Chazz looked at his aunt for long, pensive seconds, then nodded. "Since we're being married by a priest, which would have suited my mother's wishes, it does seem fitting." He smiled at Teel and pulled her close to him again. "Thank you, love. That was very thoughtful of you."

Teel smiled back, heaving a big sigh. She felt Chazz's lips feathering her temple and closed her eyes. She felt safe. Maybe she really *was* going to marry him.

"I'm taking my lady out to get her some of that food you have there. Then I think we'll leave. Teel has to get up early tomorrow and fly back to Selby."

Wrinkling her nose at him, Tilda put down her pencil and rose to her feet. "I suppose you're hinting that I'm ignoring my guests." She held up a hand palm outward as Chazz was about to speak. "Don't try to excuse your-self, nasty boy. I shall come out with you and sample my own food." She smiled up at Teel, who was molded tight to Chazz's side. "I'll enjoy painting you, my dear. You have the most expressive eyes."

"She's beautiful, isn't she?" Chazz said proudly. Teel's heart seemed to soar on wings of happiness.

When they re-entered the lounge area, she hesitated for a moment, reluctant to encounter Ben Windom.

"He's gone, darling. I kicked him out." Chazz spoke mildly, but Teel detected the gold fire in his eyes. "The word is out that I don't want Ben Windom around you— or near me. He won't bother you again." A muscle jumped in Chazz's cheek. "I had to hold back to keep from breaking his jaw. The thought of him touching you made me sick."

"Thank you," Teel whispered, slipping her hand into his.

Chazz looked down at their clasped hands, then back to her face. "For what, my angel?"

"For exorcizing my ghosts tonight. I don't just mean Ben. I mean for making it possible for me to do the impossible, play in front of so many people." She smiled up at him as they stood apart from the people at the long buffet table. "I don't suppose I'll ever really enjoy playing in public, but I don't think I'll ever be so afraid of it again. Thank you."

"You're welcome," Chazz said simply, and he leaned down to kiss her again.

"Chazz, old man, not only do you monopolize the girl all evening, but you don't stop kissing her," Trevor complained, coming up to them holding a plate laden with shrimp, pate, and flaky dinner rolls.

"Wait until it happens to you," Chazz murmured, his eyes never leaving Teel's face.

Trevor shook his head and offered some of his food to Teel, who assured him she was about to get her own.

"I will never be as bad as you, old man. No one could be." Trevor guffawed and sauntered away.

It surprised Teel to see red stain Chazz's face and neck. It gave her a funny surge of power deep within her.

He looked down to catch her interested stare and gave her a wry smile. "Trevor talks too much." He guided her to the stack of dishes at one end of the long refectory table and placed one of the hand-painted plates in Teel's hand.

"These are too lovely to use," said Teel handling the translucent china with care.

"When we come again, I'll show you Aunt Tilda's collection of Sevres plates. They were given to her by an admirer and are beautiful."

Chazz encouraged Teel to try everything and added more food to her plate when she would have passed it by. She laughed as the two plates became piled high with food.

They found a small table and chairs in a corner. "This is too much. I'll never be able to sleep tonight," Teel protested.

"Good. I wasn't planning on letting you anyway." Chazz grinned when she blushed. "Tell me about your modeling here in New York."

Teel tasted a shrimp and closed her eyes, savoring her favorite fish. She looked up to find Chazz watching her. "I could eat shrimp every day of the week. I love it." She reached over and speared one of his with her fork and popped it into her mouth, grinning at him with her mouth full.

"Devil." Chazz leaned over her, his tongue licking her lips. "You left a little hot sauce on the corner." When Teel fumbled for her napkin and glanced about to see who had noticed, he laughed, seeming to enjoy her confusion.

"Stop it." She looked away from a woman who was watching them. "People are staring at us." Teel tried to smile at the woman. "You've been kissing me all night," she hissed from the side of her mouth.

"And I intend to keep right on kissing you," Chazz hissed back. "And for stealing my shrimp, you get extra kisses." He leaned down again and kissed her full on the mouth.

"You're acting like a schoolboy instead of an executive of several successful firms," Teel told him, feeling giddy.

"I know," Chazz agreed. "You bring out the craziest feelings in me. I'm not the same man I was when we first met." He stared at her. "Colors are more vivid, grass is greener, flowers have a stronger scent, the air is fresher, birds seem to sing louder. It scared me at first, but now I accept that you have a powerful effect on me, lady."

"Check the exhaust on the Rolls. You're probably inhaling monoxide gas," Teel retorted, unable to suppress a happy laugh.

"Brat. Making fun of me when I'm waxing poetic."

"No doubt it's just indigestion." Teel retorted, a heady happiness ballooning through her. For a fanciful moment she thought she might have his words carved in wood so that she could keep them forever. But, no, there was no need for that. She would never forget anything Chazz Herman had ever said to her.

Chazz rose. "Time to go," he said, taking her plate and stacking it with his on the sideboard. Teel got up and opened her mouth to speak but Chazz covered her lips with two fingers. "Don't say anything, love," he whispered.

He pulled her behind him as they wandered from group to group, saying good bye. Chazz didn't hurry, but he didn't pause for long conversations either. "Come on, we have to pick up Darby in the kitchen. He'll be stuffing himself with the food Monroe will have made for him." Chazz retrieved Teel's velvet coat, studying it with narrowed eyes. "You won't let me buy you furs, but I intend to indulge myself by buying you other things."

Teel looked at him over her shoulder. "I—I don't want to be spoiled, Chazz."

"Impossible." He kissed her nose.

"You know what I mean. I don't want a—a meaningless collection of expensive trivia."

"I know exactly what you mean, love."

Darby glared at them when they entered the kitchen. "You're early." He lifted a forkful of pate into his mouth. "You wanta give me an ulcer, do ya?"

"That'll be the day," Chazz said drily. They watched the smaller man clean the mountain of food from his plate, delicately mask a burp, rise, and give an offended Monroe a pat on the backside. He pushed his chauffeur's cap to the back of his head. "I'm off, darlin'. Give my love to herself," he said to the stern-faced Monroe.

Teel bit her lip to keep from laughing at the way Darby gestured for Chazz to get moving, then chided him for being slow. Darby winked at her and continued to berate Chazz as they headed out the back and down the walk to the parked Rolls.

"Why don't I fire him?" Chazz asked once they were seated. He sighed and leaned back against the plush upholstery enfolding Teel in his arms.

"Because you trust him," she answered, gazing into the gold eyes so close to her own.

"How clearly you see things, my own," Chazz murmured. "God, I'm on fire for you."

All Teel's protests became meaningless as he began nuzzling her neck with his mouth.

"I almost went through the roof tonight when I removed your jacket and saw that dress," he said. "Lord, it was all I could do not to throw the coat back on you and my jacket as well." He loosened her coat, letting his mouth curve downward. "I have never felt like that in my life." He lifted his head, a rueful smile on his face. "I was ready to punch Trev in the nose. He knew it too. He told me I looked at every man in the room as though he were my enemy. I can't believe it." He looked down at Teel's mouth, his voice thickening. "But I don't deny it."

"I stopped necking in a car when I was a teenager," Teel told him, in what she hoped was a withering tone, but her voice came out. as a whisper.

"I like it," Chazz murmured close to her ear. "After we're married, I'm going to take you out to the park once a week and we'll neck."

Teel tried to smother a laugh. "You fool."

"About you I am."

Chazz cursed under his breath when Darby stopped in the underground garage. "Of course he wouldn't dream of letting us off at the front entrance.

He thinks this is more efficient." Chazz glared at a bland-faced Darby as he helped Teel out of the car.

"And so it is more efficient. Good night, Darby." Teel detected a thread of nervousness in her voice even though she smiled at the elfin man.

"Good night, Terese Ellen. I will see you at the wedding, if not before."

"Who says you're coming?" Chazz glowered at him.

"I'll be there, Chazz, my boy." Darby flipped his hand in a good night salute.

Silence fell between Teel and Chazz as the elevator sped them up to the apartment. One light burned in the private foyer as Chazz locked the door behind them.

"I have a key to the apartment for you, love," he told her as he ushered her inside and removed her coat. "Would you like a drink?"

"No—no, it's late." She watched him. "I have to get to sleep."

"Right." He took her arm and led her up the curving stairway to the second floor.

"Where are you sleeping?" Teel whispered.

"With you," Chazz whispered back.

"What about Mrs. Pritchett?" Teel protested, grasping at straws.

Chazz raised his eyebrows. "She would only crowd us, darling."

"You know what I mean," Teel hissed, trying to shake off his arm as he led her into a room she had never seen before, a huge circular bedroom with many doors opening off it. A huge bow window opened onto a terrace and revealed a spectacular view of Manhattan and the Hudson River. The bed was round and pulled Teel's eyes to it. "A seducer's camp cot if I ever saw one," she whispered, her lips numb.

"You're the only woman I've had in bed who has ever meant anything me," Chazz declared. "And you'll be the first to sleep in this bed. I had this room prepared especially for us."

"I'll feel like a lady of the evening."

Chazz stared at her, then pressed a button, making part of the wall slide back to reveal a closet. "To me you are virginal, my love, untouched, unspoiled, and sweeter than honey. When you marry me, it will be the happiest day of my life." He looked back at the closet. "Here are your clothes." He pointed to built-in drawers. "Here is lingerie of all kinds." He smiled at her. "I think it would be a waste of time to wear a nightie but suit yourself. I'm going to shower. I'll use the one that connects to my room. You can use this one." He pushed open a door to reveal a gold and cream tiled bath, then disappeared through another door.

Teel stared at the spot where Chazz had been for long minutes. Had he really said that to her? That she would make him happy when she married him? Oh God, Chazz, please love me, for I will love you all my days, and I haven't the courage to tell you that I won't marry you. I want it too much.

Coming out of her reverie, Teel hustled into the bathroom after grabbing a silk robe from the closet. "Eeeek!" she exclaimed at the enormity of the pool-sized bathtub. Its cream-colored tiles were repeated in the large shower cubicle. Everything but the wooden sauna was colored the muted cream, which shone with a quiet luster. Thick towels hung from several racks. Myriad soaps and shampoos filled the built-in shelves.

All at once jealousy streaked through Teel at the thought of all the women who had used this bathroom. But she shook her head, telling herself not to be silly. If Chazz said no other woman had used it, no other woman had. He would always tell her the truth. It was his way.

Teel showered and shampooed her hair, knowing she wouldn't have time in the morning. It would take awhile for her hair to dry, but at least it would be done. She dried herself in fluffy bathsheets and rubbed her hair with a smaller towel.

When she returned to the bedroom, she found Chazz in bed, reading some papers, half glasses propped on his nose. "I didn't know you wore glasses."

"Yes, for reading." He smiled at her and pushed the papers into a neat pile before shutting them into a briefcase. He swung around on the bed, putting his feet on the floor and the briefcase next to the night table. "Are you coming to me, or shall I come to you?" He removed his glasses and set them on the night table, not once taking his eyes from her.

Teel looked at him, mute, still holding the towel on her head.

"I'll dry that for you, love." Chazz walked over to her and took the towel from her hand. He rubbed gently for a few moments, then got a hairdryer from the bathroom. He blew her hair back and forth with the warm air, rubbing her head with his free hand.

The soporific effect stayed with her when he brushed her hair free of tangles, led her to the bed, and removed her robe. She blinked up at him, aware of his stillness.

"Your body is perfect," he whispered. "But I also know that if it were marked with scars it would still be perfect to me." He looked down into her eyes and smiled.

"You're blushing, love. Don't be shy with me. I'll always want to look at you."

"I'm not used to it."

"I'm glad of that," he chuckled into her neck, his hand running up her thigh to her waist.

"Will we live here?" Teel asked.

His laugh tickled her skin with warm breath. "Stalling, love? You know we intend to live in Selby so that you'll be near your work. I'll commute. We'll use the apartment when we want to stay in New York for one reason or another. All right?"

"Yes." Teel sighed, immediately forgetting what he had just said. Her body was warming to the feel of his body pressed against it. "I wear half glasses too." She slurred the words, her fingers picking at the short hair on his neck.

"Do you?" Chazz's body curved over hers, his mouth edging down her cheek. "Teel!" His breath grew ragged as his mouth took hold of one soft breast. "Darling!" He swung her up in his arms, his face still as he looked down at her. "You're the loveliest woman I've ever known."

"You're not so bad yourself." Teel's voice quavered as she felt the bed sink under his weight. "I love your hair with that little wave," she crooned, her fingers threading through the strands, feeling an electric tingle on her skin when a shudder passed through his body.

"God, Teel, you tear me apart." Chazz's eyes turned a darker gold, his passion building. "I need you," he murmured hoarsely.

She curved her body close to his, loving the velvet feel of skin against skin, warmth against warmth.

His hands convulsed on her body as his face moved down her, loving her.

Her stomach contracted as his mouth touched her. Her hands clenched on him as a volcano of feeling erupted within her. Her veins and arteries were lava, and she panted raggedly. Her heart was pounding erratically.

"I've never felt this way," she gasped into Chazz's shoulder. "I feel as though I were dying."

"Love me, angel, love me." Chazz's voice broke as he lifted himself over her, his body light yet pinning her, demanding yet giving.

A ringing sounded in Teel's ears. She seemed incapable of getting enough air into her lungs. Her body began to pulsate with a new rhythm as Chazz took her, claimed her, and joined with her. She felt as if she were breaking free and floating out of the atmosphere as the power built between them. "Chazz!" She didn't recognize the hoarse voice as her own.

They crested together, holding each other so tightly that Teel's bones felt fused to his.

The planets and stars before her eyes faded slowly. She was glad that Chazz continued to keep her in his strong grip. She had the feeling that her body would fall apart if he released her.

"Love?" Chazz leaned back from her. "I didn't hurt you, did I?" He wiped tears from her cheeks.

She shook her head, unable to speak. She saw him clearly in the glow of the lamp, a pale, urgent look on his face that she had never seen before. "You always think of making love in the darkness," Teel said dreamily, her finger traveling down his cheek. "It's nice with the light on, isn't it?"

"Yes." Chazz's face softened as he smiled down at her. "It is most enjoyable in the light. Looking at your body excites me more than anything." He grinned as her cheeks grew hot. "Still blushing? Will you be doing that when you're an old married lady?"

Teel yawned, covering her mouth with her hand, and nodded. "Probably. You say the most outrageous things." Her eyes fluttered shut, and she smiled to herself when Chazz folded her close. She fell asleep feeling utterly relaxed and at peace.

Twice more in the night Chazz woke her, and each time Teel was eager for his lovemaking, each time surprised that he could bring her up to heaven with his touch.

At last she curled her body into him quite naturally, murmuring, "I'll be a dishrag in the morning." His chuckle was the last thing she heard before a black velvet sleep claimed her.

When she opened her eyes, sun was streaming through the windows. She sensed it was late even before Chazz poked his head around the door of the bathroom.

"Sorry, love, it's my fault. I should have left a call with Darby or Mrs. Pritchett. We were both dead to the world." His chin was covered with shaving cream. "Come and take a shower." He smiled to see her gripping the sheet under her chin.

"I'll use the other bathroom," Teel said.

Chazz paused in his shaving, his smile slow, making the cream on his face part in an upward curve. "All right this time, but after we're married, we'll be showering together."

Teel's pulse rate soared, her hands trembling as they clutched the sheet. "Maybe."

"Absolutely." Chazz's head disappeared from the doorway.

Grabbing the robe that Chazz had discarded the night before in such cavalier fashion, Teel sprinted for the bathroom that connected with Chazz's bedroom.

After her shower Teel wrapped herself in a bathsheet, cursing her lack of foresight in not bringing clothes with her to put on in the bathroom. When she opened the door to get some, she found Chazz standing there, her lingerie in his hand.

"Thought you might need these." He chuckled as he handed her the small bundle. "Of course, I'd prefer that you came out here to dress..."

"No." Teel shut the door in his face, smiling when she heard his laugh.

She hurried into the undies and stockings, twisted her hair in a loose knot on her neck, and did her makeup right there, impressed with the array of cosmetics. Back in the bedroom, wrapped in her robe, Teel quickly inspected the closetful of clothes, choosing a deep green suit in a silky wool material and a silk blouse with very thin green and pink stripes on an ecru background. She found low-heeled black pumps in soft kid and a matching bag.

For the first time she noticed the glow in her face, the elusive smile that played around her mouth, the sparkle deep in her eyes. She bit her lip and closed her eyes, but she couldn't mask the warmth that was spreading through her. She was happy.

"Hey, lady." Chazz's voice rose from downstairs. "Breakfast is ready."

Teel was emptying the contents of her clutch evening bag into the day bag just as Chazz re-entered the bedroom. He stopped and hitched his shoulder against the doorjamb. "Is this what I'll have to do every morning? Get your lovely rear in gear?"

"Don't be ridiculous. I'm always punctual," Teel retorted lifting her chin in the air as she tried to sail past him.

One strong arm hooked around her waist and pulled her against a long, hard body. "First, my kiss."

Teel opened her mouth to scold him, then changed her mind and stretched up on tiptoe to fix her mouth to his.

"There," she told him, a little out of breath, watching his eyes turn dark with desire.

"Ummm, you taste good."

Chazz made as though to pull her more fully into his arms, but Teel ducked away from him and sprinted down the stairs, calling over her shoulder, "It's late. Hurry up." She laughed when he cursed. She felt as if her feet were touching ground at every other step as she waltzed into the breakfast room and caroled, "Good morning, Mrs. Pritchett."

"Good morning, miss." The older woman smiled at her indulgently. "You look happy this morning."

Teel felt the blood rushing to her face, but she smiled more widely. "I am, thank you." She looked past Mrs. Pritchett to the sideboard, her mouth beginning to water at the sight of eggs and ham, kippers and croissants, and

silver-dollar-sized hot cakes. Holding a plate in one hand, she paused before the food and sniffed appreciatively of the coffee Mrs. Pritchett was pouring from the silver pot.

A hand reached in front of her and scooped egg and ham onto her plate. "Toast or hot cakes, love? The jam is homemade."

"I can't decide." Teel assumed a stricken expression as she gazed from Chazz to her plate. "I can't imagine why I'm so hungry."

"I can." He leaned over and whispered, "Lovemaking is the next best exercise to swimming."

"Hogwash," Teel exclaimed, looking sideways to see if Mrs. Pritchett had heard him and feeling relieved when she saw that the older woman had returned to the kitchen. "You shouldn't talk like that in front of Mrs. Pritchett," she scolded as he set the plates on the table next to each other and held out her chair for her.

Chazz shrugged, watching Teel as he took his seat. "She didn't hear me." He lifted a forkful of egg from his plate and fed it to her, smiling when she, "ahhhhhed" her enjoyment. Even though they were rushed, they took time to enjoy their meal.

Suddenly Teel clamped a hand to her mouth. "I should have called Nancy."

"I told your office you would be a little late," Chazz informed Teel, wiping her chin with his napkin.

"Thank you." Teel felt shy. "I suppose she'll question me unmercifully." She sighed, lifting one shoulder in a fatalistic shrug, not really feeling uncomfortable.

"Ignore them all." Chazz went with her when she returned to the bedroom to brush her teeth and get her bag. "We'll be married soon," he added.

"There are a few more things to do first." Teel gulped. Her voice sounded thin and unsteady.

"Hurry it up then," Chazz told her. "I'm not waiting forever. I want to get married now."

"Yes," Teel capitulated, absolutely certain for the first time that she was going to marry Chazz Herman. The thought filled her with a quiet, steady happiness, a calm that entered every part of her body.

They went down the elevator in silence, hand in hand.

Outside, Darby wished them a good morning, his eyes twinkling.

Once in the car, Chazz pulled Teel close to him. "Love, I have a meeting, so Darby's dropping me off first. I'll see you tonight at home. All right? Alexander has to fly some of the corporate staff to a meeting in Pittsburgh, so I'll be flying the Cessna to Selby."

Teel nodded, suddenly sad at the thought of being away from Chazz for a whole day. When the Rolls pulled over to the curb in front of his office building, she clung to him for a brief moment and returned his kiss with fierce ardor. He seemed surprised but pleased, and with a last gentle caress on her cheek and a jaunty wave, he stepped out of the car and disappeared inside.

THE TRIP BACK to Selby was uneventful, but Teel's late arrival meant that she was buried in work until after six that evening. She was rubbing the back of her neck when Nancy and Clint Wills walked into the office. She looked up at them, surprised. "Hi. I thought you two had gone home. Are you here to pick me up early for the shower, Nancy?"

"No." Nancy's voice sounded strained, and she sniffed.

Teel stared at her, alarmed. Nancy had been crying. Teel glanced at Clint. His face had a pinched look to it. "What's wrong?" she asked, wariness assailing her, then panic. "Tell me. Is it Chazz? Tell me!" Her voice sounded shrill in the otherwise silent room.

"There was a plane crash," Nancy said hoarsely. "The announcement came over Clint's police radio. He called the sheriff."

"Les Tillman is my brother-in-law," Clint explained. "He said the man's wallet identified him as Charles Herman. Don't look like that, Teel. He's in the hospital. Les said he was unconscious, but that it didn't look bad." Clint swallowed hard and patted Teel's arm as she stood rigidly in front of him, both hands pressed to her mouth.

"The plane lost power and Chazz crash-landed in a field just short of the runway. He was all the way down and it looked all right, but he must have hit a tree stump or something because the plane flipped over." Clint took a deep breath. "I called Nancy because I thought you would want her along when I take you to the hospital."

Teel nodded numbly, unable to speak, and squeezed Clint's hand in silent thanks. The car ride seemed to take forever even though the hospital was located only ten minutes from the school.

Later, Teel had no memory of what Nancy or Clint said to her or what the nurses and doctor told her. She only knew that she had to see Chazz. She would make him get better no matter how bad it was.

When she stepped inside the door of the private room and saw him lying there, his face white, his eyes closed, she froze. Though her brain registered that there were no tubes coming from his body attached to life-sustaining apparatus, that he was not heavily bandaged, enervating shock coursed through her body.

To her surprise, his eyes opened and his mouth curved upward in a boyish grin. Was he all right? Suddenly he looked fine.

She stepped forward tentatively, still unsure. "Chazz," she breathed. "Are you badly hurt?"

"I'm fine, love. Fit as a fiddle," he replied blithely. "Just resting up a bit is all."

All at once Teel was angry. "You frightened me to death," she cried, trembling with relief and rage. "I thought you might be dying—or at least have broken bones." She shook a fist at him, tears streaming down her face as she shut the door forcefully behind her and stalked over to the bed.

Chazz sat up, wrapping his arms around her and pulling her down on the bed with him, soothing her as she cried out her fear and frustration. Several attendants entered the room, but Chazz said something to them, and then they were alone.

"It's all right, love," he murmured. "I made it down just fine, but I must have hit a rock or something as the plane was beginning to stop. No broken bones, nothing but a scratch on my arm and a bump on my head. Don't cry." Chazz held her close, rocking her. "They tell me that I landed not too far from the carriage house." He kissed her forehead. "I guess I was in too much of a hurry to see my woman." He chuckled softly.

"That's not funny." Teel sniffed and wound her arms around his neck. "I couldn't bear to lose you." She tightened her hold. "I just couldn't bear it."

The doctor came in just then to talk to Chazz about staying overnight for tests. Teel nodded in agreement, but Chazz shook his head. "Chazz, you must stay—just to make sure," Teel pleaded.

"I *am* sure." He kissed her nose, then turned to the doctor. "You've run some tests already, haven't you?" At the doctor's slow nod, Chazz continued, "I'm getting married next week, and my fiancée and I have things to do that need our attention. Could you give me an educated guess about the state of my health? I know I feel fine except for the throbbing in my arm and head."

The doctor stared at Chazz for a few moments. "I'd prefer that you stay, but I feel that you're in pretty good shape and could be released tomorrow with a clean bill of health."

"Good." Chazz squeezed Teel.

"But if you feel dizzy or nauseated at all tonight or tomorrow, come back." The doctor shook a finger at Chazz.

"He will," Teel promised, her voice firm, one arm around Chazz's waist.

The two men smiled at her.

As they left the hospital, they met Nancy and Clint in the waiting room. Teel suddenly remembered the shower, but Nancy reassured her. She had already telephoned everyone and rescheduled the event.

Chazz was fine. Chazz was fine. The words rang in Teel's head just over a week later as she dressed for her wedding. She looked down at the cream-colored lace that her Aunt Tessa had brought for her from Spain. Her friend Charine had fashioned it into a mantilla-like veil. The ecru silk gown that Charine had made for her swirled out behind her to form a train. Veil lace edged the sleeves and formed a bertha around the low neckline. Tiers of silk material were caught at the dropped waist to create a modified bustle, which made Teel's small waist look even smaller. Her neck rose from the almost off-the-shoulder style like a slender column. Her skin glowed like translucent porcelain.

Aunt Tessa was giving her away and, though she promised not to cry, she had pushed several lace-edged hankies up the sleeve of her sky-blue dress.

Nancy was her only attendant. "You're the most beautiful bride I've ever seen," she told Teel, sniffing discreetly.

Darby drove them to the church in the Rolls-Royce, patiently answering all Aunt Tessa's questions about the limousine.

At the church Teel looked down the aisle and saw Father Gargan and Rabbi Levine standing side by side. She was very grateful to both clergymen for rearranging their schedules so that they could assist at her and Chazz's wedding on such short notice.

When the organ played the processional, she walked down the aisle, never taking her eyes off Chazz. He stared back at her, heat leaping in his eyes.

Later, Teel couldn't remember saying her vows, but she did remember seeing both clergymen lift their hands in a blessing. Vaguely, she heard someone say, and "You may kiss the bride."

Chazz turned her toward him, and she looked up and smiled. "I love you," she murmured, her voice as clear as a bell in the sudden silence of the church.

Someone tittered. Someone whispered, "Did she say what I think she did?"

Teel didn't pay any attention. She only watched Chazz. She felt relaxed and serene as she stared up into his familiar face.

"Darling." His voice was hoarse.

"You may kiss the bride now," Rabbi Levine whispered once more.

As the organ music swelled, Chazz pulled Teel close. His mouth touched hers in a tender caress that held a promise of passion and enough love to last them all their lives.

The reception was held at the Selby Museum. Chazz had arranged the catering from a New York firm, but when the local ladies asked him if they might bring their own dishes as well, he had kindly encouraged them. Virtually the whole town was invited because Teel couldn't think of one family she could exclude. Few of Chazz's business associates attended, because Chazz had assured them that they would have another reception in New York in the near future. Nevertheless, he took great pride in introducing Teel to the small number of his associates who did attend. And he neither left Teel's side nor let go of her hand the entire time. "How does it feel to be married, Mrs. Herman?" he asked.

"Lovely." Teel felt unaccountably shy with him. The look in his eye was possessive, but even more than that, she had the feeling that she could step inside his eyes and revel in that golden world.

When it was time to change, Tilda and Nancy came with her. "I think it's nice that you're going to take a week on the yacht," Tilda said, and she smiled when Teel's mouth fell open. Tilda wrinkled her nose in dismay. "Oh, I wasn't supposed to tell you!" She shrugged, then grinned when Teel and Nancy laughed. "Teel, dear, one of the crew has taken your portrait to the *Deirdre*, so you'll have your own surprise for Chazz."

"How can I ever thank you?" Teel asked, hugging the small woman with sincere warmth.

"You can't," Tilda answered tersely, "so just go and enjoy yourselves."

In no time at all they were flying southward toward where the *Deirdre* was docked. "My lovely aunt told you, didn't she?" Chazz whispered as he held Teel against his shoulder.

"Yes." She laughed, hugging her secret about the painting to herself.

It was a relief to land and know that it was only a short drive to the ocean. With Chazz at her side, the time seemed to fly past.

"We'll just cruise in the Caribbean for a few days," Chazz said as he helped Teel out of the car and led her down into the forward cabin, looking

surprised when she gasped at the size of the room and how it was outfitted. "That's right. You've never been in here before, have you? Do you like it?"

She nodded, staring around at the oak-trimmed stateroom, which was dominated by a king-sized bed.

"Tell me again," Chazz's voice demanded, bringing Teel's head around to him.

She didn't pretend not to know what he meant. She swallowed once. "I love you," she whispered, her eyes steady on him.

"Thank God for that." His mouth quirked in amusement, but Teel knew that the fire leaping in his eyes expressed his deeper feelings. He reached out and pulled her into his arms. "When you said that at the end of the ceremony, I wasn't sure I heard you correctly. Lord, darling, you choose the most public places to tell me your most important—and most private—thoughts. I almost picked you up then and there and ran out of the church with you."

Teel smothered a sigh. She would never regret having told him she loved him, but how she yearned to hear the same words from his own lips.

"I've loved you since I leaned over the side of the *Deirdre* and saw you lying unconscious in the dinghy," Chazz told her.

"What?" Teel pushed back from him, her eyes searching his face. "You love me?"

Chazz frowned. "Of course I love you. I've told you often enough."

"You've *never* told me." Teel felt her sinuses open up and her head clear. Her body felt pliant, alive, and strong. Her thoughts seemed to regroup in an intelligible order. She suddenly felt capable of outstanding feats. Her spirit soared. "You love me," she repeated simply.

"Of course. Everyone knows that. How could you not know it?"

"Dumb, huh?"

"Very." Chazz enfolded her in his arms and slowly began to undress her. "Are you hungry? There's a lovely bridal dinner awaiting us."

"How nice," Teel answered, unbuttoning his shirt. "I hope it's a casserole. It will have to wait." She smiled up at him, confidence coursing through her.

"Quite awhile, I think." Chazz's breath grew ragged.

"How I've chased you, woman. You had me scared witless."

"Not true." Teel stood in front of him clad only in silk bikini panties, the flesh-colored fabric hiding nothing from her husband's ardent gaze.

"Very true, my love. I held you in my arms when you were unconscious, and all I wanted to do was make you well so that I could marry you. You were all the dreams of women that I'd ever had, all rolled into one bruised and scarred package. You have very few scars left now from your ordeal in Central America, but my love for you is the same." He took her hands, smiling down at her. "No, that's not true. I love you much more now and still more every minute." He lifted her hands to his mouth and kissed each palm. "You have a beautiful body."

"So do you," Teel said, feeling a little out of breath and giddy when Chazz chuckled. She watched his muscular upper torso rise and fall, the arrowed patch of curling black hair having an erotic effect on her senses. She couldn't control the urge to touch him and, wriggling one hand free of his grasp, she reached forward and gently pulled at his chest hair. She saw the leaping gold of his eyes and thought of the painting over the fireplace in the apartment. Painting! It was on board the *Deirdre*. Darby must have put it in the lounge area.

"Hey, beautiful wife, you've left me. Where are you?" Chazz demanded, nuzzling her neck.

"I want to go to the lounge."

"What?" He leaned back to look at her.

Teel took his hand and pulled him over to the cupboard, where she rifled through the clothes and pulled out two terry-cloth robes. She put on one and held out the other to Chazz.

He closed his eyes, then opened them and stared at her. "Lady, I hope you have a good reason for breaking the romantic mood I was in."

"I do," Teel promised. She pinched his chin and smiled up at him, giddy with confidence. "Besides, I don't think it will take much to put us in the mood again."

Chazz grinned. "You're right." He led her from the stateroom, interrupting their progress with frequent kisses.

Teel ran ahead of him into the lounge and deliberately blocked his entrance until she saw the painting propped up on an easel facing the door. She gasped at how beautiful Tilda had made her look in the vibrant sea-green dress, her hair a chestnut fire, her eyes luminous with love. She seemed to be stepping through a sea mist. She and the dress seemed alight with an inner fire.

She stepped aside and let a puzzled Chazz enter. His eyes remained on her until she turned toward the painting.

At once his gaze was riveted to it. He swallowed and took a deep, shuddering breath. "Tilda has given me the best present of my life, except for the gift of the real you, which I received this morning." He looked down at her, and Teel saw the shimmer of tears in his eyes. "I love you, Mrs. Herman."

She reached up to cradle his head in her hands and kissed him gently. "I love you too."

He swung her up into his arms, looked at the painting for long moments, then left the lounge and made his way back to their cabin.

He set her down on her feet and removed the terry-cloth robe. His eyes roved hungrily over her body as she stood naked in front of him. "Woman, I

hope you're going to take pity on me. I have a feeling I won't be able to deny you anything you ask me—ever." Again Chazz swept her up into his arms.

"Really?"

"Really," he murmured into her neck.

"Then... I would like a baby... right away."

Chazz leaned back from her, searching her face intently, his expression a mixture of hope and concern. "Are you sure that's what you want?"

Teel nodded, feeling warmth creep up her face. "Yes," she said lightly. "After all, since we're having four, I think we should get started."

Chazz kissed her cheek, sinking with her onto the king-sized bed. "Very efficient of you." A slow smile spread across his face. "Tilda will go out of her mind. She loves children."

"And you won't mind?"

"No, my lovely Teel, I won't mind. You can't know how much I want us to have children together." He nuzzled her chin, taking little bites of her skin. "Of course, I will demand some time alone with you."

"All the time you want, husband."

"Darling, you just promised me your every waking moment, not to mention all your sleeping time," he growled into her ear.

Teel traced his features with a light finger. "You're the first man I've ever met that I truly enjoy talking with, except my father."

"I want to do more than talk with you." Chazz stroked her body from shoulder to ankle, his mouth following his hand.

"Yes, I rather got that idea." Teel's breath came in short gasps, as though she had just run up two flights of stairs. "Will you always love me, Chazz?" Her voice had a hollow, detached sound.

"Till the earth falls off its axis and then some. You're both dream and reality to me. Without you, breathing is a waste of time," he murmured into the valley between her breasts.

"Oh Chazz,..that's the way I feel, too. I love you so much."

The love flowing between them increased until they were caught in the vortex that spun through ^{their} own private world.

Teel's last coherent thought was how delightful it was going to be to have a baby who looked just like the man she loved with all her heart. Being enthralled with Chazz Herman was very sweet indeed.