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Second Chance at Love

INNOCENT SEDUCTION



CALLY HUGHES

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Cally Hughes

Eileen Younger fell immediately in love with Talbot Wendell's boyish charm and sensual good looks. And she knew, as only a woman can, that he was attracted to her. Yet why did he act so strangely? Why was he so aloof? Why did he make cutting remarks about her career as a cartoonist?

When their desire finally bursts in a torrent of passion, the beautiful redhead forgets her questions in the ecstasy of love. . . until Talbot tells her why he's been so cold, a revelation so shattering that it may destroy their love forever.

PROLOGUE

JOHN TALBOT WENDELL glanced up as redheaded, fiery- bearded Mel Jenkins paused in the door of his office at ITT and said, "Lunchtime! How about going to Paley Park this noon for hot dogs... and maybe just a tad of girl-watching?"

"Fine," Talbot agreed. He straightened his papers, rose from his desk, and joined Mel. They took the crowded elevator and exited the building with the noontime throng. Talbot took a deep breath. The day was cooler and less humid than it usually was in August, and the park would be very pleasant.

Paley had all the prerequisites of the perfect city park, according to a report Talbot remembered watching on PBS one night. With its wonderful waterfall, located right in the middle of midtown Manhattan on East Fifty-third Street, it was a superior pocket park. He could see why New Yorkers cherished their parks, which provided a place to meet friends, for artists and book vendors to sell their wares, and for actors and musicians to perform.

It was nice outside, and after buying hot dogs and soft drinks, they stood in the ebb and flow of the lunchtime crowd, watching the girls in their summer dresses. Several passersby, friends of Mel, stopped to say hello, and Mel introduced Talbot to them. One man said, "There she is—the girl in pink."

They all glanced around, and the man, whose name Talbot hadn't caught, went on, "She's expensive, but I've heard she's worth the price. I couldn't afford her." His voice was regretful.

"Which one?" several men asked at once.

"The one in pink," he said again. "Over there." He indicated the direction with his chin.

As if drawn by a magnet, Talbot's eyes locked on a mahogany-haired woman who wore a pink dress. She was stunning! She was slender, and nicely rounded, and she was laughing. She laughed as if it was... fun. She looked fresh and charming and clean. She was chatting easily with a man;

seeing that, Talbot felt an odd stab of something he couldn't define. "She doesn't look like one," he commented doubtfully.

"None of the pros do," the man replied knowingly. "They can make it seem like a first time, that it's true love, and they just blundered into knowing all the tricks."

"That golden hair," one man said and groaned. "I wonder if it's real."

Golden? Talbot considered. Yes, there were golden highlights where the sun hit her mahogany hair. "And clean," Talbot added rather pensively as the woman he was watching said good-bye to one man and walked away with another.

"Oh, yes," was the cynical reply.

Then Mel asked, "Are you going to Ohio's opening this weekend?"

The man laughed and said, "No. Thanks but no thanks." He lifted a hand in farewell as he left.

Talbot gloomily watched the mahogany-haired call girl walk out of sight, chatting with the man as if they were good friends and not just—business partners. Mel asked, "Hey, Talbot, how about going to a friend's opening at the Gallery?"

Talbot answered with a dispirited "Okay."

CHAPTER ONE

A VOICE BABBLED into the earpiece of Eileen Younger's phone. "... and he'd seen that article—the one you wrote, remember? The nasty one about men."

Eileen stiffened and held the phone from her ear to give it a murderous glare, then she enunciated, "No, that article was not nasty. It was a character study that just happened to slice to the core of some men!"

"Well, whatever. But it scared him silly, and he didn't want to meet you." She didn't sound grieved. "It makes it very difficult for your friends to find you dates."

"So don't worry about it."

"Oh, Eileen, that article, in addition to your cartoons, scares them off! They think you're mentally drawing cartoons of them or writing another devastating article— about *them*!"

"I have to go," Eileen said, her tone barely civil. "Call me another time."

"You always say that, Eileen, but I usually get just your automatic answering tape, and you never return my calls."

"You're on the list," Eileen replied, but she didn't specify what sort of list. "Good-bye." And she hung up while the woman was still gabbling.

That article! Eileen wondered who had originally copied it, and she mentioned again to the Lord that it would be nice if the person was tracked down and struck by some disaster. Nothing fatal, but something suitably irritating.

She wasn't sorry she'd written it. In a fury she'd dashed it off after Homer-the-bastard had almost raped her. It was scathingly witty, however unpublishable, and dealt with the man's preoccupation with his private parts. Although they'd grown, he hadn't.

The only problem was that someone had read it by accident and copied it. And it had been recopied and handed on with glee.

For Eileen, the real-life experience hadn't been at all amusing. Homer had nearly succeeded in forcing himself on her but by chance the duchess had arrived, like the Marines.

Actually, to compare the duchess to the Marines was as ridiculous as believing she had the strength to stop a rape. Eileen had to shake her head over the tiny old lady. The duchess had to be one hundred and ten, conservatively. But she claimed blandly to be sixty. She was just over four feet tall and probably weighed eighty pounds.

Eileen got up and walked to her mirror, thinking that the cartoons alone were problem enough, without the article. She poked at her mahogany hair. She could blame the cartoons on Grandmother Phoebe. Her mother had pointed out often enough, "You're *very* like your Grandmother Younger. Around Phoebe, no one's private vanities are safe." Her mother's comment had made it clear that the talent of pointing out people's foibles in cartoons wasn't necessarily one to brag about.

But Eileen's cartoons made her a lot of money. She leaned toward the mirror and looked for wrinkles. Too much money was probably why she was a twenty-eight- year-old divorcee. She squinched up her face and then smoothed it out in order to see if any lines stayed.

Poor Tom. He had probably asked for the transfer knowing full well it would be an excuse to end their marriage. They'd pretended for almost a year, letting the marriage drag on, and since she made more money she'd done most of the traveling that allowed them to be together. Still, it hadn't worked. In the end neither of them had had the determination to make it work. Actually, Eileen knew, the divorce had been a relief for both of them.

It wasn't only the fact that she made more money than he did. It had been the sex, too. She liked sex a lot, but she'd often wondered if Tom did. He rarely initiated it, and even when she did, he refused about half the time. She'd lived alone now for two years and missed having a man in bed.

She wondered if marriage was for her. Men did seem to find her unsettling. There was the money, and some of them found her appallingly independent, and too many people had read that elusive article. She supposed a man might, indeed, wonder if she was mentally drawing a cartoon of him or composing another article with him as the subject. In general, men were very insecure.

Eileen went to her closet and sorted through the clothes in a desultory way, looking for something to wear that would encourage her to make the effort to go to the Gallery that evening for Ohio's opening. She thought about the people who would be there and acknowledged that she was fortunate to have such a satisfying number of really good friends. She should be content with life.

But it lacked focus, she decided as she found herself staring out her window at the building across the street. In spite of her friends, she was often alone. She faced the fact squarely—she was a little lonely. There was no one with whom she came first, and she needed to find someone to care about in return.

She brushed her mahogany mane and fastened it on top of her head to be cooler, then applied a minimum of makeup. She was dawdling because she didn't really want to go. She glanced out the window again, thinking how the concrete jungle absorbed the sun's heat all day and released it all night, making the city an oven. She wanted to stay in her airy apartment and read a good book, that was what she wanted to do. She sighed and told "-."-elf. You have no choice, Eileen. Ohio needs- you. He's one of the group.

Ohio needed more than the group. What he really needed was talent. Too bad he couldn't adopt talent as he'd adopted the name Ohio. He'd mimicked Robert Indiana, who'd done the stacked sculpture "Love." Ohio thought that if he had a similar name he could duplicate Indiana's success. But it took more than just a name.

And his paintings were awful. Eileen slid a cautious look at the bamboo wall screened by tall potted palms, which held Ohio's gift paintings. Even without actually looking at them, she flinched. His paintings never sold, and predictably, he was a prodigious painter. He gave small renderings to his

friends, who were all equally hard-pressed to find something kind to say about the gifts.

Eileen sighed again, dreading having to go into the hot August evening. Grimly she put on a light yellow silk suit and prepared to sally forth bravely.

She carried her cash in a small needlepoint purse, the chain of which crossed her body from left shoulder to right hip. Wearing high heels, she clattered down the stairs from her loft in SoHo and emerged onto the street, where she successfully hailed the third cab that passed.

On the way to the Gallery, she considered how the rest of the group was probably as reluctant to attend as she was. But they'd all be there. They all felt obligated to go to Ohio's openings, because you never knew if anyone else would show up. Well, at least she would get to see her friends. They could chat as they walked around, sipping wine and trying to invent acceptable words to feed to Ohio's hungry ego—yet not jeopardize their souls. Thinking about the Ten Commandments warning about bearing false witness, she decided that friendship could be burdensome as she arrived at the Gallery.

Moments later, as she sipped her first glass of wine, Ohio came over to her and asked eagerly, "How do you like it?" He smiled the vulnerable smile of a parent showing off his child as he indicated the room filled with his paintings.

"Stunning." The word slipped out of Eileen's mouth. She nodded gratefully, relieved that her tongue had chosen an acceptable description, and she smiled gently at Ohio. She hadn't lied. It was, indeed, stunning, for the impact numbed her mind.

"Everyone says you're so mean." Ohio took her hand as his eyes blurred with tears. "But you're really very sweet." He led her to an overwhelming canvas and asked, "Tell me your—abdominal reaction to 'Abstract 127.'" His lips parted and he peered intensely at her, waiting.

Now what in God's name was she going to say? "I believe I... must study it for a while... uh... from different angles... before I can... decide." She gasped mentally and finished, "It's very complex."

Ohio beamed at her and exclaimed, "You understand!" In his enthusiasm he grasped her arms roughly and awkwardly kissed both her cheeks. "Oh, I must tell Joe!" He released her so abruptly that she crashed into a man's hard form and her full wineglass spilled on both of them.

There was a flurry of moppings as they both accepted the blame and apologized repeatedly, but Eileen's humor bubbled to the surface and she whispered, "Thank God you came along. I had no idea what to say about 'Abstract 127'! You've saved my life. According to the old Chinese proverb, you are now totally responsible for me. Lots of luck." She laughed and looked up... into a stranger's face! She bit her lower lip and added, "Oh, I beg your pardon. I thought you were one of us! You see... well..." What if he was an art critic there to review the show?

What if she'd just ruined Ohio's big chance? She stared, appalled.

But not so appalled that she didn't notice him. If he *was* an art critic, he was certainly an attractive one— about thirty, tall, wide shouldered, with dark brown hair that was casually tousled about his nicely shaped head. Under his shaggy dark brows, behind the screen of incredibly thick eyelashes, his eyes were intensely blue. Very nice.

He was staring at her as if stunned. He didn't say anything, just stared. He wasn't flirting, as men often did, or trying to be friendly, as men usually did. He just stared soberly. It was somewhat unnerving. It was almost as if he planned to call the butler to count the silver. In an apprehensive whisper Eileen asked, "Are you an art critic?"

He shook his head. "No. I came with Mel Jenkins."

"Oh!" she exclaimed in a rush of relief. "I hadn't meant to insult 'Abstract 127.' But there are *never* strangers at one of Ohio's openings, so when I blurted out about the painting, I felt sure that whoever had absorbed the other half of my wineglass would be a fellow sufferer." She pulled her

blouse, which was revealingly wet and clinging to her breasts, away from her body.

Although his eyes did not leave her—in fact, they seemed glued to her—he seemed excessively wary, as if she might leap on him and sink her teeth into his neck and turn him into a bat. Her curiosity aroused, she stared back at him. She saw him compose himself and glance around, as if to reassure himself that other people were present and he wasn't alone with her. No man ever acted so strangely with her, and she peeked down at her chest to be sure she was inside her clothes and the silk wasn't clinging too badly. Then she smoothed her hair on the off chance that she looked like Medusa, but her curly locks weren't completely out of control. What was the matter with this interesting man?

Mel Jenkins came up to them. He was bulky and redheaded, with a full fiery beard. He greeted her easily, put a casual arm across her shoulder, and leaned over to give her cheek a chaste kiss. "So you've met the newcomer to our intrepid little group."

She shook her head in denial. "If you mean him, no. It would be nice to know who I just poured my glass of wine over and inadvertently christened."

"John Talbot Wendell," Mel proclaimed. "He goes by Talbot because he says there are enough Johns in the world. He's an MBA with ITT." Mel grinned easily. "Tal, this is Eileen Younger. Since you've been here for over six months, you undoubtedly know about her work. She's an extremely talented young lady."

Eileen nodded to Talbot, but he still had that sober, cautious expression on his face. He looked almost uncomfortable. Eileen told Mel, "I said something totally reckless about 'Abstract 127' when I dumped my glass on Talbot"—when she said his name, she saw his lips part in a gasp. Was he in pain?—"and *then* I realized he wasn't one of us, and I thought, Oh, no, he's an art critic!"

Mel raised his eyebrows and glanced along the walls before he asked, "Which one is 'Abstract 127'?"

"The big one."

"Oh." Mel's tone was dull.

"That's my impression, too," she confided. "What are we going to say to Ohio about it?"

"What did you say so far?" Mel asked warily.

"I said I would.. I don't think I'll tell you. It's not a bad comment, and I found it quite by accident. It's reusable."

"For goodness sake, *share!*" Mel commanded.

"You didn't share 'whimsical' that time with the rest of us," she reminded him.

"I hadn't realized it'd make such an impression. It's terrible his ego is so starved. Why can't he become a fad? If someone would just buy *one*. Someone from outside the group..." Their eyes fastened on Talbot.

"That small one over there, 'The Leaf,' isn't revolting," he said.

"Could you bring yourself to buy it?" Mel urged. "I think he'd sell it for a quarter."

"You can't offer a quarter for it!" Eileen scolded, exasperated. "That'd be insulting!" She looked at Talbot. "Would you actually buy one?"

"If it means that much to him." He shrugged.

"How very kind you are!" She looked closer at him and found him even more attractive than before. She was surprised, too, to feel her body respond to him. Was she reacting to the way he looked or to his kindness? It had been so long since she'd felt attracted to a man, she wasn't sure.

Mel excused himself, saying he needed to talk to Beth before she left. Eileen knew he'd been trying to rivet Beth's attention for several months, but she

was making him sweat. After he left, there was an awkward pause between Eileen and Talbot.

Then Talbot asked, "Were you at Paley Park last— Wednesday noon?" His expression was so intent, she realized her reply was important to him.

She smiled slightly, thinking back. "Wednesday? Let's see..."

"You were wearing a pink dress," he prodded.

"Oh, yes!" she agreed, smiling wider and looking up at him. "I remember. I was there. Were you?"

He looked so grim! "Yes. A man pointed you out." His mouth turned sour. "He told us what you do—for a living."

"Oh, really?" Her reply was noncommittal. She got so tired of defending her cartoons, and apparently Talbot Wendell disapproved of them. That was too bad, although she was surprised to realize she cared what he thought. She asked hesitantly, "Do you mind what I do?"

He looked away abruptly, and she knew he *did* care, but he only said, "To each his own." His voice was bitter as he added, "Mel just said—that you're—talented." It was as if the words had been dragged through his teeth and he'd thrown down a gauntlet.

Carefully neutral, she replied with studied ease, "Friends tend to say nice things."

"How *good* a friend?" he demanded.

"Well, he's a concerned friend."

"You've slept with him?" He snapped out the question.

"Good heavens, no!" she protested, laughing. "That would ruin our friendship."

A waiter brought them more wine, and they stood sipping it. Talbot watched her, his face stiff, obviously wanting to leave her but not leaving. Suddenly he asked, "Do all these people know what you do?"

"Well, of course!" She frowned at him. "It's no secret. But men do have trouble adjusting to my—product. I suppose that's the word." She gestured with one hand. "And some men are intimidated by the money I make."

"So you make a lot?" His voice was harsh.

"A ridiculous amount," she replied airily and grinned, wanting to share her amusement over such a thing. But he didn't warm to her at all. After another long, awkward silence, she finally suggested, "Why don't you buy 'The Leaf' now and give Ohio's whole evening a sparkle?"

"How much should I offer?" He didn't seem very interested.

"Actually, he'll probably give it to you, he'll be so thrilled that you want it. It would be nice if you could offer him a hundred originally, but he'll talk you down after he recovers and cries a little."

"He'll *cry*?" Talbot looked appalled.

"Oh, yes. He's extremely emotional," Eileen explained.

"*You* buy it!"

She shook her head emphatically. "I cannot *stand* to have another of his paintings. You have to display them! I have a whole wall I can't bear to look at."

Disgruntled, Talbot declared, "I can't handle a man crying."

"But he'll laugh, too, and be so pleased," she coaxed.

"Good lord, what have I gotten into?" he said almost to himself. He seemed unusually upset. It had to be something other than the debate to buy the picture. "I think I'll just take off and forget this whole thing."

That would include his talking with her. Did he regret meeting her? Just because she drew cartoons? She watched him a little woefully, not saying anything.

"Don't look at me like that," he growled at her.

"Like what?" "Like I'm going to kill the cat." He glanced absently around the room.

That made her curious. "Have you killed a cat?"

"Not lately."

"Why would you have killed a cat?"

"My dad and big brother were gone, my sisters were bawling, and my mother looked at me the way you just did. She couldn't handle killing it and depended on me to do it. It had been mangled by the fan on the car motor. It had gotten up into the car and sat there where it was warm, and Mother had to go somewhere and got in and the fan hit the cat. It was chaos."

"How old were you?"

"Fifteen. I sat in the barn afterward and cried." He pressed his lips into a thin line and looked belligerently around the room. It was probably the first time he'd ever told anyone the story.

She held his arm and touched her head briefly to his shoulder in sympathy, but he went rigid. How strange. He probably still felt bad about the cat. "Remember, you don't have to buy 'Abstract 127,'" she consoled him,.

"If he cries or throws his arms around me, I'll walk right out of here."

"Oh, he won't touch you," she assured him. "Joe would get upset."

"Oh. Which one's Joe?" He glanced around.

Guess."

Talbot moved slowly and surveyed the thirty-odd people drifting around, talking and sipping wine and looking as if they were trying to avoid looking at the crowded walls. "That big bouncer?" he guessed.

"How did you know?"

"I think Ohio must need a strong, protective friend if he's the weepy type."

"He's very sensitive," she said, defending Ohio. "Very compassionate. I twisted my ankle once and was bed-bound and he came and stayed with me—cleaned, cooked, and was just so sweet. Joe did the shopping."

"Joe wasn't jealous?"

"Not of a woman." She shook her head slowly.

Silently he examined the other people more shrewdly, then he said, "They all look ordinary. Ohio would, too, if the color of his clothes was a little more discreet." His eyes came back to Eileen and included her in his evaluation.

So he thought she looked ordinary? No one had ever told her that, not even under the worst circumstances. She couldn't avoid a slight quirk of her lips and knew amusement danced in her gray eyes. Talbot was staring at her as if he was transfixed.

Suddenly he blurted, "Your hair is spectacular," and he immediately looked startled, as if he was surprised he'd said it out loud. Hurriedly he went on, "The yellow of your dress—suit—it's beautiful with your hair. But I suppose all the men you—work with—say that." His compliment sounded grudging.

Pleased, however reluctant he had been, she replied artlessly, "How I look doesn't enter into my work."

"It has to!" He actually sounded angry.

"Well, maybe at first, but then they forget it."

"Because of your—*talents*?" he asked harshly.

Maybe he'd read the article and thought the callous opinion of one man expressed there was her view of all men. She told him gently, "I like men."

But that didn't help, for he gave her a scathing look and said, "Naturally!"

He was baffling. She considered giving up on him. He was so hostile, and without cause, that he must have many quirks in his character. For that matter, he looked ordinary. She gave him little peeks, looking away when he caught her studying him. But she didn't leave his side. They just stood there, not speaking. Eileen was deeply puzzled by the electric communication between their bodies.

Mel drifted back to them and sneered at her with a great deal of humor. "So you have to *study* 'Abstract 127'? Because it's *complex*?"

"He told!" She put her hand to her head in exaggerated pain.

"He's told *every* one. That'll teach you to be selfish." Mel was pleased. "How are you two getting on?"

"Fine." Talbot's retort was so unconvincing that it made Mel raise inquiring brows, but neither Talbot nor Eileen added anything. It was awkward.

"Are you buying 'The Leaf'?" Mel asked Talbot.

Talbot sighed with impatient exasperation and said, "Only if you'll go with me. I can't handle weepy grateful men."

Mel placated him. "Joe will do that. He's very tenderhearted, at least when it comes to Ohio. In business he has no heart at all. He's a holy terror and drives the hardest bargains ever. That's why he's cornered the money market."

"He has?" Talbot took another look at Joe.

"Just about. Pretty soon the Arabs will be taking lessons from him."

"What does he do?" Talbot wanted to know.

"You name it." Mel shrugged.

"I thought he was probably a bouncer at some disco. He looks as if he carries a blackjack in his hip pocket," Talbot added recklessly.

"You're right about the zapper, anyway."

Talbot told Mel, "You run with a strange bunch."

Eileen realized he was including her again. But Mel replied with pleased satisfaction, "They're never dull." He grinned then at Eileen and put a companionable arm across her shoulders as they moved toward Ohio.

The artist beamed at Eileen and asked eagerly, "Have you decided about 'Abstract 127'?"

"Not yet, but the colors are put together with great imagination."

Mel coughed. "I told her that."

"How incisive!" Ohio exclaimed. "What did I ever do to deserve such friends? Oh, Joe." Ohio looked up at Joe with vulnerable eyes, and the big man put one large, clumsy hand on Ohio's shoulder and patted him with great tenderness.

Talbot watched uneasily and cleared his throat. Ohio's glance turned to him, and he gave Talbot a beatific smile. Uncomfortably Talbot asked, "Is 'Leaf for sale'?"

"Oh, my dear, of course it is. *All* of them are for sale."

"Not 'Abstract 127,'" Joe rumbled.

"Of course not, darling," Ohio reassured him. "But all the others are."

Talbot hesitated. "Would it be crass to ask what price for 'The Leaf'?"

"How sensitive you are! You know how delicate it is to haggle over treasures. Joe, could I ask for—"

"What'll you offer?" Joe interrupted, giving Talbot a measuring glance as he kept a possessive hand on Ohio's shoulder.

"I've never bought an original painting," Talbot admitted.

"Oh, how exciting! I'll be your *first!*" Ohio squealed as several members of the group gathered to watch.

Joe's small eyes took on a dangerous glint as he watched Talbot closely, so Eileen put her arm through Talbot's and leaned against his side, hoping to relieve Joe's suspicions. The hostility lessened. She smiled up at Talbot, and he seemed to understand her move and looked grateful. There was no question but that Talbot realized Joe could be formidable.

Showing some trepidation, Talbot offered the suggested one hundred dollars. Ohio was overwhelmed, but Joe protested he'd given Ohio more than that for little bitty pictures. Ohio patted Joe's cheek and said that Talbot was a stranger, which caused Joe to sulk. In reassuring Joe, Ohio forgot to cry. So it was all easier than Eileen—and Talbot—had expected.

Ohio was adamant that Eileen's friend shouldn't have to pay full price. She was looking at Talbot and saw alarm flare in his eyes at being called her friend. She almost cried. Mel suggested a token fee, say twenty-five dollars? Ohio agreed in melting gratitude, and Talbot looked glad it was over and he could escape. He shook hands awkwardly and only just managed to avoid a kiss from Ohio after the Sold sign was put on 'The Leaf' with great ceremony. He wrote a check for the twenty- five dollars and promised to retrieve his first original painting when the show had run its course. But his promise was so uncertain, so indefinite, that he had to restate it several times before Ohio was satisfied.

When Ohio called for more wine, Joe said they were out. But when Ohio turned sad, chiding eyes up to his, he obediently left to buy more.

The ordeal was over. Talbot discreetly wiped the sweat from his upper lip. "You did very well," Eileen told him. "Joe will probably put you in his will."

"I'd rather not have anything to do with Joe."

"I can understand your attitude, because you don't know him yet, but—"

"I have no intention of ever knowing him," Talbot said emphatically.

Or her either, she wondered. "Well, he is somewhat defensive when it comes to Ohio," Eileen ventured.

"Who would be tempted?"

He had asked the unanswerable. "But isn't it nice he feels Ohio is attractive?"

"Good grief," he exclaimed. "I believe all the weirdos of the world are gathered here in one place."

"In this gallery? Or in New York as a whole?" she inquired, stiffening.

"The ones in this gallery must be a fair sampling."

"Nothing says we have to fit a mold," she retorted with some spirit.

"And you certainly don't," he accused her bluntly, his eyes stabbing her.

"I'm not that different!" she protested.

"You're the first I've ever known." He looked around in a restless way, and she knew he was on the verge of leaving.

"Would you call me sometime?" Her question was serious, but she knew instantly that he never would.

"Yeah," he said without conviction.

When he didn't ask for her number, she said, "Mel knows how to get in touch with me."

"No doubt!" he snapped.

"Look, he isn't anything but a friend. He's after Beth."

"Then he must be blind and stupid." Obviously Talbot didn't mean that as a compliment, only as a comment on Mel.

"I'm sorry about spilling the wine on your suit. It was my fault, and I'd be glad to pay the cleaning bill."

"I'll hang it in my closet the way it is to remember you by." If he'd intended to see her again, he wouldn't have needed a wine-soaked suit to remember her. "It's been interesting," he added. Then he lifted a hand to Mel and walked out of the gallery, out of her life forever. The thought made her very sad.

CHAPTER TWO

FOR TWO WHOLE weeks she didn't see him. That was how she thought of him without saying his name. Why didn't he call? What was he doing? Would she ever see him again? Her mind instantly understood whom she meant. She knew she was being silly, and the whole thing was hopeless, and if she was smart she'd distract herself.

So she accepted a date with an absolutely glorious hunk named Ken. But he was all facade, and after he said hello he was silent until it was time to get her into bed. Even then he just said, "Okay?" with a surety that appalled her. What was the world coming to?

Ken couldn't believe Eileen meant her no, and he was so unpracticed in rejection that he blundered into speech. When she said she just didn't sleep with every man who came along, he asked how come she dated? When she told him, "For companionship," he couldn't accept the idea at all and helped her figure up her half of the evening's cost.

He found it mind blowing that she hadn't slept with anyone since her divorce and discovered the word "therapy" lying in his untapped reserves. He was so pleased with it that he used it an unconscionable number of times as he tried to convince her that he could thaw her frozen responses. She declined.

Ken then launched into a lengthy discourse on how sleeping with him had helped what seemed an endless number of distressed women. Since he was so pleasing to the eye and magnificently endowed, she could well imagine that Ken could fill a need. And she worried whether she'd ruined him by shocking him into speech. He was a dead bore.

Several times that evening Ken agreed it was time for him to leave, but then he remembered one more hardship case and how he'd helped. He ended up going to sleep on her sofa. Eileen pulled off his shoes, loosened his belt and tie, and left him there.

He wakened cheerfully the next morning. Eileen was in the kitchen as, on silent stockinged feet, he ambled in and confidently put his arms around her silk-robed body. She told him to cut it out.

"I've already ruined you, spending the night here," he told her. "You might as well have the game now you have the name." He was exuberant with his cleverness.

She smiled at him and suggested, "Come meet the duchess."

He sobered. "Who?"

"The chaperon of SoHo celibates."

"You're no virgin," he argued.

"I'm no whore, either. When you decided to stay the night, I just popped down for the duchess, and she shared the apartment along with you last night. We refer to her as the SoHo Tattler."

Just then the duchess herself emerged from the bathroom and stood there smiling, pleased, as she listened. Ken eyed her and said, "Tattler sounds like she's a newspaper."

"Actually she's better than a newspaper, because she phones the news around day or night as it breaks—and it's free," Eileen replied drolly. "She knows everyone and keeps track of them. She knows all their scandals and she *repeats* them."

Nodding in agreement, the duchess laughed so hard she had to wipe her eyes. When it was possible, Eileen introduced Ken to her. The duchess looked over his succulent points and shot an amazed look at Eileen. "You didn't?"

"Duchess!" Eileen scolded, astonished by her yet again.

Unchastened, the duchess grinned at Ken in a wickedly predatory way. He preened under her regard, sat down, turned his face to her as if to the sun, and settled himself to bask in her admiration.

They were at the table in the dining alcove, which was separated from the main room by plants, and the two guests allowed Eileen to serve them

breakfast as they fell into a long and avid discussion on their favorite subject—sex. After they'd eaten and Eileen had cleared the table and placed the full coffee pot next to the duchess, she went into the studio corner of her loft and drew a succinct cartoon of the two of them—the robust hunk and the lady far past her prime. Although it was physically flattering, it revealed their preoccupation with sexual mores. It was a masterpiece, but she put it into a folder of cartoons that she kept only for herself. She would never show it to anyone.

Eileen looked for Talbot every noon in the park, but he was never there. Once she saw Mel and asked perfunctorily, "How are you?" Casually she added, "Have you seen Talbot?" When he said sure, she asked, "How is he?"

"Oh, just fine," he replied, dismissing her question.

And before she knew it, Mel was gone and she still had questions about Talbot that she'd desperately wanted to work into the conversation but hadn't figured out how. Was he seeing another woman? Was he eating all right? What was happening to her? She'd only met him once and he'd been hostile to her. How could she possibly ask an intermediary if he was eating all right?

It must be the heat. It had been miserably hot, and her brain was probably suffering from heat stroke. She ought to get out of town for a while. How could she work it so Talbot would go along? He'd turn her down flat. She'd say, "Would you like to go to the Catskill Mountains for a weekend?" and he'd say, "No."

After her editor told her he had enough cartoons about brutal men who were insensitive to tender women, she went out with Andy. It was awful. He was as self-centered as Ken but on a higher level. Whereas Ken's interest was dominated by sex, Andy's was focused on his own brain. Unfortunately the key to the puzzle of why his intellect was so absorbing to him eluded Eileen, and it was a long, long evening.

Andy had taken her to dinner, and as she sat at the table receiving a verbally administered lobotomy, her eyes were drawn as if by an outside force

beyond her sedated mental control, and she found herself looking into the intent, furious stare of John Talbot Wendell.

It took a moment for the conscious part of her brain to register the knowledge that it really was Talbot and not a trick of another part of her brain. She smiled at him. He gave her a sharp stare and turned away. What in the world made him so hostile? Other people who disapproved of her cartoons didn't react so strongly.

However much he resisted, there was no question that Talbot was attracted to her. Every time she glanced at him, he was staring at her in a somber, moody way, like a darkling prince in a fairy tale who had been cast under a spell. Perhaps she could kiss him and release him from it. Good grief, Eileen! Settle down.

While Andy gave his brain a new challenge by studying the wine list, Eileen sent a signal to Talbot to ask her to dance. It was worth the chance, even though she was almost certain he'd refuse. But he was no cynical city dweller. Mel had told her he was a farm boy whose mother had depended on him. Surely Talbot couldn't refuse a lady in distress.

And he didn't. Andy seemed uncertain whether he had the right to refuse Wendell's request to dance with Eileen, but he wasn't allowed time to apply his brain to the problem. Eileen simply rose to her feet and led Talbot to the dance floor. Andy glared for a while, then went back to the wine list.

As they danced, with Eileen in Talbot's arms and close to his body, Talbot inquired, "Why did you ask me to dance with you? That John not to your liking?"

She laughed, a little breathless at being held against him, and corrected, "His name is Andy. You're the only John."

"I'm not a John," he said emphatically.

Why was he so sensitive about his name? "Talbot, then. If you had a grain of human decency, you'd send a cab driver to my table to tell me my Aunt Henry is dying and I'm needed at once."

"Aunt *Henry*?" he questioned with a frown, his expression indicating that he thought her whole family must be weird.

"Or something."

"Why?"

"I honestly can't take any more of his brain. He thinks he's brilliant. I can't tell you how badly he's been deceived."

"His money is as good as anyone else's." Talbot was harsh.

"It *is* expensive here," she admitted. "But it wasn't my idea to come here. I believe I'd rather go garbage picking with almost anyone else."

He laughed at that and asked, "That bad?"

"That bad." She nodded solemnly.

He was silent for a minute. Then, reluctantly, he asked, "Do you ever see anyone other than... well... on just a social... uh... friendship basis?"

"Oh, yes." She looked up to give him a blinding smile and saw that he was looking oddly pained. So she said, "I would like to see you as a friend." It would be a start.

He sighed in a defeated way and bit his lip as if to cause a pain to counter another hurt. "I'll see what can be done—about your—about Andy," he promised, then he ushered her back to the table and gave Andy a disapproving nod. Soon he left the restaurant.

"Who was that guy?" Andy asked.

"A friend of a friend. I met him at an art gallery. He's a nice farm boy."

"A hayseed," Andy said smugly as he resettled himself in the chair. "I've ordered Chablis. White."

"How clever," she murmured, and he beamed.

But time passed, and Talbot didn't come to rescue her. Andy expanded on how clever he really was, and they ate, and nothing happened. Where was her knight on a white horse? Finally with a discreet flourish the maitre d' directed an underling to plug in a phone and explained that there was a call for the lady. A quiet glow bloomed in Eileen's stomach. She said hello in a breathless, hesitant way. After all, it might not be Talbot.

But it was. His voice rumbled in her ear. "Your crazy Aunt Henry ruptured her spleen at the disco where she dances in the cage, and the hospital is calling for blood donors."

Fighting a giggle, Eileen breathed a serious, "I'll be right there."

She started to hang up but heard his voice continue, so she put the receiver back to her ear and asked, "What did you say?"

"The maitre d' will be watching for you at the side door."

"How kind," she said gently. Then she hung up and turned wide eyes to Andy. "My aunt is in the hospital and I must go to her. They are looking for blood donors."

"Yeah?"

She dug in her purse. "I believe this will cover my share," and she handed Andy some money. Check splitting was obviously his forte, and he figured it rapidly. "There's the ten percent tip," he reminded her.

"Ten percent? How generous of you! Put this on it." She gave him another bill of the same denomination, scooped up her purse, and left. So long, Andy.

Even at his age, the maitre d' probably still drove women wild, Eileen decided. He smiled at her approach, his hooded eyes appreciating her, and he gestured with flair to where she was supposed to exit. She reached out her hand; he took hers gracefully and pocketed the bill lying in it with delicacy.

Through the arched doorway, she was swept straight into Talbot's arms. As he steadied her, she gasped. He was laughing, and it changed his face strikingly. "That old charmer!" he growled. "I'd already given him a gratuity, but did you see how adroitly he accepted yours too?"

"It was worth any price to be rescued." She laughed up at him feeling vulnerable. "What's your fee?"

His lips parted instantly and he took a quick breath to reply, then seemed to change his mind. What had he almost said? Baffled, she tried to study him, but he hurried her to a waiting cab and hustled her into it. "Where's a good bar near you?" he asked, but it was as though he'd already had one in mind and just asked out of courtesy.

"Sam's." she replied, and he repeated the name to the driver as they drove off.

"We could go to my place," she offered.

He hesitated but shook his head and said, "Best not."

"What took you so long? I really thought you'd forgotten all about me," she asked with a grin.

"Well, I figured he ought to at least have your company through the meal."

"Hah! I paid my own half," she scoffed, then added, "And the entire tip."

Talbot chuckled.

On the way to Sam's Eileen told him that the bar was informal. "It's very small and cozy, very dark and smoky. The reason it holds a remarkable number of people is there's always room for one more. Sam does object to people sitting on the bar—that would slow sales—but he doesn't mind any other means of doubling up.

"Sam's name was really Angelo," she went on, but he plays the piano, and after seeing Woody Allen's film *Play it Again, Sam*, he changed his name.

At least once a night Sam plays 'As Time Goes By.' Although he pretends to be very sentimental, he's quite hard-nosed. Of course, it would be disastrous for a bar owner to be a soft touch, but Sam has no problem with that. He could out-poor mouth anyone."

Talbot grinned at her, paid the cabbie, and opened the door to Sam's. Sam greeted Eileen with a nod of recognition and gave Talbot a slow appraisal. Then he negligently waved them into a less populated corner. Less populated meant that there was a chair for each person. But Talbot and Eileen's arrival tipped the scales.

Room was made for them at an already crowded table of strangers, and hip to hip, Talbot and Eileen shared a chair. Midge, the scrawny, overworked barmaid, brought them drinks on the house. Eileen couldn't believe that—she was sure there was some mistake—but Midge pointed her chin at Talbot and said, "He's spent enough here in the last—"

"I was here the other night," Talbot hastened to explain to Eileen, cutting Midge's explanation short. To Midge he said quickly, "Thank Sam, would you please, and bring us another round?" Midge left.

"I can't drink that much," Eileen protested.

"You don't have to drink it," Talbot told her sternly. "I just thought I'd order it in case Midge didn't get back to us."

"Midge gets back to people every fifteen minutes or Sam gives her two turns on the rack!" Eileen exclaimed.

Talbot grinned. It was marvelous to see him smile, and Eileen grinned back, enchanted. Their eyes lingered on each other, and her insides melted. She was excessively conscious of their hips touching. But such acute awareness was foolish, so she tore her eyes from his and looked around, giving a nod or two to people she knew from the neighborhood. But the thought crept back into her mind that it was just lovely to sit there so close to Talbot. It was headier than the booze in the free drink, but it was as disastrous to her nervous system.

In another corner a group of people was singing. Their voices were draggy. Every once in a while they interrupted the singing to debate political issues. Eileen asked Talbot, "Do you sing?"

"In the shower."

"Do you ever sing in public?" She smiled, liking to look at him so closely. His arm was around her, holding her on the chair, and her shoulder was against his hard chest. It was very nice.

"In a crowd," Talbot answered.

She'd forgotten her question, so she pretended she couldn't hear and used that as an excuse to lean closer to ask, "What?" But her voice was soft and breathy.

"I've only sung in a crowd in public. No solos."

"Oh," she said, as if he'd said something bright.

Some people across the table were having a desultory argument, and the others were offering their comments on it. Eileen wasn't aware of what was being said, since some of it was in Spanish and she wasn't paying much attention.

"How did you know about Sam's?" she finally asked.

He hesitated a minute and looked at her with a still face, then glanced away and said firmly, "I was with Mel. I think it was last week."

"You should have come up to see me."

"You had company," he blurted, then bit his lip.

"Company?" She tilted her head and thought about that.

"A big blond meathead," he supplied unkindly.

"Ken." She nodded, realizing immediately whom he meant.

"And he stayed the night." He turned away and stared off into the smoke-filled room.

How had he known that? "On the couch," she explained quickly. "And the duchess was there, too."

He jerked his head around to her and asked sharply, almost eagerly, "The duchess?"

"The SoHo Tattler. Ken is totally predictable, so when he fell asleep on the sofa, I assumed he was faking it and I asked the duchess to join us. But he was actually asleep, so she stayed, too."

"Does she—often stay with you?"

"Oh, no. I think this is only the second time." His voice grated. "To prevent him from getting—a free night?"

"I suppose you could say that," she agreed with good humor.

He stiffened a bit and sipped his drink, glaring at the other people at the table from under his brows. The argument across from them was heating up, and the voices were louder. When they spoke English, their language was illuminating and inventive.

"What are they saying?" Eileen whispered to Talbot.

"It's Spanish."

"I know that. Do you speak it?" When he nodded, she repeated, "What are they saying?"

He listened and smiled slightly at what the man said, then raised his eyebrows when the woman spoke. "No," Talbot told her. "They're speaking too fast," which caused a man on Talbot's right to choke on his beer.

Someone pounded on his back, and the arguing couple paused to observe the incident, then went back to their quarrel. After listening for a while, understanding a few words here and there, Eileen got back to what was important. "How did you know Ken was at my place the other night?"

"Oh, someone mentioned it."

"Who?"

"I forget." Talbot's tone was abrupt.

But she persisted. "What did they say?"

He tidied the overloaded ashtray. "That the meathead brought you home and paid off the cab. No other cab came for him until the next morning."

"I wonder who was that curious?" she speculated.

"I don't remember."

"It would be interesting to know."

He moved restlessly. "If I do remember, I'll tell you."

"Are you too crowded?" She tried to move over.

"Not at all." He held her more tightly against him, and she relaxed, loving it. A few minutes later he said, # "I've heard people say you and Mel go together. I thought you said you were only friends."

"It's our hair. We're both redheaded." Perhaps he hadn't noticed?

"And you don't date?"

She Med her tongue once with amused impatience and said, "I told you. He's after Beth!"

"Some men have to have more than one woman," he said darkly, "just as some women want more than one man."

She didn't agree with him, but she didn't know him well enough to debate the issue. The woman across the table got up, leaned over the man with her hands on her hips, and spoke harshly through clenched teeth as she gestured. Then she waited as if daring him to do something. Just then, from out of the smoky dark room, came strains of 'As Time Goes By' on the piano. Everyone hushed respectfully, including the debaters at their table. The standing woman turned and looked across the bar at Sam, who was playing with exaggerated, emotional agony. In addition to being hard-nosed, Sam was a ham.

The bar door opened, but even the people entering knew enough not to interrupt and they stood silent. Sam played the song a second time, and the man across the table pulled the woman down on his lap. She pretended to be stiff, but she allowed it. Everyone remained silent until the piece finished. Then they cheered and whistled, stomped and clapped.

The man across the table whispered to the woman on his lap, and she giggled and pretended to slap his face. They got up and the rest of the people at the table did too, except for Talbot and Eileen. One of the men said, "*Buenas noches*, Wendell." The rest smiled at them as they all filed out.

"Do you know them?" Eileen asked.

"Uh... they were here last week and we spoke," Talbot admitted briefly.

"In Spanish?"

"Slowly."

"You understood everything they were saying," she accused him, suddenly sure.

"It was—rather basic," he admitted. She burst out laughing because he'd felt he had to shield her delicate ears from life, but she was charmed that he had done so. What a darling man. They were still sharing a chair, and he didn't

appear to notice the empty ones now around the table. She did and rose reluctantly, so he got up too and held a chair for her, then sat down next to her.

Most of the patrons sang along as Sam played more old songs. Then Mel and Beth arrived with two other couples, and they had to share chairs again.

Eileen greeted Beth, sharing a dancing-eyed glance at a disgruntled Mel. As they sat down, Beth looked around the table everywhere but at Mel. Eileen studied Beth and thought that in another time Beth would have been homely and spare, with invisible lashes and brows. But she had a good head of blond hair, which was cut - perfectly to flatter her rather angular face. Her makeup did the most for her coloring and blue eyes, and she'd chosen her clothes with flair. She looked terrific.

Mel was complaining because Beth insisted he have his nightcap at Sam's and not in her apartment. "You'd think I was a lecher or something," he said. "She won't let me get one toe in the door. With her mean heart, I'd be *crazy* to put a toe in her door!" He glared at Beth.

None of it bothered her. She sat relaxed, sharing Mel's chair but managing to appear separate, with her elbows on the table and her fingers clasped casually near her chin. She was seated next to Talbot, who turned and spoke to her. "So you and Eileen have known each other for a while?"

"Since we came to New York." Beth smiled around him at Eileen.

A police officer opened the door, and the noise abated somewhat as a few people called greetings to him. He nodded formally, then with his head tilted back, his mouth open, and the tip of his tongue touching his top lip, he scanned the crowd. Someone took up a count and soon a good number of the patrons were counting in unison. When they reached fifty-seven, they shouted the number and laughed. It was the official limit of patrons that could safely occupy the premises. The cop smiled patiently and said five people had to leave. Only five? They laughed comfortably at his joke, and no one moved.

The cop strolled over to the bar and pretended to be sleepy as he looked around. Most of the patrons forgot him and went back to their conversations, drinking and singing. The cop sipped milk from the only pristine glass in the place—and seemed to note who continued to watch him.

Under the cover of mounting noise, Eileen heard Talbot ask Beth in an oddly hesitant way, "Do you—are you—in the same business as Eileen?" "Oh, no!" she exclaimed and grinned as if that would be foolish.

"I see," he said soberly. Then he asked, "Does her work—bother you?"

"Not at all." Beth said it with a slight shrug.

"And knowing what she does, you still—like her?"

"Well, of course. I like her very much. I could never handle her assignments, but she's a professional. She can cope and she does. It doesn't bother her at all, so why should it bother me?"

Her comment made Talbot's strangely sad eyes turn thoughtful. He concentrated on trying to make the overflowing ashtray neat again. Eileen grew pensive. Why should Beth not like her just because she drew cartoons?

It was late. Beth made the first move to leave by saying she was very sleepy and needed to get to bed. Mel offered to carry her home and put her to bed, and when she declined, he became sulky. She ignored him, rising and saying good night to the others. He'd risen automatically with her, still complaining about her treatment of him. Saucily she tugged his red beard, patted his shoulder, and told him good night, which upset him still more. Saying there was no way she could possibly go out on the street alone at that time of night, he left with her.

Reluctantly Eileen said she too needed to go home. Talbot didn't argue. Assuming he was glad to be rid of her she felt melancholy. One couple moved to the bar, another hurried after Mel and Beth, and Eileen and Talbot began their three-block walk to Eileen's building.

It was quieter and cooler on the street. People were still wandering by, and even at that hour there was vehicular traffic. They walked slowly. Talbot held her hand and even swung it a little. His hand was big and square with long fingers, and it fit closely around hers, making her feel secure and protected.

Suddenly a man popped up silently in front of them, blocking their way. He wore a cap and a neckerchief tied carelessly so that it obscured the lower half of his face, and he had one hand in his pocket. He took it out to display the closed knife that lay on his palm. It so astonished Eileen that she didn't react.

The man said to be quiet, like they were friends talking, and demanded their money. Eileen peered incredulously at him, thinking it couldn't be happening, and demanded, "Is that you, Nick?"

In a higher voice he said, "No."

"I'll bet anything you're Nick Bellini, and I'll tell your mother!"

"Cut it out, lady, and give me your purse." The words slurred together and sounded like 'Gimeyrpus.'

In a reasonable tone Talbot asked, "If I give you my money, will you leave her alone?" The mugger frowned, obviously nervous, and Talbot explained, "This is the first date I've had with the lady, and if you take her purse and I don't stop you, she'll think I'm a klutz, right? She doesn't have much anyway because the nerd she was with made her pay half the dinner bill."

"What a bastard!" The mugger was shocked.

"My sentiments exactly," Talbot said. "Here. I'm just taking out my wallet." He moved slowly, took it out, opened it, and extracted the money.

"Keep enough for a taxi." The mugger seemed to be in an expansive mood.

"Why, thank you," Talbot said courteously as he retrieved a bill.

"Think nothing of it." The mugger vanished.

Eileen was furious. "You let him just take your money! That *was* Nick Bellini! That little pipsqueak! That..."

"What if it wasn't?" Talbot asked her.

"But it *was*!" she exclaimed.

"I never argue with a knife." He was rather stern.

That stopped her. She paused mid-rebuttal and looked at him. "Yes." She nodded seriously. "I'd hate it if you'd been hurt."

"You weren't helping a whole lot."

"I didn't attack," she reminded him.

"I am grateful. That would have caused all sorts of complications."

"I realized that." But she was still frowning.

Just then a darkly dressed man bounced out of a doorway and said, "He forgot the purse," and he reached for Eileen's bag!

Eileen stood stunned as Talbot jumped on the man. She screamed bloody murder and hung onto Talbot's jacket with both hands. By the time he'd slid out of the jacket, the man had escaped, Talbot was in a towering temper, and Eileen was in tears.

Talbot stood glaring at her, his hands on his hips, breathing heavily from exertion and temper. She stood twisting his jacket nervously in her hands, gulping sobs. "I thought they'd hurt you."

"There was only one!" He sounded thoroughly exasperated.

"How did I know?"

"If you were going to attack, why did you attack *me*?"

"I was afraid you'd chase him and there'd be others and they'd hurt you," she explained as he reached out and retrieved his jacket, still frowning.

With all the excitement over, people began to gather around and question them. No one had witnessed the episode, but they'd all heard Eileen screaming. One man said, "You never can tell if a scream is for real or if it's some pothead." He gave an assessing stare at Eileen, which she returned with a haughty gaze.

Talbot ignored all the people. He put on his jacket and took out his handkerchief and tilted Eileen's face. "Your mascara has run," he explained gently as he wiped the streaks from her cheeks. He smiled down at her, but suddenly she realized he was struggling not to laugh! She became indignant. She must have looked like a clown with mascara-streaked cheeks. He must be laughing at *her*. She jerked her chin from his hand and plowed through the bystanders, storming off toward her apartment, which was still a block away.

Moments later Talbot caught up. "What's the matter?"

"What's the *matter*?" She had to stop to survey the purveyor of such a stupid question. "Here you've been robbed one time and almost killed another, and you think it's funny!"

"It really is. I've been in this town for seven months, and this is the first time anyone has mugged me and it happened twice in one block! And you quarreled with me for giving up my money the first time, and you attacked me the second time!" Then he sobered and moved to cup her face in his hands. "I don't know why I'm astonished. You baffle me anyway." He kissed her forehead. "You're a puzzle, and I don't know what to do about you." Still huffy, she said, "Well, you can start by being cheerful and friendly."

"I *am* cheerful and friendly," he stated stridently.

"No, you're not. You glower at me and turn away and are mean."

"I'm the soul of propriety!" he declared. Then he added thoughtfully, "Perhaps that's the problem."

"And you don't make sense at all. You're stiff-necked and critical, and you asked my friend how she can possibly like me."

"They all like you," he admitted.

"Yes. They're good people." Then, being honest, she added, "'Some are a little off center, but where would we be without our eccentrics?'"

"Life would be dull," he agreed and she wondered if he thought she was weird.

To reassure him, she said, "I'm really quite square, you know." But his expression showed that he was unconvinced, and he said nothing in reply.

Her loft was on the fifth floor, and he insisted on seeing her to the door. She didn't think it was the climb that made her so breathless; she was used to it. It was Talbot. She kept taking little peeks at him, and it seemed that with each one he became more perfect.

As they passed the duchess's door, she popped out wearing a gorgeous Chinese robe of red silk, so elaborately embroidered that one ignored the scrawny little body it must cover. She looked stunning. When she saw them, she looked disappointed and explained, "I thought it might be Ken."

"Why, Duchess!" Eileen exclaimed in a censoring tone. Then she asked sharply, "What are you doing awake at this time of night?"

Very eye-rollingly droll, the duchess explained, "My lover wants cinnamon toast and hot cocoa before he sleeps."

It was interesting, but with the duchess you couldn't be entirely sure she wasn't telling the truth. To change the subject Eileen introduced a stern-faced Talbot to the duchess, who turned on her charm and chatted amiably. Talbot was courteous but stiff, almost disapproving, which puzzled Eileen.

She finally excused them from the duchess, who invited them to visit her another time, and they climbed the rest of the way to the fifth floor. "Is she a madam?" Talbot growled.

"What?" Eileen stopped and stared at him, then she smothered giggles and sputtered, "I can hardly wait to tell her you asked!"

"Is she?" he demanded.

"Of course not, silly." She couldn't stop laughing. "She'll love it! She'll just *love* it!"

"I see nothing funny."

"You will." She unlocked her door and turned to block it, but he made no move to go inside. She smiled tenderly. "Thank you, Galahad, for rescuing me all evening long." She held out her hand, which he enveloped in his large warm one. He gazed at her with frowning sadness in his eyes. Did she remind him of someone he'd lost? Someone who'd foolishly chosen another man or someone who'd died? Why did he always look at her with such a sadly regretful expression?

He released her hand and took her head between his palms as he examined her face intently. He moved one hand to smooth her hair from her face with awkward gentleness, and her bones seemed to melt. "Is there any reason I shouldn't kiss you?" His tone was deadly serious.

The question boggled her, and she thought, My word, does he think I'm diseased? Had he been looking for a rash? She shook her head in surprise that he would think that of her, then even as she was shaking her head, she thought perhaps he'd meant were her emotions engaged. She shook her head again.

And he kissed her. It was the most shattering thing that had ever happened to her. No man's kiss had ever been so devastating. All she could think was, So this is what they mean. And she kissed him back eagerly.

She thought how perfectly they fit together. She didn't have to reach her arms too high or stretch her neck too far for his kiss, and her head wasn't pushed too far back, as with some tall men. But after that her brain accepted only the fantastic sensations that exploded in her body and made her mind reel.

His arms moved tighter around her, and he lifted his mouth from hers as his breath came out in a blast. Then he kissed her again and his mouth was more demanding. She had no conscious knowledge of her mouth's surrender, only that his became more sensual on hers, tasting, stroking, touching, relishing. He was skilled.

Finally he lifted his head and looked at her, an intense, pagan male barely under control. His breathing was rapid and shallow as his hard hands moved to press along her back, holding her tightly to him. He groaned, closing his eyes, and he leaned his face along the side of her upturned face and tightened his arms still more as he moved his hand slowly in her hair. He said her name on a sigh, with unaccountable anguish.

Held so close that her breasts were flattened against his hard chest, and liking it, she lifted her hands to his head and threaded her fingers through his hair, smoothing and soothing him. Her body moved with her arms, and he held himself very still, as if to withstand a blow. How strange.

Still not moving, he said, "I must go."

She understood the wisdom of his leaving. They were going too fast. Swallowing, she said, "Call me?"

"I have your phone number." Why did it seem to bother him to tell her that? It sounded as if he was ashamed to admit it. Then he raised his head and looked at her. "What if I call and you're—busy?"

She smiled, her eyes tender, and she toyed with his hair, studying the way it curled as she twisted it into a Napoleon windblown style. "I don't have that many calls," she said softly.

"I find that very hard to believe." His voice was husky.

"It's true," she assured him, "I'm very choosy about the men I know."

He released her abruptly and almost turned away. Then he asked, his voice grating, "And do I qualify?" as if he'd been forced to ask.

She was perplexed, but she continued to tease. "I shall have to see you several more times before I decide." And she laughed in a soft, throaty, flirting way.

He turned back. "When do you—work?"

She cocked her head, keeping a fair flirting smile on her lips, but she understood that he was serious. Something was bothering him, and more than likely they were back to his disapproval of her job. "I work when the mood hits me," she said candidly. "I'm not always up for it, and to do it right, I have to be in exactly the right mood or it's just"—she gestured—"blooey." He said a swift "Good night" in a muffled voice and turned away.

"Will you be at Paley tomorrow?" she called down the stairs.

He stopped but didn't turn around. "I might."

"For lunch?"

"All right." Then he seemed to think of something and he whirled and said a sharp "No!" He looked at her belligerently and went on, "We'll go to Windows on the World at the World Trade Center."

"That's too expensive," she protested.

"We'll go there." He almost turned back then said, "Where shall I pick you up?"

"I don't know where I'll be then. Shall I meet you there?"

His body jerked at her first words and he frowned. Was he ill? "All right," he said, and he left.

He didn't look back but went rapidly down the stairs. Bemused, Eileen went into her apartment. John Talbot Wendell was a very confusing man. What on earth troubled him?

CHAPTER THREE

WHOEVER HAD SET up her loft as living quarters had partitioned it judiciously. Only the bath and the closets were enclosed. Windows were banked along the outer wall and skylights took up half the ceiling. Shades had been rigged to rise from the bottom of the windows so that there was always light; and at night, if the roof windows were clean enough and there wasn't any smog, you could see the stars as if from the bottom of a well.

Eileen had lived there for almost five years and still loved it. It was bright and cheerful, decorated in white, blue, and an accent of orange. It was really a one-person place, and her ex-husband Tom had been an encumbrance the years they'd lived there together. Well, maybe Tom as a body hadn't been in the way, but his possessions had been. There wasn't room for anyone else's clothes or treasures. There was room only for Eileen, her belongings, and the cat. The canary which lived in a large cage that hung from the ceiling, didn't count.

The cat's name was Farand. Its fur was smoke gray and its eyes were yellow, and it kept the mice at bay. Eileen suspected the mice never realized that Farand only wanted a companion; they all fled.

The bird's cage hung safely out of the cat's reach, which made it somewhat hazardous to clean. The bird sang its heart out, giving the cat an interest; that interest kept the bird alert. The bird's name was Wooser, goodness knew why. It had already been named when an emotional old lady had asked Eileen to keep it for the weekend—and never came back. That was how Eileen had acquired Farand, too.

Then there were the plants. Bright and airy, with tall ceilings, the loft environment was like an elixir for plants. They'd grown to such proportions that they didn't fit through the door, so they'd been included in the initial cost of acquiring the apartment. Some were young trees, and they most definitely enhanced the room. In addition, there were hanging plants. But the plants didn't overbalance the room or intrude on Eileen.

She considered the place really quite charming and fresh-looking. Wooser was at home in among the greenery, and Farand kept trying to climb the plants to get to the bird's cage. It was excellent exercise for him.

On the morning after Talbot had rescued Eileen from boring Andy, she drowsily became aware that the bird was making inquiring cheeps from under the cage cover. Farand purred and touched Eileen's face with his whiskers, tickling her fully awake. Without them, she might have overslept on many mornings.

She stretched, keeping her eyes tightly closed, reluctant to relinquish her dream of a laughing Talbot, who'd been moving toward her with deliciously lecherous intent. But the bird kept calling, the cat still purred, and duty called.

She turned Farand over on his back and rubbed his silky stomach. Then she climbed out of the big bed and went to the silken tassel anchored to a hook above the bathroom door and pulled the cord that lifted the cover from the birdcage. The cover lifted beyond the top of the cage and, hanging there, looked like a hot-air balloon riding above the wicker, bird-inhabited basket.

Eileen got out the stepladder and made certain Wooser had seed and water. She changed the paper at the bottom of the cage. "How about the comics?" she asked the canary. "Gordo's bird always reads the bottom of his cage to the other animals. Do you read to Farand?" The bird cheeped, but she didn't know if it was a yes or a no.

She had to shoo the cat off the stepladder before she could get down. "You're going to make me break my neck one of these days," she scolded.

Since she and Talbot were going to the fanciest restaurant in the World Trade Center for lunch that day, she chose her clothes with care. She finally decided on a dark purple late-summer cotton suit. She swirled her hair up in a neat French roll. With her mahogany hair and the purple suit, the color of her lipstick was a problem. She finally decided on a very pale melon. Her high-heeled sandals matched her suit, as did her bag and gloves. Windows on the World warranted gloves and a wide-brimmed hat.

She stopped at the corner newsstand for a paper and when men whistled and spoke to her, she assumed an elaborately haughty air and didn't answer any questions. They were all too busy to wait for her reply anyway.

Since she was to meet Talbot at the restaurant, she took the subway to the World Trade Center and leaned against a wall to sketch. Her sketchbook looked like any ordinary book, except that the pages were blank. It had a tooled leather covering, which enhanced the deception. If people knew they were being sketched, they became self-conscious and fidgeted, standing straight, pulling in their stomachs and otherwise doing things that made them look unnatural.

The people she saw provided good material—a mouth here, a frown there, a marvelous nose from that one, and over there a perfect slouch. She sketched away, becoming so engrossed that she almost drew Talbot as he approached her. What a stride he had! As if the world was his. His welcoming smile made her heart skip a beat, and she closed her book and slipped it into her bag without another thought for it.

"Have you been here long?" he asked.

"No» no. I like watching people." It seemed to her he'd almost kissed her in greeting, then stopped himself at the last minute. Damn. She looked at his mouth and gave her lip a quick, comforting lick, then watched, mesmerized, as he licked his own lip. They stared at each other for endless seconds before he came to with a start, glanced at his watch, and took her arm.

"We're right on time," he said as he escorted her to the elevators.

The view from the one hundred seventh floor was staggering. The windows looked out over the New York harbor and the Statue of Liberty. The maitre d' smiled and nodded as he said, "Mr. Wendell," and they were led to a discreetly placed table.

As Eileen was pulling off her gloves, Talbot said to her, "Everyone looked at you, and I wish they wouldn't gawk, but I can understand it. You look terrific. Like a lady."

She smiled, refusing to be troubled by the implication of the last three words. "They're resenting the fact that the women in the room are all staring at you, and they're trying to find some way to prove to themselves that they're superior to you in something. It's taking them too long to figure it out."

He sat perfectly still, his face blank.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"After that compliment I expected my head to swell to such proportions that it'd lift me right off my chair and I'd float to the ceiling." He grinned at her, and she laughed, imagining the scene.

He set out to entertain her, and their banter continued throughout their meal. He told her about his life growing up on a farm in Illinois, and she replied with what it had been like living in a small town west of San Antonio. He asked if that was in Texas. She slid him a droll, chiding glance. He said, "There are towns all over the Southwest called San Antonio—at least another five."

"*They* say what state," she explained, "but with a Texas town, you don't have to." He hadn't known that, so she went on, "Take New York. Even the song says,

'New York, New York.' See? It tells which New York."

He laughed with her, then said, "You look New York *and* Vogue."

"It's my hair," she explained. "It was handed down to me from my great-grandmother."

He grinned. "Handed down—like a wig?" And with great patience she sighed and told him about the gene for red hair. He said his blue eyes came from his mother and father and from their mothers and fathers and they were almost all blue-eyed, except that a vagrant little brown-eyed gene popped up now and then.

"I'm surprised you didn't get the brown-eyed gene. I think you're a little quirky."

"I'm straight as an arrow and very dull," he told her.

"Oh, really?" she said with such disbelief that he smiled as if he'd been stroked.

They were astounded that two hours had gone by and they hadn't yet had dessert. He had ten minutes to make an appointment and had to phone to say he'd been delayed. Eileen went downstairs with him to hail a cab. He said that if she stood near him, he could get one quicker; cabbies were susceptible to gorgeous women. She didn't bother to hide her pleased smile but asked what about women cabbies? He'd never run into one. When a cab did come along and did stop, she said she still had business downtown and wouldn't ride with him.

He turned around and gave her a chilling look without saying anything. Then he kissed her roughly while the cab driver stretched his neck to enjoy it with a patient smile. At last Talbot ended the kiss and said, "Eileen..." He stopped and thrust her away, got into the cab, and slammed the door—and he was gone. Eileen stood alone on the sidewalk feeling bereft.

* * *

Silent days passed before she gathered her courage and phoned him at ITT. "Hello," she said. "Were you in time for your appointment?"

"Eileen." He said her name as if saying it hurt him, but he didn't say anything else.

"I have two tickets to see Ruth Tyndall Baker's *All the Pleasures Prove*." She'd never in all her life felt more awkward. "And I wondered if you'd be free on Friday." There was a long silence. "Talbot?"

"I'm here. Yes. I'm free." He hesitated a moment, then asked, "Are you?"

"Oh, yes, silly, that's why I called. I enjoyed the lunch so much that I thought perhaps we could have an evening together."

There was another silence. At last he said, "I've seen the play. It's fun." His words came slowly.

"Well, perhaps we could go to another one." Was she being pushy, she wondered.

"We could just spend the evening together," he suggested.

"I would enjoy that." She felt fifteen years old.

"What will it cost me?"

"It's my treat. Would you like to go through Central Park in a hansom cab?"

"That would be fine. I haven't done that yet."

"Shall I pick you up?" Her palms were sweating.

"No. I'll arrange it and come by for you." But he didn't sound eager. His voice was flat and dull. Was he ill? When they'd finished making arrangements and she'd hung up, she sat without moving, her hand still on the phone. She frowned at the wall for a long time.

The two days until Friday took almost four weeks to pass. Eileen went through her closet and decided firmly exactly what she'd wear. She hung the dress on the closet door and put all the accessories around it, then she eyed her selection, wondered what on earth had made her choose that godawful rag, and changed her mind. She did that about five times in those two days. She was worn out with nerves.

Since she'd never been in such a state before, she didn't know how to cope with it. She mentioned her concern about Talbot's attitude to the cat and the bird, but they didn't pay much attention to her. The cat went tearing up a tree, his tail lashing like a savage panther, and the bird kept singing its heart out. Dumb animals.

At last Friday came. The day dawned bleakly, with a misting September rain and the elusive smell of the first hint of fall. Eileen removed the safety block to open one of the windows and sit on the cold radiator and look at the fog-softened building across the street. She thought about Talbot. She needed to see more of him. She'd been with him three times, and he'd taken on such a cloak of mystery that she was bewitched.

If she saw him enough, she was bound to become disillusioned. Anyone that good-looking, with such a beautiful body, had to have flaws. Since they weren't readily discernible, they must be flaws of character.

He'd asked how much the evening was going to cost him. could well be a pinch-penny. He probably took his salary in bags of change and carried the clinking coins home to store them in a room guarded by alligators from New York's sewers. Well, if that was all that was wrong with him, she could handle it. She made enough money for both of them. He wouldn't have to spend a dime of his beloved hoard.

For some strange reason he seemed adamantly opposed to her job, to the way she earned that money. Why? Perhaps he just didn't care for independent women. He was a farm boy and had obviously been brought up by a strongly male hierarchy. His mother was a softhearted woman who couldn't drown the mangled cat. She'd depended on a fifteen-year-old son to do it for her. She must have felt dreadful, to put a boy through that.

Eileen looked at Farand, who was stalking along the back of the sofa. She couldn't drown an injured cat, either. She couldn't even toss one out of a car. That was how she'd acquired Farand. She'd been walking down the street, a car had passed, and a bag had come sailing out the window to land about ten feet in front of her.

Eileen had been thoroughly indignant at the way they'd littered when the bag had suddenly wiggled and mewed. Eileen had stood there and looked around for someone else to accept the responsibility. No one had. She'd finally picked up the sack reluctantly and peeked in. The animal was all ears, eyes, and fur—Eileen should never have peeked. How could anyone discard a living animal?

She'd carried it to the local vet intending to pay to have it destroyed, but she couldn't do that, either. Instead she paid for the medication it needed, learned how to administer it, bought some kitty food, and took the animal home, a new cat owner. She amended that—owned by a cat.

Talbot had cried in the barn after he'd killed the cat, but he'd done as his mother had asked him. Poor darling. She thought about his eyelashes, and funny things happened to her chest. He was so *masculine*, and then for him to have those eyelashes! It wasn't fair.

She leaned against the window frame and thought about his eyes—how they glinted when he was amused— and his mouth. How had he learned to kiss that way? Well, that should be obvious. He should be forced to wear a sign that said: Danger! Hazardous Kisser. She smiled into the fog and sighed. She wished he were there right then and could put his arms around her and hold her and kiss her a whole lot.

Tonight it would be her treat. She'd pay for the cab and for a snack so he wouldn't have to spend any of his hoard, and in gratitude he might kiss her again. She thought about how she felt with his arms tightly around her, pulling her closer against him so that her body was pressed along his length and her breasts were crushed by his hard chest. Her eyes lost focus, her mouth went slack, and she stared into the fog with unseeing eyes.

The cool, damp mist finally made her stir. This wasn't a day in which she could draw clear-eyed, biting cartoons. So what could she do to pass the whole day until it was time to see him? She wandered over to the mirror and looked critically at her image. It was as if her hair had been reconstituted by the fog and was now twice as full and curly. She posed languorously in front of the mirror, smiling seductively and looking inviting. Who'd ever dare to actually do that? She allowed her robe to slide down her shoulder and thought that looked pretty neat. Would she ever have the nerve to do that deliberately?

Tom had ignored or been unaware of her subtle flirting. She'd had to be quite blunt in seducing him. Talbot looked like another kind of man entirely. Men were all different. Ken wouldn't wait. His 'Okay?' would encompass his

whole idea of foreplay. If anyone dropped a shoulder strap for Andy, he'd probably avert his eyes and hastily put it back into place.

But Talbot? What would Talbot do? Looking in the mirror, Eileen dreamed about what Talbot would do. After a while she decided she'd see him a few more times, then she'd just set out to find out what Talbot would do. She smiled at herself in the mirror, then floated into the kitchen and ate a poached egg and toast with orange marmalade, which tasted like ambrosia.

Farand always demanded the toast corners. A tiresome cat, Eileen decided as she rubbed his head. He purred his thanks, flipped his fluffy tail and walked confidently away. His actions appeared similar to what she had just practiced in the mirror—exceedingly graceful, knowingly so. She smiled after the cat and stretched herself in a feline way. Poor Talbot. He'd be helpless.

In the late afternoon she lay in a leisurely bubble bath, allowing Farand to walk around the edges of the tub and getting up only when the tub was too full to add more hot water. That saved her from turning into a pink prune.

She decided to wear a skirt of rich brown, then debated between two tops and recklessly chose a soft halter that would have made her mother gasp. The top was cream colored, and around her shoulders she draped an embroidered shawl with a long fringe, which an uncle had brought to her from Spain. He'd also brought her a Spanish comb of white bone to sit dramatically in her hair. She wore that, too. She was ready twenty minutes early.

Twenty minutes early for a date can last two and a half hours. Why hadn't she said she'd meet him there? She wondered where he lived and tried to picture his apartment. There would be neither chintz nor anything too austere. What did he read? He must be physically active for his body was so hard and his arms were so... strong. Her thoughts went spiraling to what sort of bed he had. Did he sleep nude?

She went to the kitchen and put ice cubes into a glass of water. The cat followed to watch. She leaned her backside against the kitchen counter. She thought of Talbot lying asleep in bed, nude, and she thought about going into

his room and watching him sleeping there, his incredible eyelashes lying on his cheeks. Did he have a hairy chest? What if she...

Now really, Eileen, she thought. What are you thinking of? She shrugged in reply. Haven't you anything else to think about? And she recalled that as she'd dressed before going to Ohio's show, she'd thought about needing someone to care about. And of course she'd met Talbot that very night. That didn't mean he was the one. In fact, he wasn't very eager, when she came right down to it. Although there had been that kiss.

How would it be to lie in bed, nude against his hard naked body, and have him kiss her that way—that way in bed? She gulped down more water and decided it would be best not to have any wine that night. He probably wouldn't pass up a pass from her. She should be a little aloof and watch her behavior and not ask him any personal questions.

She could hardly ask, "Do you sleep nude?" without him wondering why she'd asked or what had made her think of such a question. She could reply, "Well, I was standing in the kitchen, entertaining the cat by drinking a glass of cold water, and I wondered how it would be if I was in bed naked with you and you kissed me. Do you have hair on your chest?" That would really be pretty personal, and it might give him the wrong idea about her morals.

Just then the buzzer sounded from the street entrance. Startled, she dropped the glass, which shattered in the sink. Her guilty conscience must be responsible. Such thoughts she'd been thinking! She'd have to clean up the glass later. She dashed to the door, punched the button, and said, "Yes?"

Talbot's deep voice asked, "Ready?"

"Yes," she replied a little breathlessly. "I'll be right down." She almost locked herself out but remembered in time to rush back and get her purse. Then Farand ventured toward the hall but fortunately stopped. Eileen scooped him up and slid him back inside the door. She had almost closed it again when she thought how rude to make Talbot wait in the tiny foyer, and she snaked a hand in, holding a foot to prevent Farand's escape, and punched the door button.

Not feeling at all cool and serene, she hurried down the stairs—and met Talbot on the landing just below the third floor. He was coming up the steps two at a time, and she stopped, all her welcome in her eyes as, her shawl sliding off her shoulders, she said a breathless, rushed "Hello!" He stopped dead and looked at her.

For an instant his face was so young and vulnerable that she could see the fifteen-year-old boy there, but as he looked up at her, the man in him took over and he came slowly up, taking her hand as she came slowly down. He leaned forward and kissed her.

Her head spun, her pulse raced, her cheeks grew hot and her breath came in light pants. All that from a drink of cold water and one kiss. They paused, looking at one another. Then he said, "Eileen?"

"I'm fine. And you?" She wondered if that made sense.

Apparently it made some sense, for he said, "Sorry I'm late. The cabbie tried to hoax me into a five-mile ride." He gestured as they turned and walked down the stairs together. "We argued, and I told him there were cabbies like him in Peoria, too. That offended him. So I threatened to switch cabs. He's waiting outside. He wanted me to pay him and then he'd wait, but I told him I'd lived here awhile and knew better than that."

They emerged onto the street, and Talbot ushered her into the cab at the curb. The cab driver didn't speak to them the whole way to the hansom cab stand. There he let them out and looked at the tip, unbelieving. "You gave me that much?"

"I'm an honest man," Talbot said.

"So'm I!" The cabbie was annoyed.

Without replying, Talbot took Eileen's arm and led her to the hansom he'd reserved and helped her climb into it. He seated himself next to her, fished a plain, cream-color cotton scarf from his pocket and handed it to her. "Your hair might blow." He watched as she tied the scarf and she was touched by his thoughtfulness.

They sat in the carriage, the horse clopping along, the drive silent, and they listened to the sounds of the city, muted somewhat, as they rode through Central Park. They talked now and then, but the silences were comfortable. He held her hand, and she suspected the blood vessels in that arm would be permanently damaged by the electric thrills that kept shooting up it.

He didn't kiss her. She couldn't figure out why he didn't, but she didn't want to appear forward by throwing herself on his chest and demanding a kiss. She began to get cross because he wasn't kissing her. The whole hansom ride idea was a total waste.

When they arrived back at the stand, the cabbie was still there, still hostile and careful to let them know he wasn't doing them any favors. They really preferred to walk, but he said for the gas he'd take them on a tour of the city. Tourists and newcomers always touched his heart and he wanted them to see it all. Talbot said he'd been in the city seven months and had seen just about everything. Eileen said she'd been there five years.

"And I suppose you think you're a native?" the cabbie ground out with a sneer.

She hesitated and suggested, "Acclimated?"

"That's the way it always is." The driver nodded to himself in disgust. "People come here and they're New Yorkers the second week."

Eileen ventured the information that people who moved to Texas were that way, too, and that in Alaska a newcomer became a native in six months and could share in the oil profits.

Talbot kept an eye on the meter during the long discussion and finally he had just enough money to get them to SoHo. They talked all the way to Eileen's apartment. When Talbot paid the cabbie off, he gave Eileen an assessing look and said he'd wait. Talbot said he'd walk home, he needed the exercise, and he had only a dollar in cash on him.

The cabbie said he couldn't leave a greenhorn out on the streets, he could get mugged, and anyway... But Talbot shot Eileen a look that expressed both irritation and amusement and told the driver he'd take his chances.

With that the driver, who said his name was Roberto, gave Eileen a more careful, narrow-eyed evaluation and said, "She's a nice girl. I'll be back in an hour. You shouldn't stay longer than that anyway. The trip to your place is on the house." He got into the cab and drove off.

Eileen watched the departing cab with a calm facade but inside she was seething. Why couldn't Roberto mind his own business? Who needed a cab driver for a chaperon?

But Talbot exploded into laughter. "I'll bet he turns on the porch lights as soon as his daughter's been there for the count of ten." He laughed again.

Eileen wasn't amused. "How would you know about that?"

"My brother told me." He grinned at her so charmingly that she had to smile a little.

She looked around the well-lit street with its parked cars and traffic and pedestrians and asked, "Well, would you like to wait for Roberto down here, or would you like to come up to the loft? Climbing the four flights would give you a little exercise. We could go up and down the stairs for an hour until your chaperon picks you up, or I could feed you an omelet. There's also some cold quiche. How about a piece of fresh peach pie? Or coffee? A drink?"

He took her hand, restraining his grin, and chortled. "Roberto is treating you like a sixteen-year-old!" He seemed to find the thought hilarious.

Disgruntled, Eileen retorted, "The group calls me the Vestal Virgin." She just threw that in, but again Talbot burst into whoops of laughter. Eileen eyed him irritably not sharing his excessive amusement at the idea of being a virgin.

She waited a reasonable length of time for him to control himself, then reminded him she'd given him a choice of food. He kissed her cheek and said, "The omelet, the pie, and the coffee."

"Okay," she replied and turned toward the door. Making the omelet and eating it would take up the whole blasted hour. She hoped Roberto had a flat tire.

CHAPTER FOUR

As THEY CLIMBED the stairs, she half-whispered, "Do you find cab drivers difficult to understand?"

"I was a summer camp counselor for preschoolers in college," Talbot explained. "They tend to run their words together and slur the pronunciations, so I've developed an ear for it. Then there's Chicago. I was there, for four years, and the Chicago accent is an introduction to New Yorkese. The most interesting thing to me out here is how few people know how to drive cars. The public transportation system is so extensive that no one has to drive. There's no place to park anyway."

Eileen opened the door to her apartment and scooped up the cat before he could escape. Then she watched jealously as Talbot took Farand into his arms and held him, petting his head with a gentle hand and smiling down at the damned cat, who purred and acted like a slave to pleasure.

Holding the cat, Talbot unflinchingly examined the wall covered with Ohio's paintings. Even when Eileen pulled the palm tree aside to expose the collection in stark reality, he stayed stanch. Only the narrowing of his eyes showed its impact on him. "Interesting," he said.

"You can't use 'interesting' because it's so overdone. You have to rack your brain and come up with something different that's equally noncommittal."

He promised he'd work on it and glanced around her apartment with great interest—at the verdant growth, the birdcage, the pleasing color combinations. He smiled and said the loft was attractive, which made her extremely pleased. Then he stared thoughtfully at the bed and his whole attitude changed. He put the cat down and turned away.

With the change in him she suddenly became awkward and unsure. Not understanding him and unable to think of anything else to say, she asked, "Would you like a cheese, Spanish, or pizza omelet?"

He looked at her soberly for a minute, then seemed to realize he hadn't answered her question and sighed in a resigned way. "Pizza."

She tied on an apron, which in five years she'd used twice, and started the coffee, assembled the ingredients, did the chopping, and gave him the napkins, silverware, and dishes for the table. She worked efficiently, casting quick, assessing glances at her guest. He offered no conversation and appeared lost in his own thoughts. Whatever it was that occupied his attention, it wasn't lighthearted. What had altered his mood?

When the silence became unbearable, she paused in cooking long enough to put some low but cheerful background music on the stereo. The sound helped make the apartment feel less empty.

As she returned to the stove to begin the omelets, she noticed that Talbot was reading a list of her cartoon contacts that was tacked up next to the phone. His expression was bleak as he looked up at her. "You know Vince Worldman, the publisher?"

"I've only seen him a couple of times, but he's been very kind. Do you know him?" She smiled, thinking perhaps this would get the conversation going, but he only nodded abruptly and again fell silent.

She turned the omelets out onto heated plates, put the pie into the small tabletop oven to warm, and carried their plates to the table. She set them down and glanced at Talbot, smiling at him shyly.

He moved slowly to his place, then held her chair out for her before sitting down. They each took a bite, but Eileen could hardly swallow. What had happened to the evening? What was *wrong* with him? She was in despair.

He glanced at his watch several times, and she felt even more uncomfortable. Finally he offered, "Your plants are unusual. How did you get them in here?"

"They were here when I took the place, and they just keep on growing. Karen Green—and that's her real name; she's green all over, she claims—has a little shop in the next block. She comes up every so often to trim them all back and shape them. Otherwise we'd have to hack our way through. Farand loves the rubber tree and is very careful of it, but he's

merciless with the fig. Apparently figs survive panthers. That's what the cat pretends to be when he lurks in the greenery." She ran out of things to say.

He smiled perfunctorily, and she blurted, "What do you read?" Her tongue had surprised her, but at least she hadn't asked if he slept nude!

He glanced at her in a way that showed her question had appeared abrupt to him and said, "Oh, *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*..." He gestured with one hand.

"No fiction?" she asked in an urgent, breathless way.

"Sometimes. I read the book reviews and find something that sounds good. But I lean to nonfiction." He paused, then asked, "Do you—have time to read?"

"Oh, yes."

"What? *True Confessions*?" His voice had roughened.

She ignored the hostility and concentrated on continuing the forced chatter. "I was shocked to learn that those stories are written by professional writers. Mostly they're fictional. I thought they were all really true. My mother had a maid who sent one in and it was accepted. When it was published, the farm in the story had been changed to a ranch, the fruit picker had become the owner, that sort of thing."

"Have you written for them?" He watched her closely.

"No. I'm not really a writer." Had he seen the feature on Homer?

"You're just a student of human nature," he said cynically.

"As a matter of fact, that's true." They were back to her job.

"I don't want to talk about it." He'd turned harsh again, and his eyes shot sparks. Then he looked at his watch again.

She frowned at him impatiently. It always came down to her cartoons. Why would he be so hateful about them? "I don't harm anyone," she said. "No one knows the people I do. And it's a good living."

"So money is important to you." He stabbed her with a cold stare.

"Money helps smooth the rough road." She lifted her chin and grinned, still trying to be pleasant.

"There have to be other ways you could earn a buck."

"We're not talking 'a buck'; we're talking big bucks."

"And that justifies what you do?"

"I brighten the lives of a lot of people."

His eyes raked her. "I imagine so!" Then he seemed forced to add, "I thought you'd work nights."

"Well, I do. There's no set time. There are days I don't do anything at all, then all of a sudden I'll work straight through and be so wildly pushed I hardly eat! Then there—"

"I said I didn't want to talk about it," he interrupted.

"I don't know why on earth you're so hostile about my work."

"Who the hell—you're right! It's no concern of mine!"

"You said you wanted to see me in a social way, as friends. You're not being very friendly," she retorted.

He shot his cuff angrily and glared at his watch. "I have to get downstairs. Roberto will be there."

"Oh, Talbot..." She shook her head in restless frustration.

"Thanks for asking me tonight. And I... Eileen, I like being with you..." He stopped and just looked at her in that miserably intense way he had, as if he was bitterly regretful about her for some reason.

She stood up, feeling dejected. The whole evening had been wasted. No, it wasn't the evening that was wasted, it was her and Talbot's relationship that was hopeless. Nothing could ever come of it. She'd never know if he slept naked or if he had hair on his chest.

He shook his head slowly, frowning at her, then took her into his arms in a troubled way. She almost cried. She almost just leaned against him and bawled. But it would never do. She did lean against him, but she waited to see what he would do. He tilted her face up and kissed her.

It was unfair. How could he kiss her that way when she knew she'd never see him again? What a mean and hateful thing to do, to kiss her so magnificently when there was no hope he'd ever follow it up and make magnificent love to her. She'd never know what it would be like to make love with him. She swallowed a sob and widened her eyes and didn't blink, and she controlled her tears.

She felt stiff, and she moved woodenly as she went to the door with him. He turned and said, "Eileen in the same way he'd already said it several times, then he kissed her again with the same dastardly tenderness, as if trying to make her cry. But Farand bounced over to take advantage of the opening door, and Eileen had to lean down to scoop up the cat and thereby hid her betraying expression.

As if reluctant to leave, Talbot hesitated in the doorway, but Eileen was silent. Finally they exchanged goodbyes, knowing they were probably the last words they'd ever say to each other, and he left.

She stood there, holding the happily purring cat, her tears spilling over. The cat watched her with wide eyes and enormous pupils, then patted the droplets falling down her cheeks. The action was playful, but the gesture was too tender for Eileen, and she hiccuped and gulped and her throat jerked and she put the cat down and flung herself full-length on the bed and gave herself up to the onslaught of tears.

Finally the smell of burning peach pie aroused her from her sorrow, and she turned over, still sniffing, her throat still jerking, and dragged herself off the bed. She threw the pie into the garbage and opened some of the skylights to allow the smell to escape, took a long shower, swallowed two aspirin, and went to bed. Farand jumped up and cuddled close to her, purring. Usually he slept on the sofa, but tonight the cat crowded close to purr and lick, jiggling the bed minutely, distracting Eileen. And she realized she wasn't alone in the world. Did Farand, that small graceful furry creature, sense that she needed someone close? Impossible. Or was it? No. After all, Farand was just a cat.

Almost a week went by. Now when the phone rang, Eileen looked at it dully, having given up hope. For days she'd leaped, reaching it by the end of the first ring and gasping, "Hello?" but it had always been someone else, never Talbot. Now she didn't pick it up until the third ring, and she said a listless, "Hello?"

"Are you—is someone there?" Talbot asked tersely.

"No." And the wonder of hearing from him made that small word sing.

"I'm not—interrupting anything?"

"No, no. I was just entertaining—"

He made a harsh sound.

"—Farand." What was the matter with that man?

"The *cat*?" he exploded.

"There isn't anyone else around named Farand," she pointed out.

"I'll just be a minute, if you're in a hurry."

"To entertain a cat?" she asked incredulously.

"Are you—all right?"

"You forgot to eat the pie."

"That's right!" he exclaimed.

"I had it in the countertop oven and it burned."

"Oh, that's too bad." He sounded genuinely regretful. Their meaningful dialogue had run out and they sat there holding silent phones to their ears. Finally he said, "I want to see you."

"Yes," she agreed immediately, before he could qualify the statement. It didn't occur to her to be coy or ask why he wanted to see her. She simply wanted so badly to see him. But why did he have to sound so unhappy about it? Was it such a chore to see her? Perhaps he was having trouble with his job. Was he about to be transferred and didn't like getting involved with her when he would be leaving? She'd fly to the ends of the earth to see him, but she couldn't quit her job. Maybe she could arrange to take a vacation wherever Talbot landed.

Her train of thought led her to say, "You know I've been married?"

He sounded surprised at her sudden question, then tiredly he replied, "No, I didn't."

"Altogether almost three years, but we were divorced about two years ago."

There was a pause as he seemed to consider the information. "Were you a—professional then?" "Yes. I started in—"

"And *he* couldn't handle it, either?"

Either? There it was again: her job. "It was the money more than the work," she explained. "I made almost twice what he did."

Abruptly Talbot changed the subject. "Would you like to go to dinner this Saturday? We could drive to the beach."

If they went out, they'd never talk. She needed to know more about him. "Why not come here?" she counteroffered.

"What would it cost me?" he asked cautiously.

Good lord, money! With a sauciness she didn't particularly feel, she replied, "The wine. This is just for dinner, two kisses, and you leave by eleven. That okay?"

"Do you—have a later appointment?" he asked harshly.

Somewhat impatiently she said, "No. One date a night is enough for anyone. Doubling would be exhausting."

He asked grimly, "What kind of wine?"

"How about something light? It's so beastly hot, we'll have a summer supper. Would that be all right?"

"Sounds good," he said. "How about champagne?"

"Henri Marchant?"

"Done," he promised.

That week she cleaned the already-clean apartment, inadvertently entertaining Farand no end. The cat found a perch and watched intently, then rushed down the tree and bounced on whatever Eileen was working with and skittered past, escaping to lurk in the shadows somewhere else. Wooser just cheeped and sang... and sang and sang. As on her previous dates with Talbot, Eileen agonized over what to wear. Finally she decided on a peasant dress left from college days. Made from soft cotton in a dark blue print, it was long, with elastic at the waist, at the low scooped neckline, and at the tiny puffed sleeves. It was very flattering and cool. She'd wear soft Chinese silk slippers and leave her hair loose but held back with an Alice band. In the kitchen she'd wear the apron.

She kept changing her mind about the meal, but she finally decided on black bean soup with lemon slices, shrimp sauteed with spring onions and parsley, parmesaned vegetable mix, wheat rolls, and a melon salad. For dessert she'd have ice cream topped with crushed pineapple and creme de menthe. It would be simple, attractive, and difficult to ruin, even if she was nervous.

Why should she be nervous? She was a grown woman. She'd cooked countless meals for other people. Talbot was just a man. Yeah. Sure.

She made lists so she'd be sure of herself, and she did all she could ahead of time. The black bean soup didn't taste right and she threw out a batch. Despite that small catastrophe, she was dressed and ready, although a little edgy, when the intercom buzzed. She punched the button and asked eagerly, "Is it you?"

He gave an amused snort and replied, "Of course. How do you know who's lurking on your doorstep?"

"Oh, yes," she said with breathless charm.

"If you greet us all that way," he growled, "no wonder you're wealthy."

But she'd buzzed the door release and didn't hear that very clearly. Then, being more welcoming than was perhaps prudent, she left Farand in the apartment and went to the top of the stairs and leaned over the rail to watch for him. Impatient, she went down to the landing and waited there.

She heard his footsteps, and excitement circled lazily inside her. Her breasts lifted against the thin cotton cloth of her soft peasant dress, and her lips parted in suspense as she waited for him to appear. Just as he approached the top of the third flight, the duchess popped out of her door, dressed for an evening out.

"Well, Mr. Wendell, isn't it?" she exclaimed in her high voice. "Going up to see Eileen? What lovely flowers! And wine! You are so fortunate to find her with a free night! All the young men who troop up these stairs to her door! All eager and devoted..."

Eileen closed her eyes and gave a silent groan. The duchess meant well—she wanted Talbot to realize what a prize she was—but it was too much. He might think she was too popular and be discouraged. Discouraged? He couldn't be more so already!

When Talbot escaped the duchess and mounted more slowly toward Eileen, his face was blank and rather forbidding. She tried to lighten his dark mood by saying, "Just before the last flight you get your second wind; as you reach the fifth floor, you magically recover."

His eyes rose to her and he seemed to take in her charmingly domestic, flatteringly feminine figure. "So all the men arrive breathless?"

"I never realized before it was from the climb," she teased. "The duchess wants you to understand how fortunate you are to have an evening with me and—"

"I do know." His voice was harsh.

"That was nicely said. The flowers are just gorgeous.

They look like an English garden."

"If you already have some for your table, these will be comfortable anywhere."

"I was going to use some begonias for the table, but they'd really be better by the window. These will look beautiful." She took the flowers from him and impulsively offered her mouth for his. And he put his flower-freed arm around her and kissed her thoroughly. It was simply lovely, and she remembered not to drop the bouquet.

He lifted his mouth and explained the long kiss. "You said I get only two, so I wanted more than a little peck."

She gave him an absolutely impish grin. "I wasn't counting on one for the flowers."

That did make him smile finally, and he slowly released her and allowed her to move so that they could walk up to her floor and over to her apartment door. Inside, he spoke to Farand and paused to look around. "It's so clean and airy. It's very attractive."

"I'm glad you like it here. I hope you come to see us often."

He gave her a quick, quizzical glance and questioned,

"Us?"

She gestured. "Wooser, Farand, and me."

He smiled slightly and kept glancing at her. "I've never much cared for canaries or cats," he said.

"You ought not to say that in front of them."

"But the *me* of the group holds a strong interest for another me—me."

Her lips parted, she considered briefly, and she decided what she really wanted was another kiss, so she moved over to him and reached up to kiss his mouth. She intended a quick one, but he took advantage of it and turned it into a searching, breathless kiss that thrilled her stomach and tingled her nerves deliciously. When he released her, he said, "How many do I have left now?"

"Oh," she said, "that didn't count. That was for your charming compliment."

"I get kisses for compliments?"

She grinned, blushed, and bit her bottom lip as she replied guardedly, "For that particular one."

"What kind do you prefer? I could talk all night and it'd take you a week of concentrated effort to pay off."

The thought of a week of kissing Talbot caused the quiverings in her stomach to go berserk and swoosh around so that she almost missed a step. That caused her to blush scarlet—the curse of redheads. He grinned at her, looking very pleased. Then the grin faded and his expression became one of quizzical contemplation. She had surprised him. "You blush beautifully."

She groaned and covered her face with her free hand and shook her head. But he pulled her hand away and smiled at her, his eyes glittering, and he leaned over and gave her a quick kiss. "That didn't count, either," he told her. "That's for the blush."

"Don't start that or we'll never eat!" And the color of her face darkened.

"Who needs food?"

"Behave!" she commanded saucily, and she flipped away to the kitchen to put the flowers into water, then set them on the table. She stood back and admired them before she said, "They're so beautiful! Thank you very much."

"Do I get kissed for them?"

"You already did!" she scolded with mock indignation. "When?"

"Down on the landing!" She pretended to frown.

"Oh," he said, sounding disappointed. "I thought that was because you were glad to see me."

Heat stole back into her cheeks. "I was. I am," she admitted.

"Then what about the flowers?"

"You're wickedly greedy," she declared in a chiding way.

His eyes turned smoky and seemed to burn into her body. "You're quite right."

While her eyes widened and her mouth gasped in elaborate shock, her body hummed and her insides quivered with yearning. She gasped again to get some air and turned away, suddenly shy—at her age, for goodness sake! She couldn't prevent whatever impulse caused her to give a quick smile over her shoulder in an outrageously flirtatious manner. Whatever was she about? She'd had no conscious intention of doing that. She hadn't known she could.

Talbot followed her, but she put a restraining hand on his chest, lifted her chin and cocked her head in a sassy way, telling him to open the wine. His voice rumbled through her body as he asked, "Do I get kissed for that?"

"I'm not sure." She pretended to consider. "I shall have to decide."

His eyes narrowed dangerously, and the sight of his lashes made her ache deep inside. "I'll present a bill at the end of the evening," he warned.

She widened her eyes. She thought: It's going to happen—tonight. Then sensual lickings curled out from the core of her body and wound their way along her bones and nerves to her stomach and thighs, her breasts, her arms and legs, fingers and toes. She wondered if her hair had risen from her head. The sensation was so powerful, she could imagine it mending her split ends.

Her mind went into a rosy haze, and all during dinner they giggled and laughed and sent flirtatious glances and blushes, and they even ate a little food. Talbot said she was as good a cook as he was. She asked what he cooked and he said food, which sent her into spasms of giggles, which should have made her see how silly she was being, but he acted as if he thought she was absolutely enchanting.

At her suggestion, he shed his tie and jacket. They lingered over the food and the wine. Then as they were spooning out dessert, she fed him a bit of hers. He was taking it from her spoon as she watched intently with slightly parted lips and dreamy eyes, when the doorbell rang.

Startled, they looked at each other, coming back slowly from whatever magic place they had been. Eileen said incredulously, "The doorbell?"

Talbot looked at the door, equally disbelieving, as the duchess called, "Whoo-hoo." Not knowing what else to do, Eileen got up reluctantly and went to the door, scooped up Farand, and opened it a crack. But apparently the duchess had never doubted her welcome, because she barged right in. "I was lonesome," she explained. "And I knew you'd be eating dessert by now so I came up to share." She smiled one of her fragile smiles, which she saved for special occasions when she particularly wanted her way. "And besides, there's nothing on TV." She leaned over to examine their dessert cups and exclaimed, "Not .quite so much pineapple on mine." And she took over the evening.

She was funny. She told stories about her life and people she'd known, and she entertained them, making them laugh and enjoy her. That they really did enjoy her was proof of her skill. Finally she looked at her watch and exclaimed, "Good God! It's two o'clock! What great company you are. I've seldom had such a delightful evening." She looked at Talbot with a stunned expression and guessed shrewdly, "I've spoiled it for you."

Being a gentleman, he assured her, "It was delightful. A gracious hostess, a remarkable meal, and good company."

The duchess turned to Eileen and advised, "Keep this one."

Eileen blushed again, partly from embarrassment, partly from anger. Talbot escorted the duchess down to her apartment and returned to find that Eileen had whisked away most of the dishes. He helped her tidy up, then he stopped her and kissed her and held her. He gave a ragged sigh. "How do you—work, with her popping in that way?"

"When I'm really busy, she leaves me alone," she replied absently as she wound her arms around his neck and leaned her face into his shirt to breathe in the male smell of him. She wiggled her nose into his shirt front and felt the crinkly hairs growing on his chest. She thought: Now.

But he didn't follow up. He gently released himself, saying it was late, that it had been a wonderful evening, and that he was going to be very busy for a while, but he'd call her when he could. He interspersed the sentences with light kisses, and then he took up his jacket and tie, and he left. Damn!

What did he mean that he'd call her when he could? Why couldn't he?

CHAPTER FIVE

AS SOON AS it was decently late the next morning, which was Sunday, Eileen called Mel and Beth answered the phone! A sleepy, lazy-voiced Beth. The very sound of her voice irritated Eileen. Envious, she snapped, "Is Mel capable of replying to one question?"

"Oh, hi, Eileen. I'll see if I can—rouse him." She laughed in an intimate way as she turned away from the phone.

The irritating background sounds of exclamations and chuckles and *mmmmms* almost made Eileen hang up, but she had to know. Finally Mel heaved a large, extremely patient sigh into the phone and said, "Yeah?" sounding as if he really didn't want to be bothered. "Is Talbot engaged?" Eileen barked. "Widowed? Anyone terminally ill? Is he being transferred?"

"No."

Eileen hung up. Why had Talbot said he'd call her when he could? She mentally chewed on that and couldn't figure him out. She was determined not to call him. So far she'd done all the chasing, and he mustn't be interested or he'd have reacted. He could be darling, but basically he was hostile to her—more particularly, to her work. If she pursued him and forced his attention on her when he was so reluctant, she would only hurt herself in the end. Her affections were too attuned to him. She might fall in love with him. She might be terribly hurt. If she was smart, she would shun the thought of him. She decided to be smart.

Shunning John Talbot Wendell was similar to, but worse than, quitting smoking. She thought about him constantly, yearned for him, rejected his mental image, and stopped her hand from dialing his number. She spent a good deal of time at the phone either in intense debate with herself or just sitting there with her hand on the receiver. Was she restraining herself from dialing? Or was she ready to answer the anticipated ring? Several callers were startled by her prompt response—the phone never rang more than once—and by her quick, breathless hello. She was disappointed every time.

But finally he did call, and received the same quick answer and brief, breathless hello. "Were you expecting a call?" he asked harshly.

Not even bothering to answer, she blurted, "Are you through with whatever it was?"

"I've decided to see you," he began, and before she could question that wording, he added, "Are you busy this Friday? Would you come to my place for dinner?"

"Oh, yes," she said, the words bubbling from her mouth. "I'd love to." She could think about that first statement after she'd seen him again. "Can you really cook? Shall I bring Chinese?"

Modestly he replied, "I'm an excellent cook. Plain fare but tasty."

"Where do you live?"

"In a town house. We have a whirlpool hot tub just outside the solarium. It's really a four-man stopover place, but the other three take off for long weekends with their families. And then I'm all alone."

Hearing that did funny things to her stomach and breathing. Was he saying she could spend the weekend with him? Now, Eileen... she cautioned, while a sane part of her brain asked Talbot, "Do you have a garden?"

"That's where I picked your bouquet when you had me to dinner and the duchess turned out to be the entertainment." He sounded easy and droll. And he sounded bolder, as if he was pursuing her.

"She's asked about you," Eileen said. Then she asked, "So you're a gardener? The flowers were so beautiful. They lasted almost ten days." During which time I never heard from you, she added silently.

"Yeah. Being a farm boy, I've taken the garden over this summer, and the place isn't bad. I have a fairly good compost going, and the flowers have struggled to cope with what I've managed to do with the soil in such a short

time. In another couple of years, with care, it could be pretty. Do you garden? You must with the jungle you have."

"Remember Karen who comes and prevents my killing them off? She was appalled with my using coffee grounds."

"Well, yes, she would've been. For pots inside that way, the grounds are too concentrated. In a compost, mixed with other vegetation, it would be all right. It isn't hard to care for plants yourself," he assured her.

"I only look and enjoy."

"Do you have any hobbies?" he asked curiously.

"My work's my hobby—" she began.

"Do you like any particular foods?" he hurriedly interrupted. "Or do you have any violent dislikes?"

"Anything but turnips," she stated emphatically. "And brussels sprouts."

"An adolescent taste," he diagnosed. "I'll bet you like the basics: green beans, carrots, meat, potatoes, and apple pie."

She chuckled and agreed. "Apple pie served with cheddar cheese."

He gave her the address and his home phone number and said to come about six or so. She replied that that would be fine.

On Friday she arrived at his town house with two bottles of wine and a fall flower arrangement Karen had made up at her shop. Eileen had never been invited to dinner at a man's apartment when it had been such an...event. It had always been casual, and generally there'd been other people present. This was different, and she was a little nervous because it was so important to her.

She'd been in agony over what to wear and had mentioned the problem to Karen. Ever practical, Karen had said that a lounge outfit would be fine. They wouldn't be going anywhere else, so either a lounge pajama or skirt should do it.

It was late September and since New York was enjoying a spell of Indian summer, it was warm enough for an icy blue-green pajama outfit of soft cotton. The top was strapless with a reliable elastic band to hold up the bodice. Eileen pulled her hair back and secured it with a long vertical clip so that it tumbled down the back of her head in a fall as cool as but more sophisticated than a simple pony tail. She wore flat sandals and large hoop earrings.

Thoughts of the hot tub gave her pause, but she decided to add a bikini and use a larger purse. If he suggested a dip or a soak, she couldn't simply strip and jump in. This way she'd be prepared.

Eileen faced the reality that she wanted Talbot. She had a lusty sexual appetite and relished sex. But she also had qualms. Would she be able to control her need? Had their relationship reached the point where it would be the right time to make love? And she had strong instincts of self-preservation and protection. She couldn't make love if she thought he was just using her, if her self-esteem was threatened.

Her feeling for Talbot wasn't casual. She decided she would judiciously evaluate their relationship that evening and, if it appeared doubtful that he would be interested in a long-term relationship that could lead to marriage, she'd break it off. She would measure and balance as she watched and listened, and she'd weigh it all with clear eyes and a cool head while she still could.

But when he opened the door, all her fine resolve flew right out of her head. As she entered and he closed the door, her eyes clung to him, her face serious before his cheerful greeting, her lips parted to accommodate her rapid breathing.

"Flowers!" he exclaimed. "If I remember correctly, that deserves a kiss." And he nudged aside her burdened hands and took her body close against his

and kissed her almost into a swoon. When he lifted his head from hers, she swallowed noisily and licked her lips. He kissed her again. When he spoke, his voice was a deep rumble from his chest into her breasts. "Thank God I didn't put any foolish limits on kissing." And he kissed her again.

It was lucky for her that the wine bottles were in a woven fiber basket with linen napkins wrapped around them and that the carpet was thick, for when she dropped the flowers, the bag of wine also slipped from her hand, but the bottles didn't break. There was a soft thud and a smothered clink, which she ignored as her freed hands crept up around his shoulders, and she relaxed against him deliciously as his kiss deepened. She thought: Now.

He released her reluctantly, but he did let go of her. He smiled, his eyes dark, his face flushed and his breathing uneven. He retrieved the wine and chuckled as he scooped up the flowers. He showed her that the wine was intact. She couldn't have cared less. He headed toward the kitchen, and she followed like a parentless duck.

Some of Eileen's resolve to judge their relationship returned, and she gave him high marks for greetings. He put the flowers into a vase and placed them on the table, as she had done with his. He slipped the wine into clay holders to keep it cool. He took her purse from her arm and set it aside, and then he took that arm and led her on a tour of his marvelous town house.

It was one of a row of houses that were like books crowded together on a street shelf. His house was narrow and deep, with three floors and an attic. The garden in back was also long and narrow, and it was a delight. It still held the dregs of summer glory, and Eileen looked obediently at the rock wall, the rose trellis, and the grape arbor, all of which served as screens and kept the garden shielded from the surrounding houses and their minute gardens.

A six-person indoor whirlpool tub had been added to the back at one side of the solarium. It was about twenty inches deep and there was a wide board so that you could lie comfortably in the water. One end of the board could be hooked over the edge of the tub and you could lie slanted into the water from the waist down.

The tub was surrounded by a lush jungle of plants and looked very appealing. Water trickled musically over rocks bordered by ferns, and tall leafy plants screened the narrow floor-to-ceiling windows from curious eyes. The lighting was indirect and subtle. It was a seductive place. Eileen was glad she'd brought her bikini.

Talbot led her through the house to his own room on the third floor. She thought he would make his move then, but he only kissed her once before continuing the guided tour. The furniture throughout was sleek and tasteful, and the decorating and coordination were so graceful and unobtrusive that it all had to have cost a great deal. The floors were covered with elegant rugs instead of carpeting. The whole place was lovely, subtly but tastefully arranged.

"Are the other men ever here on weekends?" Eileen asked.

"Occasionally their wives come for plays or shows, or to be with their husbands without the children. This house is just a convenience. The city is great, but kids' needs are different. At least my three roommates decided that and were willing to adjust their lives to meet those standards."

She gestured to the house. "This is pretty good adjusting."

"Isn't it though?" he agreed, looking around. "I was lucky. The guy I replaced was transferred. The others accepted me because they could be fairly certain I'd be here on weekends, and it's smart to have someone around, not leave the place empty for long. They come back Monday mornings, so they're only away from their families four nights a week. It's not a bad deal, and they don't have to commute all week, which can take a chunk out of each day."

They were back in the kitchen by then. He opened the wine and poured it into glasses, and they saluted each other and sipped. Eileen asked if she could help with the cooking, but Talbot said everything was under control. "Would you like to guess what we're having?"

"Peanut butter sandwiches."

He looked pained. "No. Try again."

"Chili?"

She had shocked him. "You have only one more guess," he warned.

"Not hot dogs," she decided, studying his face for clues. "Hamburgers?" she ventured.

He assumed a look of mock disgust and stood with his hands on his hips. "Steak, baked potatoes, and a salad."

"Good heavens! Of *course!*" She hit her forehead with her palm.

"You knew all along."

"Not for a minute," she vowed.

"Do you mean you took the chance that I might give you pigs' knuckles and sauerkraut?"

"If you added steamed carrots and applesauce, that wouldn't be bad."

He assessed her carefully, nodding. "You're a little strange."

"I am not!"

"Pigs' knuckles and sauerkraut might be the reason you're a—in the work you are." When she grinned, he looked at her curiously and asked abruptly, "So you know Vince."

"Vince Worldman? Oh, yes. Where did you meet him?"

"Around. I asked him—how you were." Watching her, Talbot paused as if waiting for a reaction, but she just looked at him with an interested smile and he went on. "He said you're great, and you're a good business woman." His voice had turned hard. When she still didn't respond, he poured more wine

into their glasses. Then he held up his glass and studied the color through the crystal as he said flatly, "You know a lot of people."

"Well, I meet a lot of people through my work."

"Men."

She shrugged. "That's reality. They're still in charge."

In an oddly deliberate way and with a level look he said, "Let's have a romp in the hot tub."

It struck her as an awkward invitation, as if he'd planned it but had just dispensed with the preliminaries. She wondered if there'd been a checklist: greeting, tour, blank, hot tub... What was the blank that he'd skipped? His invitation to sample the hot tub while standing in the kitchen jarred her, but she had never tried one—she was checking off a list of her own—and she was prepared if he began to seduce her.

She had a little trouble rationalizing her decision but she knew if he tried to make love to her, she'd cooperate. She did want him. She might know he wasn't the right man and she'd never see him again, but she did so want him at least once. He affected her very sensually—not only seeing him but just thinking of him.

She'd come prepared. She'd never done that before. In fact, her lack of preparation had saved her virtue several times. She'd been adamant that the man would have to marry her, and none of them had been ready for marriage. So, she'd said logically, then they weren't ready for sex, either. They hadn't seen that, and the arguments had gotten so involved and heated—for, having been married, she was no virgin—that passions had cooled and she'd survived. But this time she'd come prepared. And she felt uncomfortably like a loose woman.

"I've never tried a hot tub, but I'd like to," she said. She smiled rather shyly and blushed. It was her guilty conscience, she was sure. He might very well not have anything salacious in mind, just entertainment. She darted a look at him. He was watching her blush quizzically.

"So you can still blush!" The fact seemed to amaze him.

"Isrv't it awful? At my age!" She put her hand to her flushed face.

"I find it very—appealing. It makes you seem—innocent."

"It's the red hair."

"Are you a natural redhead?" The words were bold, and he too reddened somewhat.

She understood he was asking about her private body hair, and her flush deepened as she turned away, embarrassed and avoiding a reply.

His low, intimately amused chuckle sent skyrockets off inside her, and she became very self-conscious—and exquisitely aware of her body.

Tom had never had this effect on her. Perhaps at twenty-eight she was approaching the peak of her female sexuality, which might explain her barely controlled lust for Talbot. Maybe he was actually an ordinary man, and simple biological circumstances made him the target for her lustful fantasies. She doubted that. It was Talbot.

If biological changes had been the cause, she'd have welcomed Ken's advances or ravished poor Andy. A mental picture of Andy's insulted stare made her smile, and she lifted amused eyes to Talbot, whose answering grin looked almost wolfish. His expression made her hesitate, but he took up one clay wine holder and indicated the way toward the hot tub. Still uncertain, she nevertheless retrieved her purse and moved toward the door that led to the back hall. Again she was glad she'd brought her bikini. Would he wear trunks? At the thought of being naked in the tub with him, her knees almost buckled.

They stood for a minute looking at the placid tub. The surface of the water was barely disturbed by the contrived trickle of water that fell into it from the rocks. The water was clear. Anyone sitting in it naked would be fully visible. Thank goodness she'd brought the suit.

Talbot set the clay wine holder down by the side of the pool and put his empty glass beside it. Then he tipped her glass against her lips until she'd finished the wine and placed her glass down, too. He gave her an enigmatic searching stare and began deliberately unbuttoning his shirt. She glanced around nervously and asked where she could go to change. He hesitated over the request before leading her to a half-bath under the stairs. There she managed to disrobe and put on her bikini.

Actually it wasn't really a bikini. The bottom was more like boy's shorts with the hint of cuffed leg. However, one summer she'd gone with her family to the Gulf Coast, and the combination of sea, salt, and sand had permanently turned the suit's pristine white color into the exact shade of her skin. At first glance, she realized, she looked naked.

However, knowing she was more than discreetly covered, she strolled out confidently, barefoot, to the pool. Talbot's head snapped up and his lips parted in a gasp when he first saw her. Then his astonishment faded and his mouth widened into a big grin. "A swimsuit?" he asked incredulously. "You do surprise me."

The whirlpool jets were roiling the water and the busy bubbles obscured him from the armpits down, but Eileen noted that his chest was indeed nicely hairy. Was he wearing trunks? He started to rise as he reached out to assist her into the pool, but she said hurriedly, "Don't get up!" and stepped quickly down into the warm water.

He settled back, grinning, looking exceedingly amused. She sat down about three feet from him and was engulfed in gently massaging bubbles. "I feel like a fly in a glass of champagne!" she exclaimed.

"Isn't it great?" He seemed on the verge of laughing out loud. "You're not supposed to wear a suit, didn't you know?"

"What did you think I was going to do? Just wiggle out of my clothes and jump in? I told you I was square."

But as she babbled, what really occupied her mind was the thought that he was probably naked. They were in the same tub and he had nothing on. Holy Maloley and Mother Macree!

Eileen knew that when people are uncomfortable they often either clam up entirely or talk incessantly. Eileen was a talker. "Have you heard about Ohio?"

"He's pregnant," Talbot guessed.

"No, of course not! But some art critic wandered into the gallery at the end of Ohio's show and declared that he's an impulsive primitive."

"Primitive? Ohio?" Talbot asked skeptically.

"Of course he was offended, and Joe had a terrible time calming him down. Ohio sees himself as the epitome of the cultured intellectual. Mel told Ohio that having his work termed primitive was a high compliment because it showed he could go back to his roots. Therefore he was open, giving, unblocked. It was Mel's finest hour."

When Talbot's laughter faded, she told him, "'The Leaf' particularly caught the critic's eye. Do you know Ohio has been offered a thousand dollars for it?"

"Sell!"

"He refused! He said he'd been your first."

"Good *grief!*" Talbot dramatically raised both hands to his head, agonized.

"If you have to explain what he meant by *first*, I'll go along if you'd like me to back you up. Or you can hand out printed cards and give my name and number so people can verify your side of the story."

Talbot's head snapped up and his face went still. With some asperity he said harshly, "I could put your name in telephone booths, too." "Oh, no. I'd only be available to your immediate circle. You'd have to—"

"You need more—clients?" Talbot interrupted.

She explained in a professional tone, "When one is in business, one must always explore new outlets. Who knows where they might lead? I'd like to go public—"

His face grim, Talbot interrupted harshly, "How nice I found you in a relatively amateur status limited to New York City."

"I'll have you know I have a contact in Galesburg, Illinois."

"How did you get so far afield?" he asked nastily.

"I was on a plane going to Colorado for a ski—"

"A professional holiday."

"Well, one never knows when one will find the—"

"How often do you see the Galesburg contact?"

"Not very often, but we keep in touch.- That's where Knox College is, you know. Old Siwash."

"Fascinating," he growled, and impatiently he stretched over to the wine bottle and poured them each another glass. As he moved, his backside was briefly revealed in the bubbles—and she saw that he *was* nude.

An electric shock of acute awareness prickled over her skin, causing her nipples to peak and her sensitive places to tingle and shiver. She went briefly mute as he handed her the wineglass and she took it from him. How clever of her hand to realize it was supposed to do that.

While she was observing the exchange of a glass of wine, another part of her mind was quite logically considering Talbot's nudity. It was no big deal. People in swimming pools wearing mere scraps of cloth were basically nude. It was completely natural to take even that off when sharing a bath, and a hot tub was a bath.

Talbot wasn't being bold or an exhibitionist; he was being natural. She was the weird one. Who ever heard of a person bathing with clothes on? He probably thought she was a dreadful prude. She blushed and admitted that she *was* a prude, and she was sitting in a bubbling bath with a naked man.

As the reality of what was happening sank in, her eyes became very large and she looked at him quite solemnly. He was gorgeous. He poured his own wine and replaced the bottle before settling down quite close to her. Bubbles of excitement started rioting around inside her body just like the jet-propelled bubbles in the bath.

Had the inventors of the whirlpool jets been inspired by sensual reactions inside their bodies? She became very still, intensely conscious of both the inner and outer sensations, and decided the inventors needed to monitor what Talbot did to her in order to improve their product. The inner jet streams were eclipsing the outer ones.

Then he kissed her. It was exquisitely sensual to sit in warm, busy bubbles and be kissed. Her senses reeled, and she responded eagerly. As she clutched at him, some of her wine spilled over his shoulder, and since she was plastered to him, she too felt the cold splash.

His voice was low and intimate as it rumbled, "What is it about me and wine for you? Do you think you're launching a ship?"

Very saucily she poured the rest over his head and laughed up at him. He took the glass and put it aside, then placed both arms around her and pulled her across his body to kiss her, keeping her head above the roiling waters. It was delicious. Her head spun, her body trembled, her hands moved on his shoulders and head, and her mouth and tongue responded to his.

They became so entangled that they slid too low and were splashed. They came up sputtering and laughing, and Talbot said he thought the ratio of wine and water was too diluted.

"I think the jet streams and bubbles are superior to bathing in champagne," she said. "Wine is so sticky."

He gave her a quick enigmatic glance and asked, "Have you ever taken a bath in champagne?"

She laughed. "I've only shared glasses of it splattered in an art gallery and in a hot tub."

And he kissed her again. They moved around so much and the water was so active that she hadn't been aware of his sly removal of her bathing suit top until he took the last strap off over her hand. Suddenly her whole body responded, and she wasn't sure whether she was reacting to the water's agitation or to the turmoil inside her.

He flipped her discarded top onto the tiles, but he didn't put his hands on her bare breasts right away. He grasped her under her arms and dragged her close to him, draping her over him, and pulled her up his chest so that she was aware of the crinkly hairs on his body. Her nipples rose and her thighs thrilled as her mouth turned eager and seeking.

He was ready for her, eager for her, and he asked, "Is there any reason why I shouldn't make love to you?" After she gulped and shook her head, he asked, "Do I need to get something to protect you?" Again she shook her head, and he growled a cynical, "I figured you'd be on the pill."

She was confused by that statement and by the fact that at first his next kiss was harsh. When she made a sound of protest, he became an ardent lover again. His hands and mouth teased her, seeking, caressing, tasting, loving her. And she forgot about his questions as her own hands became free on him.

She kept expecting him to take her from the pool to a couch or to a bed, but he pulled the slanting board down with one end in the pool and laid her back on that. She thought: Now? In a hot tub? And she loved it. She laughed and helped him remove the bottom of her suit and lay back as he built her again to a frenzy before he hovered over her. She placed him eagerly so that he could join her with mind-bending, thrilling ecstasy. And he carried her to the peak of rapture and kept her balanced there to falter and rise to it again and again until she was frantic. At last he carried them both over that divide and into fulfillment. She floated down in shuddering spasms of pleasure.

It had never been like that for her, and she was laughing and weeping as, still coupled, his weight on his elbows, he watched her, looking down at her face, his own expression closed and blank. She moaned with after- thrills and tenderness. "Oh, darling, it's never been that way." She didn't see his face as she spread tiny kisses on his chin and shoulders and her hands smoothed back his wet hair and caressed his shoulders and throat. "I wish we could do it again—right now!" And her throaty laugh was excessively wanton and amused.

"We will." He moved a bit on her, but she protested that he was a beast, that she was devastated. He said he'd give her five minutes. She laughed again and protested more. Then, with unusual hesitancy, he kissed her with small soft kisses and murmured sounds that weren't ~words, but his face was still closed and aloof, which greatly puzzled her. It was as if he didn't want to be making love to her but couldn't help himself, but eventually his loving sweetness wiped all the doubts from her troubled mind. She held him to her and relished the gentle afterplay. Finally he separated from her and helped her from the board.

She eyed the board with droll suspicion and asked, "Whose idea was the board? That's almost salacious!"

"Harry has bad legs and hips. When he first started jogging, he did it wrong and strained some muscles. He loves running, so he still does it, but he has to soak his legs. To sit in the water isn't as helpful as lying in it, so he devised the board. He lies on his stomach and sleeps for thirty minutes, and we've all gradually taken it up because it feels so good... and so do you—feel good." He put his hand to her face and gently kissed her, the most exquisite kiss that turned her completely vulnerable to him.

They had to turn off the jets before they could find her shorts. He couldn't understand how she'd managed to lose them. Whatever had she been up to? And he commented on her being a natural redhead. She blushed absolutely scarlet and told him how ghastly it had been to change clothes in gym when she was young. He petted her and told her she was beautiful. She said if he thought so, it was worth all the embarrassment of having been so different from the other girls. He said she was different from boys, too. She had to be

shown how and he was aroused again, but she laughed and evaded him and ran naked and lovely through the rooms, and he chased her.

Trapped at the end of the upstairs hallway, she called King's X, protesting that she was starved and he'd tricked her by asking her to dinner when he had only wanted to sate his carnal lusts. He was astonished that she was hungry. She said emphatically that it was so. He said, well, he supposed he'd have to feed her. She agreed to that.

He led her back downstairs, his head constantly turning to look at her as they walked naked hand in hand. She thought he was beautiful, he was so wondrously made, and she too took tiny peeks at him. She wasn't comfortable enough to stare at him, but she longed to. They were like Adam and Eve wandering through a civilized jungle to their primal pool. He grinned boldly, and she returned his grin with shy smiles.

CHAPTER SIX

LATER THAT DAY she returned to the kitchen in her strapless lounge pajamas, with her hair partly dried and clasped back in a riot of curls. She knew she looked pretty good, but she felt rather shy, and she tended to blush. It was exciting just to look at him, for she had never experienced anything even remotely similar to what she'd just shared with him. All her defenses were down.

He was standing barefoot in cutoff jeans, scooping handfuls of salad from a large bowl into smaller bowls. He turned and looked at her in a strangely measuring way that made her color deepen. Then he smiled gently and took the several steps to her to lean and kiss her before he busily went back to the salad. "Through no fault of my own," he told her, "the potatoes are a little crisply overdone. Something distracted me from my timing of our meal, and I forgot about them."

"What distracted you?" she couldn't resist asking, because she longed for him to say words of endearment or to comment on their shared pleasure.

"Some wild redhead who lurks in hot tubs to waylay— got that? *waylay*—nice innocent boys who are only trying to relax in a friendly bath."

With a boldness she hadn't known she possessed, she curled her hand on him and said, "Well, you do seem relaxed."

He pitched the salad bowl into the sink as he reached for her, bent her backward over the counter, and kissed her wildly. The timer saved her. It buzzed and buzzed until the sound finally penetrated his consciousness.

He lifted his flushed face and said, "See? Didn't I tell you you're distracting?" He frowned furiously. "If you ever intend to eat, and if you're as starved as you claim to be, you'll very carefully walk through there, into the dining room and sit quietly until I bring out the food. Then you'll quietly eat until you're no longer hungry. Then you can say or do whatever you want. All right?"

She said a meek, "Yes, sir," and cowered elaborately as he watched her, his eyes glinting.

"Scoot!" he commanded, and she scuttled past him and was rewarded with a swat on her bottom. He followed her retreat, patting her round backside until she ran squealing through the door.

They ate with great relish and much laughter. Talbot set his plate next to hers and sat watching her the whole time, making totally unrelated comments on farfetched subjects and tugging on her elasticized top. She gave his hand sharp slaps and pulled the top back up. He complained and made her kiss his hand to make it better. Then he had to give her a thank-you kiss, and it all started again.

"Do you sleep nude?" she asked him.

"I never noticed."

"Now, how could that be?" she inquired.

"Maybe I sleep in my clothes. I'll pay attention and let you know. Why did you ask?"

She continued to chew as she tried to think of a reason. After blotting her lips and taking a sip of wine, she explained, "I was thinking about you." And her blush flowered beautifully.

"When was that?" he wanted to know.

"Oh," she said vaguely, "one night..." Her blush grew so remarkably pink that she became embarrassed and laughed and put her fork down so that she could lean her elbow on the table to hide her face in her hand.

"You were in bed," he guessed shrewdly.

She shrugged. "I've forgotten." But it was such an obvious lie.

"And you were having lewd thoughts—about me?" He pulled her hand from her face and made her look at him.

Quite primly she said, "No, not at all. I was just wondering what you wore as you *read* in bed."

"And you wanted me to be in bed with you." He gloated.

"Of course not! The thought never entered my head!"

"Then why did you wonder what I wore in bed? Were you trying to figure out how to get me naked and how much effort it'd take? You must know I'd help."

She took that up. "No, I had no idea of your helping! You just told me you were a nice innocent boy." She laughed delightfully.

"*Ah-hah!* You've admitted it! You *wanted* me!" he exclaimed triumphantly. Then, with their chairs close, he crowded her and held her tightly to his side. After capturing both her hands in an iron grip, he used his other hand to jerk down the near side of her elastic top and free one breast. "Well, look at that!" he said. "Hello, you darling." And he leaned down to kiss a greeting.

The sensation made her stiffen and draw in her breath. But her reaction only made it easier for him because her spine arched, thereby raising her breasts to him. He pulled the band down to her waist, releasing her other breast to his caressing hand, which teased and kneaded it. She closed her eyes as thrills swept her helpless body. She gasped his name softly and ran her hand up his bare back into his hair, clutching it and pressing his face closer against her.

He raised his head slowly, nuzzling her breasts, rubbing his face against her softness. Then his lips captured hers to pull her lower lip into his mouth to briefly suckle it, to release it in a melting kiss, before he abandoned her mouth and sought her ear. His busy hands felt the wave of goose bumps that flooded her skin, and he laughed and blew into her neck, making her squeal as she writhed at his touch. He pulled her against him, rubbing his chest on hers and almost overwhelming her with sensations.

She wasn't surprised when he rose and pulled her to her feet. But he just held her to him, his hands clamped on her buttocks, grinding her to him. Then he released her!

She staggered a bit, and he steadied her. He kissed her cheek in a chaste way and handed her a tray, which she promptly juggled and dropped. Fortunately it was silver and didn't shatter. He laughed. Hazy-eyed, breathing quickly, intensely alert, he laughed.

He confused her mightily. Together they cleared the table, put the food away, and filled the dishwasher. Eileen wasn't a whole lot of help, but Talbot was very efficient. He worked quickly enough for them both, and the job was done in no time. Then he locked all the windows and doors, turned off the lights, and led her to the stairs. He gave her exquisite kisses all the way up the two flights to his room. She was in such a state, she had trouble making her knees work, but she forced them to obey, telling herself that her legs must function to get her where she so much wanted to go.

In his room he pulled her pajamas off and caressed her. He allowed her to undo his shorts and was patient as she fumbled with the snap. He yelped as she caught a hair in the zipper, but she kissed it better, and he recovered miraculously. He took her to his bed, which was neatly made with clean sheets. He tumbled her into it and made love to her. And she made love to him. It was special. Just before they fell asleep, Eileen realized that she was spending the night with him, and that it was just as well she'd suspected they might make love. They had surely done lots of that. And it had been beyond all expectations. She snuggled down into his arms, sated, and she slept.

When she wakened the next morning, Eileen discovered Talbot being unduly familiar. She mentioned that. He acted surprised. She said, "Nice young boys don't do that sort of thing." "I lied about being a nice young boy," he said in a muffled voice.

She said, "Oh." Then she said "oh" several more times, like little moans.

"Do you like that sort of thing?" he asked like a scientist making an investigation.

"Do I like what?" she asked, and he had to show her several more times before she was certain what he meant. Then she said, "I suppose it couldn't be much different from me doing that to you."

He wasn't sure of that at all, so she had to show him what she meant, and he had trouble being still and concentrating on the debate and not getting distracted.

"You're trigger happy," she accused him.

"I don't believe so," he began to deny it, but his voice was strangled and unconvincing. She showed him it was true. He was astonished.

They played and teased and laughed and made love. When they lay back, relaxed and content, Eileen had her head on Talbot's shoulder, and he looked down at her curled there next to him and sighed. He hugged her languid body and smoothed her soft breasts and kissed her pouting lips. She sleepily allowed the gentle buffeting of her body. "What a beautiful night," he said.

She *ummed* in agreement and smiled as she stretched lazily.

"It must be worth at least a thousand dollars," he said seriously.

"At least." She yawned and patted his chest.

In a bitter voice that puzzled her, he asked, "Should I pay now?"

She raised her head and exclaimed delightedly, "*You?* Oh, I thought you meant for *me* to pay!"

He groaned. "Oh, Eileen..." And his arms closed around her, pulling her close, and he leaned his head on hers and just held her in the sweetest way. At last he began seriously, "Eileen—"

But she said, "So you do sleep nude."

"I guess I must," he admitted.

"I like it." She allowed her hands to roam freely.

"You're a bold and brassy woman." The words were light, but his tone was serious.

"I've never been!" she denied. "There's something about you that causes me to act out of character. You inflame me." She turned up a sassy face to him, her heart in her eyes.

"Never?" he questioned, and there was a bleak hurt look in his expression. "You're very experienced."

"Well, I *was* married," she reminded him. "But *you* must have read some hair-raising textbooks and really studied them!" She squinched her eyes closed. "Were there seminars? Workshops?"

"I believe I have discovered a natural aptitude for— rising to the occasion."

She thought that was marvelously humorous, which should have shown him that she was basically an amateur. She said she was hungry and asked if he'd planned anything for breakfast. He said she'd just had breakfast. She said his memory was unreliable, that she hadn't even been out of bed and she was starving. He scoffed, "How could you possibly be starving when I've been giving you all those rich injections?"

That made her laugh again and she said, "I appreciate your efforts, but it's my stomach that's hungry."

"You're a pain, do you know that?"

"Poor baby, where does it hurt?" she sympathized.

But when he showed her, she replied that that area of his anatomy was overworked and needed rest and a hot poultice.

"I know just the thing," he exclaimed and reached for her, but she squealed and wiggled and escaped in the nick of time. Laughing, he lay back in bed and watched her.

She picked up her discarded pajama outfit and held it out with a disgruntled look. "I've been in and out of this so much in the last fourteen hours that I'm pretty tired of it."

"I like the outfit you're wearing."

She looked down her bare body and said, "This old thing? It's just like everyone else's."

"Oh, no, it's the most beautiful I've ever seen. But I do have a robe I've never had the courage to wear, if you'd like to try that." He rolled out of bed.

She put up defending hands and backed away. "I have a fair idea what you have in mind, so just keep your distance."

"Cut that out!" he said indignantly. "I'm no sex maniac."

"That's the very label I've been trying to remember! How *strange* you should think of it too!"

"You're acting like a scared rabbit," he scoffed.

"I can understand your thinking that, because you sure acted like a buck bunny."

"How would you know about bucks?"

"I've just made an intense study." But she grinned through her complaint.

By then he'd removed a Chinese silk embroidered robe from his closet. It was black with the embroidery in gold. There were chrysanthemums, one on each sleeve, with a beautiful dragon sprawled across the back. It was a museum piece. She said, "No wonder you haven't worn it."

"Yeah," he agreed. "It's too fancy." He held it out.

She looked at him with a faint smile as her eyes frankly moved over him from his head to his toes. He stood very still for her inspection. Then she moved to him and with her hand spread out she smoothed his chest in a slow sweep. "It would be gilding gold or painting the lily white for you to wear that robe." He needed no ornamentation; he was complete and perfect.

Why did his eyes look so sad? He stared at her in that odd way, then leaned over and kissed her gently. "I'd like you to have the robe, if it doesn't swallow you. There aren't any shoulder seams, and on me the sleeves are elbow length. Here, let me help you—although I'd rather you just wore the original." He smiled and touched her breast and ran his hand lightly down her belly.

As she slipped into the robe, she said, "The duchess has a beautiful one, remember? But next to this one, her robe would look like burlap. I can't ever let her see this." She looked into the mirror and saw that it was stunning. Where it had skimmed his body, it floated around hers. The sleeves hung past her hands, but with her tumbled mahogany hair and white skin, the black silk with the gold embroidery was breathtakingly rich. She was awesome.

Talbot had trouble taking his eyes off her. He found another robe for himself, but she put the Chinese one aside. "I meant for you to keep it," he protested. She said there was no way she'd wear that to cook breakfast. So he found a flannel shirt that more than covered her, and after they'd showered they went downstairs to eat. Even with her in the flannel shirt, Talbot had trouble forcing his eyes to leave her. He showed her where the phone was, and she called Beth to ask her to take care of Wooser and Farand. Beth said, "Oh? And where are you? With Talbot?"

"How did you guess?"

"How do I know the sun's up?"

"You knew?" Eileen was surprised.

"It was inevitable." Beth yawned. "Kismet."

"What's kismet?"

"Fate."

"Oh."

When she'd hung up, she said to Talbot, "Beth wasn't surprised." He only grinned and winked at her.

As they greedily ate their breakfast, he told her, "You could become a very expensive habit."

She was appalled that he should think so, although his preoccupation with money was beginning to annoy her. "I won't keep the robe," she declared earnestly. "I'll pay for half the groceries."

He frowned. "I want you to have the robe. I'll think of it around you, covering you, and it will be as if I'm there, surrounding you, covering you."

She considered that, her head tilted back. "I can't see any similarity at all." She shook her head and dismissed the idea.

He got a little huffy. "I want you to take it. I want to think of you wearing it."

"Then when I'm lonesome, instead of having you, I just put on the robe?"

He nodded emphatically. "If I can't be there."

Her smile came slowly, and she just looked at him. Their eyes locked, and they were silent for a long time.

Then huskily he said, "Damn, woman, what you do to me! If I'm around you much longer, I'll be nothing but a burned-out shell. All I want is to take you to bed."

"Don't forget the hot tub." She grinned.

"That was a first for me."

"Me too."

"Do you know, I never did it in the backseat of a car." He made that sound un-American.

"I never did either."

He nodded. "We'll have to try it."

"What kind of car do you have?"

"A motorcycle."

"Oh. I should think that would not only be awkward but a bit tricky."

"We could get a limo. With a chauffeur. So we wouldn't have to be bothered with the driving," he offered thoughtfully. "With a pull-out seat."

"With curtains?" She asked. "I'm not basically a flasher."

He considered it. "It'd be a motorized bedroom."

"We might just as well stay here."

"All right," he agreed as if there'd really been a decision to make.

"My bed is like a very comfortable jungle bower," she went on. "You could be Tarzan and I could be Jane." But he fell silent, as if he didn't want to think about that. "I know basic judo and I wouldn't yell and scream to be rescued all the time—from a lurking Farand panther or a hovering Wooser vulture."

But he didn't play along with her, and she wondered if he didn't like plants. She knew he liked her. That was fairly obvious. At her apartment he'd held and petted Farand, so he must like cats. Maybe he didn't like birds.

She'd have to find Wooser a good home. But what would Farand do for entertainment?

She stayed the whole weekend. They spent most of it in bed. When they were up, they smiled at each other for no good reason and held hands and touched and kissed and leaned against one another and were silly. They also used the hot tub and played hide and seek through the house. But they didn't go out in public. Eileen thought they ought to get outside just to see if there was still a city and people, but Talbot said emphatically no.

"Are you keeping me prisoner?" she inquired loftily.

"Absolutely."

"I'm just a love slave." She sighed elaborately and put the back of a hand to her forehead, the fingers curled helplessly. And he proved that she was indeed, a love slave, and she loved it.

Afterward, she said, "When you invited me for dinner three weeks ago—"

"Yesterday," he corrected.

"*Yesterday?*" She was astonished. "I came here just *yesterday?*"

"That's right."

"Just yesterday and we've—I think you're oversexed."

"Starved," he amended. "You started to ask me something." ,

"Uhhhh." She thought back. "Oh, yes. When you asked me to dinner yesterday, did you intend for me to stay the weekend?"

"Of course."

That admission made her cross. "You might have mentioned it. I would have brought more clothes. I'm getting very tired of that pajama outfit."

"I love it. It comes down so easily." He paused as if a new thought had disturbed him.

After waiting for him to continue, she asked, "Were you ever married or jilted or engaged or in love or involved with another woman?"

He said he hadn't been. "I've never really had the time."

"And you have now?"

"No. You're very inconvenient. Perhaps if you lived an—ordinary life..." He stopped.

She protested that her life wasn't extraordinary. "I admit it's not usual, but it isn't *that* strange." She thought about drawing people everywhere she went. "I haven't got regular hours and I'm outside a lot." She considered further.

"You walk the streets?" He was aghast.

"I have to see people," she explained candidly. She grinned. "I really meet some oddballs."

"I imagine you would!" he retorted stiffly. "And dangerous ones!"

"Not really. I'm very careful."

Appearing to retreat inside himself, he studied her carefully before asking, "Have you ever had any of the venereal diseases?"

His question shocked her. "Good heavens, no! Have you?"

He shook his head, but his eyes stayed on her in a troubled examination. "You said your husband couldn't handle your—job."

"No. He was jealous. I made so much more money than he did, and I had to be gone a lot. I have to see people. That's vital to my work, obviously."

Talbot groaned and rolled his head back to stare at the ceiling.

Concerned, she frowned as she asked him, "You do understand my job?"

He didn't look at her but said, "Yeah. No. Well, I—" and he heaved a big sigh.

Trying to be understanding, she said, "That's okay. A lot of men have trouble with it. I'm not cruel, you know. My work gives people a lift, a laugh." She looked at him as if hoping her words would help him adjust to her work.

"I think it's incredible that you can discuss it that way." When she tried to explain, he added, "I can't talk about it anymore." It was with obvious effort that he brought himself back to his previous lighthearted mood.

As they were clearing the kitchen he told her, "You know, for a Texan you speak quite lucidly."

"I try to blend in. I got so tired of people brightening as if they were excessively clever and asking if I was from the South. I can fake normal speech, but it's especially hard after I call home. For a couple of weeks my tongue is so thickly Texan that you could die listening to it. It takes me awhile to get it back under control. Everybody outside Texas has terrible accents. Weird."

He looked down his nose. "The Midwest accent is standard for radio and TV announcers. It has a nice balance and it's clear so everyone can understand it. The Midwest has the only normal sound."

"I don't think that was a deliberate choice. I think the news media have been taken over by the Midwest mafia, and you've forced us to learn to understand you. We've adapted as if to another language. You will notice there are no native easterners on the newscasts. I don't believe there are any native New Yorkers at all, come to think of it. Have you ever met one?"

But he wasn't to be distracted. "Midwest mafia?" he asked, raising his eyebrows.

"See? You're part of it. You all pretend us smart ones, who've caught on to your moves, are mistaken, and you act surprised when one of us guesses."

"I believe all Texans are strange, but then, of course, not even Texans claim to be normal."

"We're not un-normal. We're unique," she confided. "It's the people on the two coasts who are weird. I believe it's the salt air. It affects the population. The West is worse than the East because of the prevailing winds. Or it could be the air pollution. That must be it. We have salt air in Texas from the Gulf, and we're not anything like the people on either coast. But our orange carpet at home is unusual even in Texas."

"Orange carpet?" he inquired.

"Ummm. And Mother painted some chairs a flat blue— they were wooden, of course—over Daddy's dead body. They didn't bury him, so I guess he recovered."

"Your dad was opposed to the orange carpet?"

She nodded. "He's from Illinois."

"Don't you *ever* say Illinois that way. The's' is silent."

"He's an unrepentant Illinoian."

"Illini," Talbot supplied.

"He's no Indian."

"What did he ever do to be exiled to Texas?"

She gave him an admonishing glance. "When Daddy's parents visited, my mother's parents tried very hard not to say 'Yankee' or 'carpetbagger' the

entire time, and my granddaddy almost had a stroke because on top of being Yankees, they were Republicans as well!"

"What's wrong with Republicans?"

"They'd never even *seen* a Republican until Daddy came there."

Talbot narrowed his eyes at her. "Does your father know what you do?"

"Yes."

"And he doesn't object?"

"Well..." She thought about it. "I'm just like Phoebe, *his* mother. You have to realize that makes a difference, that I take after his mother."

Talbot was silent for a while, then asked reluctantly, "Phoebe did what you do?"

She nodded. "Of course she never went pro, so she never got paid for it."

"And your grandfather didn't mind?"

"Yeah, he did. She embarrassed him a couple of times and he did try to reform her, so to speak, but the talent and urge were ingrained, and she never did change. I guess it's genetic." Eileen shrugged her shoulders in cheerful acceptance. After that he didn't mention Phoebe again. But the subject of Texas did arise now and then.

Later, in the whirlpool she sang all the verses of "Beautiful, Beautiful Texas." In spite of the song and the motion of the water, Talbot held steady. She was impressed because being with him made her dizzy.

When she suggested they go to a film or an off-Broadway show, he turned on the TV. They found a program on genetic engineering and began a lengthy debate on environment over heredity, and the study of identical twins who had been separated at birth, and how similar the lives of the parted twins often were. But they didn't mention Phoebe.

Eileen became very aware that they never went out. It was no hardship; she didn't feel confined. She loved Talbot. He was fun, intelligent, good company, thoughtful, playful, humorous, delightful, and loving.

He might be a little tightfisted, but he bought elegant food and the wines were the best, and his clothes were superbly made. All his other attributes were tops. If she'd still been keeping a list she'd have rated him superior.

Some tragedy in his past must be responsible for his sad and pensive moods. She wanted to help him get over it, but in the meantime she would simply love him. She really did love him. The thought filled her to bursting with happiness.

She wore the Chinese robe as they lounged about the town house. It was exquisite, and she felt like a gem in that gemlike robe. She lay back under Talbot's entranced gaze and was deliberately languorous, smiling seductively as she allowed the robe to slide slowly from her shoulder exactly as she'd practiced in the mirror. She was surprised to find she was doing that. It amused her at first, then she did it again and enjoyed riveting his attention... before he riveted her.

Their play was essentially sexual. As surfeited as Talbot must have been by Saturday afternoon, he did not hurry to completion. He teased and aroused her, but he avoided a climax. She said he had a one-track mind and he showed her that was true. She didn't mind at all. They also cooked. They were both good cooks, and they worked well together. Talbot said they did everything well together. Eileen said, "Yes? What?"

"You're a good back scrubber."

"You're awful. You only scrub three places on me. You don't even know I have a back!"

So he had to stop and pat and squeeze her bottom and pull her against him and kiss her. He said she had a nice mouth. She said it was so clean because he licked it clean so often. He licked it. She said, "You must be part cat, you lick so well." He began to work on her ears. She reminded him, "You're supposed to be beating the eggs."

"I can't stop now, you only have one clean ear," he told her contentedly, holding her and nibbling on her ear.

"Beat the eggs."

"You won't be able to hear out of the dirty one," he warned.

"Beat the eggs."

Hardly able to look at the pale blue pajama outfit by Saturday at suppertime, Eileen wore one of Talbot's dress shirts with a black tie, and French cuffs turned back twice and held with emerald cuff links. She pulled on a pair of his jogging shorts and pinned them almost double around her waist and hips. He was so intrigued with the wide legs that she tucked the shirt into and through the shorts. The ends hung almost to her knees, which made him laugh. She gave him a haughty glance.

The boiled-starch front of the very stiff formal shirt was not made to accommodate a rounded chest, and it buckled outrageously over her breasts, which also amused him. She had trouble controlling it so she could see her plate. She handled the situation with sober Stan Laurel intentness, which sent him into convulsions of laughter.

After they'd cleaned up the kitchen and before they went to bed, he took her into the hot tub in that stuffed shirt and watched as the whirling, bubbling waters melted the starch from the fine linen. It turned transparent and clung to her breasts. He said it aroused him to see her in his shirt that way. She retorted that anything aroused him. She could take the shirt completely off and he'd still be the same way! He said he didn't think so, but when she took it off, he did react the same way. She said, "See?"

And he agreed, "I can see, I can see."

He tasted her in the tub, on the stairs, in the upper hall, and finally in his bedroom, where they eventually landed in bed.

They slept late on Sunday. Eileen insisted they go outside, but Talbot argued against that. He pointed out the ultimate argument, "You have nothing to wear."

She dug through his clothes and found a sweat suit, which she put on, rolling up the arms and legs. He gave her a cotton neck cloth that covered her hair, and dark glasses. She surveyed herself in the bedroom mirror and said no one would ever recognize her. She laughed. "It's just as well. Look at me!"

He looked and seemed satisfied with her appearance.

She realized he was glad she was incognito and felt insulted. "I have a perfectly decent jogging suit in black and purple that's smashing. You wouldn't be ashamed of me in that. We could go to my apartment and get me something to wear."

"No," he said adamantly.

So they went outside and strolled down the streets hand in hand. Eileen longed to pass someone she knew so she could test the effectiveness of her disguise. Talbot asked, "Do you ever meet anyone in public that you've—known in your business?"

"Rarely. They're a different bunch altogether." She glanced at their fellow strollers and said, "We can count on one thing. With the way we look, no one will bother us. We look so strange we'll just fade into the general run of people." And she laughed, enjoying the idea.

But Talbot appeared uncomfortable on the street and peered into men's faces as they passed as if he was searching for a reaction from them. He didn't relax again fully until they were back inside his house. Eileen wondered if he had a tendency toward reclusiveness. That could be a real problem, and she should watch for signs of it. But he talked about football games and going to the Superbowl. He asked if she'd like to go with him, which didn't sound the least reclusive. He suggested other outings, too. Then she realized that everything he was suggesting took place out of town.

She made some effort to leave after lunch on Sunday. He asked, "Why do you want to go?"

"I have to wash my hair."

"I'll wash it for you."

"And I have to do my laundry."

"You can wear the Chinese robe." She put it on and walked around slowly, flirting shyly with him, her face full of mischief. He sat watching her, his interest making his eyes sparkle and his big hands spread out on his thighs. "You're not to wear the robe for anyone else," he told her firmly.

"I wouldn't."

"You can only wear it when I'm with you," he insisted.

"Only for you," she agreed. His demand pleased her. It sounded so possessive. "The silk feels marvelous on my skin," she added.

"*You* feel marvelous on *my* skin." He got up and opened the robe and held her close to him.

They made pancakes for supper, and after they'd cleared away the dishes and tidied up the kitchen, she said she really had to go home. "In the morning," he said, as if that decided the matter.

She laughed and scolded, "What would your housemates say if they came home and found me here?"

"I have my own room. I pay my share. I don't object when their wives come here." He looked at her. "They'd die of envy."

After they'd kissed for a time, she sighed. "I really must go now, but I don't think I can face putting those lounging pajamas on one more time. I think I'll give them to Goodwill."

"No. I want them to remember you by."

She looked up at him quickly. "Why do you need something to remember me by?"

"To commemorate this fabulous weekend?" he amended. "You have the robe. Can't I have your pajamas?"

"I have to wear them home," she reminded him.

"I'll allow that."

"How generous you are." And she grinned because she really thought he was stingy.

After she called a cab, they waited for it in the foyer, clasped loosely in each other's arms, not saying much. When the cab arrived, Talbot got in with her. "You idiot," she said indulgently, but she was charmed.

They rode together to her apartment, where Talbot paid the cabdriver and strolled with her up the four flights, holding hands, laughing softly, talking of nothing at all important. He leaned next to her door with his hands in his pockets and watched her insert the key. When she opened the door, Farand bounced out, but she scooped him up in her arms, where he curled, stretching his neck to look around and moving impatiently when Eileen continued to stand there. She wanted to say a nonchalant good-bye, but it took all her willpower not to blurt that she wanted Talbot to come live with her.

If she threw out half of her stuff, there'd be room for his things. He could live and eat there—and sleep in her bed. She kept her eyes on the cat so she wouldn't see him and say all that and embarrass them both. It was too soon for such a serious move. It had been too soon to even spend the weekend with him, for Pete's sake.

But she couldn't resist asking him in. "For some coffee?" she suggested.

"No, thanks. I think I'll walk back."

"I have cocoa. Tea?" She knew it sounded as if she was coaxing him to stay, and she blushed.

"How about a kiss? Do you have some of those?"

She cocked her head in a sassy way and said she didn't have even one left. He'd used them all up. "I don't think I could pucker up to sip from a straw," she declared.

But he kissed her anyway, and she managed all right. He smoothed her hair back and held her face in his hands. "Thank you for a lovely weekend," he said huskily.

"Since I was the guest, I'm supposed to thank *you*. And for the robe! It's so beautiful."

"Only when it's on you."

They went on in that vein for some time, but finally he said good night. "I'll be in touch."

"In touch?" she echoed. "That doesn't surprise me. I think you do everything by touch."

"Only the worthwhile things." He grinned down at her and actually began to move to the top of the stairs. She couldn't stop herself from trailing along behind him. He kissed her one more lovely time. As they pulled apart, Eileen heard someone coming up the stairs, and they both listened. It was Beth. She looked up from the landing and leaned against the railing, gasping. "My goodness, do you owe me!"

Eileen turned to Talbot and explained, "Beth has a second-floor apartment and isn't used to climbing so many stairs."

"The next time you spend the weekend with him," Beth went on, "take the zoo with you."

Farand gave a tiny calculated mew and blinked at Beth.

Beth looked back. "I love you too," she said, but her expression suggested otherwise. She returned her attention to Eileen and Talbot. "Did you have a nice weekend?"

They both smiled, each waiting for the other to reply, but Beth just nodded and said, "Stupid question." She flipped a hand in farewell and turned away. Talbot said he'd walk her home, but she called back, "Mel is sitting at the top of the first flight waiting for me. He can only climb one flight of stairs before he's overcome by his fear of heights and gets a nosebleed. You can tell he isn't a Mohawk." Her steps went on down.

"Mohawk?" Talbot questioned.

"Companies constructing the tallest buildings employ Mohawk Indians because they have absolutely no fear of heights."

"I think I read that somewhere."

They talked about climbing and heights and backpacking, and finally Eileen couldn't hide a yawn. Talbot said he really must go, and he finally began to. They kissed and their hands stayed clasped, reluctant to part. He went down one flight and from the landing he began to come back. But he appeared to recall himself, and the strange sad look Eileen had come to recognize crept into his eyes.

She threw him a kiss, which he caught one-handed and tucked into his pocket. He studied her as if to memorize her face, and then he moved slowly from her sight and went on down the stairs.

Eileen stood petting the cat, listening to his retreating footsteps. When they faded away altogether, she went into her apartment and closed the door. Farand wiggled to be released, and she set about getting ready for bed. She floated about, doing this and that, and slipped into bed, smiling. And she went to sleep.

At first her dreams were euphoric, but gradually they became puzzling and distressful. Talbot's troubled face receded from her, watching her with beautifully lashed eyes that were so sad.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE PHONE WAKENED Eileen. She raised the receiver to her ear and said, "Hello?" in a sleep-blurred voice.

Talbot's voice curled deliciously through her as he said, "I can see you lying in bed, sleepy-eyed and smiling just a little, and looking outrageously beautiful. I wish I were there."

She gave a throaty chuckle and imagined him beside her as she stretched her toes.

He went on, "I just wanted you to know I missed you like hell last night. The damned bed's too big. I spent the whole night rooting around in it looking for you. Did you miss me?"

"I slept like a log."

"You wretch!" he protested in a low grumble laced with humorous, dangerous force. "If I could get my hands on you, I'd turn you over and give your nice bottom a swat." He paused. "Or something."

"I'd put my money on the 'or something.'"

He laughed deep in his throat and said huskily, "It was a terrific weekend." The back of his tongue made a sound in his throat that curled her toes and sent a strong wave of sensations up her legs and into her body.

"I have to write you a bread-and-butter note," she said primly. "I was taught to mention something especially nice from a visit. I'm trying to decide what it should be." She sighed elaborately into the phone then giggled, wickedly humorous.

"That's simple," he supplied promptly.

"Yes," she agreed immediately, "the hot tub. I'd never been in one before, and I found it much more interesting than I'd thought."

"What—was so—different?" he asked in a deliberately leading way, as if he was only getting her to say what he already knew.

"The jet streams. I'd never realized how interesting bubbles could feel on your skin."

"And?" he urged, impatient for the rest.

"And I never knew how cold spilled wine can feel when you're splashed with it while sitting in an agitated hot tub."

"It wasn't only the tub that was agitated," Talbot replied, almost in a growl.

"I found it very relaxing."

"After a time."

"You are very bold. You know that, don't you?"

"I'm ordinary, straight, upstanding—"

"That's certainly true, at any rate!" He laughed. They talked another minute or two and she exclaimed, "Oh, look at the time! When are you supposed to be at work?"

"Not for twenty minutes yet."

"Twenty minutes," she repeated in a pensive tone.

"Not long enough for what I'd like to do."

"A dip in the whirlpool?" she suggested.

"With you," he agreed.

"Oh, Talbot, it was all so lovely."

"Wasn't it?" he agreed. She sat there holding the phone to her ear, thinking of him in bemused silence. Then he said, "I won't be worth a plugged nickel today. All I'll do is think about you. I'll probably be fired before the day is over."

"I'll support you!" she volunteered with an exuberant laugh.

There was an odd silence. Then he said carefully, "Are you going to—work today?"

"Good lord, no! How could I after this weekend? I'd do it all wrong and not pay attention and louse up everything—"

Abruptly he interrupted. "I've got to go. Take care and call me when you're free. Good-bye." And he hung up.

His sudden dismissal jarred her until she looked at the clock and realized he'd have to rush not to be late for work. Then she hung up the buzzing phone and lay back and stretched with her hands behind her head, looking up at the skylights with dreamy, unseeing eyes as she remembered...

That day she floated through her apartment as if on a pink cloud. She smiled in the mirror, not seeing herself,

and she talked baby talk to Farand, who watched fascinated, with widely dilated pupils. She cheeped at Wooser, who then sang to show her how it was done. She whistled a couple of tunes, and the bird cheeped in despair at such a lack of talent before falling despondently silent. So Eileen put Luciano Pavarotti on the stereo, and the bird's throat swelled in song, trying to show Pavarotti how to raise his voice a couple of octaves. At ten o'clock, Eileen called Talbot.

"So you're up." He breathed into the phone. "What are you wearing? My robe?"

"No. I just showered and washed my hair."

"Are you wearing—?"

"Well, actually—"

"You're naked!" he gasped in a low voice.

"No!" Her laugh rippled. "I've got jeans on and a top."

"But under the jeans and top you're naked."

"What a silly man you are," she chided indulgently.

"There's an extra word in that sentence," he instructed. "It's 'silly.' The line is supposed to go, 'What a man you are.'"

"There's no doubt about that," she vowed. "Why don't... Talbot, why don't you come here for lunch?" Heat flooded her face as she was struck by her boldness.

"For a—nooner?" His voice had gone harsh again.

"I was thinking more of peanut butter sandwiches," she replied, somewhat defensive. What had made his voice change that way? "Or I could make up some sandwiches and meet you at Paley. It's a lovely day, and it won't be picnic weather much longer. We should be outside while we can."

"No." His reply was abrupt. Then he amended it quickly, explaining, "I have a business lunch today. In fact, every day this week. And my evening schedule is packed." He paused, then added almost reluctantly, "Except for Thursday evening. If you could save the peanut butter sandwiches until then? Are you free?"

"I can arrange for Thursday. And I haven't bought the peanut butter yet. If there's something else you'd rather eat, tell me."

"You." But he said it grimly. In a lighter tone he added, "I'll start with crispy fingers and end up with the soft spots."

"Sir!" she exclaimed in mock dismay.

"I was thinking of—"

"I can imagine!" she chided primly.

"—your mouth."

"Oh."

"Just what were *you* thinking?" There was an insinuating curl to his words.

"My tender earlobes, naturally. What else?"

"Oh." There was a pause before his voice came low and intimate. "Have you thought about me today?"

"Once."

"*Once?*" He was indignant.

"When I washed those damned pajamas. Do you still want them?"

"Absolutely."

"I can hardly wait to see them on you." She smirked.

He laughed, and she had to laugh with him. The elasticized top would never make it around his chest.

After they'd talked for a while longer, she sighed gustily. "I suppose I'll have to take my nap... all alone."

"See to that!" he barked furiously.

"Except for—"

"I don't want to hear about it!"

"Farand!" She bubbled with laughter, but he didn't join her. When they said good-bye, she reminded him about Thursday. He agreed with clipped words.

Eileen wandered thoughtfully around her apartment, thinking about the conversation. It seemed to her that there was something about the apartment that bothered Talbot. He liked her and he liked Farand. Was it the bird? The plants? Maybe she'd find out Thursday.

She considered five different menus and three outfits. She sat at her drawing table and drew Talbot as a knight leaning casually against a large horse. She sighed and smiled into space. Later she took her sketchbook and sat outside drawing little kids playing in the street. She drew them simple and darling, and she gave the sketches to the children, who laughed and ran away.

A policeman strolled up and asked her if she was part of a kiddy-porn recruiting group. She got huffy and told him off and stalked away, shocked and indignant. She intended to call in his badge number, but she calmed down and decided he was probably a very good cop and only doing his duty.

The duchess came up that evening and was disappointed not to find Ken or Talbot there. "Ken?" Eileen was irritated. "Why would Ken be here?" She sputtered at the duchess's salacious look. The duchess wanted to know about her weekend. Who had finally managed to lure Miss Goody-Two-Shoes into a lost and lascivious weekend?

"It wasn't that way at all!" Eileen protested, and then blushed as she realized she'd just admitted to spending the weekend with a man.

"Was it Talbot?" the duchess asked eagerly. "How was he?"

"He's very well." Eileen replied, purposely ignoring her real question.

"How was he in bed? That's the important part," the duchess insisted, going off into a spasm of giggles.

"You're outrageous!"

"No. Bored. Lonely." She rolled her eyes pitifully. "Can't you share even a few of your adventures with an old lady?"

Eileen pressed her lips together, but as she regarded the duchess, who was being deliberately beguiling, she unbent a little. The duchess settled herself in a chair, clasped her hands in her lap, and said, "Now then," in an encouraging way.

How could Eileen resist? "There was a hot tub—"

"Aren't they sinful? I love them! They beat bubble baths anytime. There's more room to fool around."

"Duchess!"

"We've had heated swimming pools for years," she reminded Eileen with droll patience. "And before that there were rivers, ponds, and lakes. In those days the water was so cold you'd get out and get cozy in the backseat and rub each other to get warm, and it would be very nice." She laughed wickedly.

Eileen gave her a disapproving look. "I have a perfectly ordinary grandmother who knits and tells perfectly ordinary stories," Eileen pointed out.

"She's either led a hell of a dull life or she is *extremely* discreet," the duchess observed.

"We live in a very small town," Eileen explained.

"They're the most fun." The duchess smoothed her skirt over her bony knees. "But go on. What happened?" She gazed up at Eileen, her eyes sparkling with interest. "Was it Talbot?"

Reluctantly Eileen nodded and blushed furiously, which caused the duchess to chuckle in a most delighted way and sigh in envy.

"He's very sweet," Eileen explained earnestly. "He's so darling."

"Is it serious?"

"I am, but I'm not so sure about him. Every once in a while his eyes turn so sad. I asked Mel—do you remember Mel? You met him here the Fourth of July and last February and—"

"I remember Mel. He's the one who lusts after Beth." The duchess nodded placidly.

"Yes." Eileen gave the duchess a wary look because she'd almost revealed that Beth was spending nights with Mel. That wasn't anyone's business, but the duchess would treasure the news. Instead Eileen said, "I asked Mel if Talbot had lost a lover or if someone was sick or *any* thing, but Mel said not to his knowledge, I asked Talbot, too, but he said no also.

"Other than knowing he's very careful with his money, I can't figure him out," Eileen went on. "And there is something about this apartment, something he doesn't like. It's not me and it's not the cat. What could it be?"

They speculated on that for a while, and Eileen added that Talbot had a hangup about her job that he couldn't handle. He was probably like Tom in that respect. So they talked about women working and men having trouble adjusting to women being independent and why couldn't men just enjoy women and not want to control them? Men are strange, they concluded.

Finally the duchess said, "But ahh, how interesting! What would we ever do without men? We could have sperm banks and continue the race, but wouldn't that be a deadly bore? Men are so fascinating, so baffling and marvelous. Why would any rational person go duck hunting in *sleet*? That is a mystery that I've never been able to solve."

"Who did that?"

"Oh, one of them. It was sleeting badly and I said I just wanted to go to bed and snuggle under the down comforter, and he smote his forehead with his hand and said, 'Duck season! You made me forget duck season is open!' His eyes snapped at me and he said furiously, 'See what you've done to me?' He hightailed it out and went duck hunting on that sleety day, which was made

for staying in bed. I never did understand the man. That's why we broke up. He said I didn't understand him, and I said I'd certainly drink to that!" She laughed comfortably.

Curious, Eileen asked, "How many lovers have you had?"

The duchess gave her a sly grin and replied, "Oh, one or two." With a shrewd look she coaxed, "Come on, tell. How was Talbot in bed?"

Independent of her will, Eileen's wicked tongue blurted, "The first time was in the hot tub!"

"The hot tub?" the duchess exclaimed with delighted laughter. Then she gasped with pleasure. "The *first* time," she said, and she wrapped her bony arms around her bony body and gave an excited squeal, which shocked Eileen to silence.

Although the duchess pressed for further details of the weekend, Eileen declined to confide more to her. Much later the old lady finally gave up, leaving Eileen quite pink with anger. Being smart, the duchess didn't leave in a frustrated huff but consented to a cup of tea and stayed to chat, not mentioning any of her store of gossip but instead telling about her parents and giving unflattering but extremely funny descriptions of her siblings.

By Tuesday Eileen had eliminated all but two menus for Thursday night's dinner, but the possible outfits had expanded to seven. She was a little frazzled about the clothes and wondered if being presented to the Queen would be easier than dressing for a date with Talbot.

On Wednesday she had decided firmly on the menu, but she had a headache over what to wear. She drew a perfectly candid cartoon of herself disguised as a clothes horse, which made her boss ecstatic. How had she ever been so inspired? he asked. She replied that she suffered for her art. He laughed uproariously, and she complained that he had no sensitivity at all, that they needed a woman editor. He cheerfully reached out and mussed up her hair, as if she were a child.

Thursday morning the duchess offered to let Eileen wear her Chinese robe. She smiled at Eileen so graciously that Eileen forgave her prying. She made sure Talbot's gorgeous robe was completely hidden, then showed the duchess the dresses she was considering. The duchess instantly chose a halter top in plaid. But Eileen wasn't sure.

The October day was crisp enough for an oven meal. She baked a roast beef with carrots and onions and baked potatoes, which she'd open in a clover leaf cut for a dollop of mixed peanut butter and cheddar cheese as a salute to the peanut-butter sandwiches. And she wore the ice blue lounge pajamas.

When Talbot rang her bell, she said a breathless "Hi!" into the speaker.

She listened to his "It's Talbot," and she was already vulnerable to him. She pressed the buzzer to open the street door but didn't go into the hall to meet him. She waited inside the door, smoothing down the strapless pajamas and pulling the elastic up under her arms and wondering if in wearing them she was being too suggestive. She licked her lips and checked her wide eyes in the mirror and pulled at her flaming mane of loose hair, and she knew she must be the worst-looking woman he'd seen all that day.

When he tapped on her door, she opened it, and a mischievous imp inside her made it impossible to repress her instant welcoming smile. He gazed into her face and grinned back at her. Then his eyes were drawn down to the pajama outfit. His smile disappeared and his lips parted in a gasp. He set the bottle of wine on the table, pitched the flowers off to the side, and reached for her. Placing the heels of his palms at the sides of her breasts, he pulled her against him and kissed her. He kissed her very well indeed, and she cooperated with unbridled enthusiasm.

In the pause after that first long kiss, he pulled the elastic down around her waist, and she was on the road to no return. She helped him out of his clothes and tugged him toward her bed, but he chose the rug by the couch. She didn't mind.

It seemed no time at all before he lay relaxed on her, his breathing calming, his heart still galloping. "Now I know why they have cowcatchers on trains," she murmured.

His chest rumbled and his shoulders shook as he laughed. He tiredly raised up on one elbow and looked down at her. "So you feel you've been hit by a freight train?"

She nodded solemnly. "Or a fast passenger. The feeling must be very similar."

"It was outrageous of you to wear that red flag." He glanced around for something.

"My ice blue pajamas?"

"You had to know they would set me off," he chided her.

"Now how was I ever to know that?"

"Hadn't you realized I'd couple—"

"For shame!"

"—them with that mad weekend we spent together? Since then I go a little berserk at just the color of pale blue. And for you to open that door and blatantly stand there—"

"In a red flag," she supplied.

"In a red flag," he agreed.

"Then you admit to being a bull?"

"Not right now." He gave her a tiny chaste kiss and eased away from her.

She lay sprawled as he'd left her. "This isn't quite what I had planned for the evening," she said conversationally.

"I figured I'd better get you while I could. I suspect the duchess will pop in at any time to act as chaperon, like she did the last time I was here." He gave Eileen a droll grin, yawned, and rubbed his hairy chest in lazy contentment.

"I suppose you won't even flirt with me now," she complained. "You'll turn on the TV and read the paper and ignore me."

"Oh, do you have the evening paper?"

"No."

"Darn." He sighed. "When's supper?" He slid her an amused glance and stretched luxuriously. "What did you do with my clothes after you tore them off me? It seems to me you could have been neater and hung them up so I don't go out of here looking all wrinkled—" He stopped.

"I thought it was you who attacked me!" She got up gracefully, aware that he was watching her with that odd look creeping back onto his face. She glanced at him, then frowned as she asked, "What is it, Talbot? Why do you look so sad now and then?" Concerned, she leaned over and ran her fingers along the side of his head in a gesture of exquisite tenderness.

He had to clear his throat before he asked, "Have you been with anyone else since last weekend?"

"If you mean friends, yes. If you mean have I slept with anyone, no. Just you."

The tension went out of his face and he smiled. "Just me?"

"Just you."

"Come here and sit on my lap." He patted his bare thighs.

"Good heavens, no! You don't have any clothes on!"

"Neither do you," he observed minutely.

"That's why I won't sit on your lap," she explained. "You'd start fooling around and getting funny and trying things."

"Like what?" he asked studiously.

"You know." "Not me. I just got hit by a red flag. I'm harmless." "Hah!"

"You still want me, don't you?" He put his hand around her ankle, his voice husky and gentle. "I was too fast. I'm sorry. But you have no idea how long this week has been and how badly I've wanted you. Then for you to open that door and stand there in those pajamas... I lost all control. Come here and let me make love to you."

She gave him an assessing glance. "How do you like your roast beef?"

"Rare, like my women."

"Then I'll have to wait. The beef is just past rare and into medium. If I don't hurry, it'll be—"

"On occasion I've enjoyed it well done."

She got huffy. "So some other woman wore strapless pajamas for you and—?"

"No. A cow got caught in a burning barn, and we couldn't get it out so we shot it before it could feel the pain. The barn was past saving, so we let it burn. The cow was nicely roasted and we ate it. Fabulous. We were all bone-tired from keeping the fire from spreading. The neighbors were all there, and the volunteer firemen, so we just set to and ate it. Mother and some of the other ladies had baked bread and opened some gallon jars of succotash and whipped up a half-dozen pies." "A milk cow?"

He grinned. "No longer. We had her fattening up."

Eileen felt sad. "Like a spent hen."

His eyes became smoky. "You're sure not spent. Come here."

But she backed away, her hands fluttering like a dancer's fans, trying unsuccessfully to screen her body. "I might let you make it up later. Or you could stay..."

"I can't." He shook his head sadly. "I accepted an invitation from my boss to visit him and his family. We're leaving from the office tomorrow. I have to go home and pack." He watched her intently as he rose from the floor in what she considered a marvelous flow of muscle.

"When will you get back?"

"Not until Monday." He peered at her suspiciously as she felt the pressure of tears in her eyes.

She turned away from him in an unconscious droop. "Then I probably won't see you until the middle of next week."

"Will you miss me?"

She made herself shrug. "A little."

"You wretched woman. Tell me you'll miss me like bloody hell."

She batted her eyes at him through the shine of tears and asked, "What was your name again?"

But his response surprised her. He sucked in his breath and his expression grew hard. "I can see where you might lose track." He turned abruptly and began to pick up his clothes.

She frowned at him, wondering what he'd meant and why he'd turned away. "Of course I don't lose track," she told him. I just pretended not to remember his name, she thought. What was so wrong with that? He was being completely unreasonable, and more than a little difficult. He came in here, made love to her, and said he couldn't see her for a week. Why had she ever accepted the invitation for the weekend? Would they have a date for him? Would he make love to her?

Eileen pulled on the pajamas and hitched the band up higher as she shot him a cross glance. He said nothing in response, just continued to dress, pulling on his trousers over his underwear with abrupt, angry motions. His body was beautiful. He looked down as he buckled his belt, and suddenly the sight of

his eyelashes melted her anger. How unkind of God to give him eyelashes that affected her like that.

Eileen went into the kitchen area and turned off the oven and prepared to serve the meal. Talbot entered with his flowers and stood in her way until she stopped and looked at him. He presented the flowers to her solemnly, and when she looked up into his face, he gave her a sweet, gentle kiss. How unkind of God to make John Talbot Wendell a man who knew all the ways to kiss a woman and when to use each one. She gave him a cool glance but blushed because she didn't mean it. As a redhead she had a tough time lying.

She put the flowers into a vase and set it on the table instead of the begonias, which she again banished to the window. In silence Talbot carved the roast beef while she put the rest of the food on the table and lit the candles. She turned the lights low and they sat down, listening to a Moody Blues album. They had had two bites when Eileen's head snapped up and she asked, "Where's Far- and?" She leaped up, calling to the cat as she searched the apartment. The cat was gone. Farand must have darted out the door when Talbot had arrived. They'd been so involved with each other that they hadn't paid any attention to the cat.

They ran out into the hall and down the stairs, searching the empty hallway, but they couldn't find him. Finally they emerged onto the street level. Eileen looked in horror at Talbot. "Could Farand have gotten out?" She opened the street door cautiously and there, braced against the door and almost falling inside, was the damn cat.

Eileen snatched him up and felt his heart beating wildly against her own chest. Farand's eyes were enormous, and he trembled. Talbot grinned and put a big hand on the small head, and the cat mewed pitifully. They climbed back up the stairs to the fifth floor and through the open apartment door to their cooling food. They sat down with Farand huddled on Eileen's lap. Cooing comforting sounds, Eileen curled a protective hand and wrist around the poor creature.

Eileen raised her eyes and caught Talbot watching her. They looked at each other for a long time. She found his expression unreadable—vulnerable, sexy, but otherwise unfathomable. What was he thinking?

"We need another weekend together." His voice was hoarse, and he cleared his throat, but his voice was still rough. "I'll find a place for us to go."

"If you'd like to go out of town, I have a little weekend cabin in the Catskills," she offered shyly. "We could go there. It's only about three hours. It's rustic, but it's isolated and there's a stream and lots of trees."

"Next weekend," he demanded.

"Yes." She regarded him very seriously as if she knew it was an important step to go away with him deliberately for a weekend. Then into her brain crawled the thought: The cabin, too, was not a public place.

"Can you leave early on Friday?" Talbot asked. "I may be able to. We could eat after we get there. I have a car—"

"I thought you had a motorcycle," she interrupted.

"That too. I have a four-wheeler because I ski. I'll bring the food."

"You ski?" She was delighted. "Cross-country or mountain?"

"Both. There are great places in Michigan. I'm not a total flatlander." He grinned at her.

"When it snows..." she began, but stopped. She was unsure about their relationship and reluctant to make plans for so far in the future. Something wasn't quite right between them, and she felt compelled to withdraw a cautious emotional step.

He smiled easily, his eyes dancing, and said quickly, "When it snows, we'll ski. Are there any reasonable hills at your place?"

She nodded, but she was thinking that it wasn't public and it was free. He *had* offered to buy the food, but she wondered if all she would have of him was discreet weekends of free sex. She could so easily become trapped into something like that with him, and she grew wary.

"Is there anything besides turnips and brussels sprouts that you can't—*won't*—eat?" Busily he took up a pad and pencil to make a list.

"I can endure liver only once a month," she confessed.

"Cross out liver," he instructed himself, chewing his lip and drawing a line on the blank pad. He gave her a quick grin and suggested, "Give me Farand and I'll be Protective Person while you put the food away. And I'll make the list. Then you can hold your traumatized cat while I put the dishes in the dishwasher. Fair enough?"

Pushing the questioning of his conduct to the back of her mind, Eileen rallied. While she cleaned up the kitchen they hotly debated meals and laughed at each other's ridiculous suggestions. Suddenly she stopped and put her hands on her hips. "I did it all!" she exclaimed.

Talbot looked around and back at her. "Darn," he said in a very unconvincing way.

She ruffled his hair, but he pulled down her elasticized top and got familiar. She protested, but not too much, and wiggled, but not too hard. They ended up breathless, somewhat tousled and untidy, and flopped on the sofa, flushed and excited.

Farand had escaped their attention, and when they settled down, he mewed to remind them that he was being neglected. They looked at the cat, who sat neatly on the coffee table, his tail arranged around him, the end curled around his front paws. The cat blinked at them and looked precious. They laughed. Farand stood up, walked to the edge of the table, gave them a parting disdainful glance, dropped gracefully off the table with fluid ease and vanished into the underbrush of potted plants.

"Do plants bother you?" Eileen asked Talbot impulsively.

"No, I like them." His hand moved as he kissed along her cheek, causing quivers to begin deep in her body.

"You don't think there are too many?"

"What?" he asked vaguely, his hands slowing, feeling and squeezing.

"Plants," she gasped.

"What about plants?" he murmured into her nape, breathing along the fine hairs and making them tremble.

"You're not paying any attention." She swallowed.

"Attention to what?" He feathered kisses from her nape to her shoulder.

"To what I'm asking."

"You're asking me to make love to you," he said. "I know that. And I'm giving you my answer, which is— I'm making up my mind. Or was it yours? Anyway, I'm working on it."

"I asked you," she said clearly, "do you think I have too many plants?"

"Where?" He pulled his head back and studied her body.

"In the apartment!"

He turned and looked around. "Nice," he said and went back to nuzzling her shoulder.

She tried again once or twice to find out his opinion of the plants, but after a while she too was distracted and forgot all about it. Her body was awash in mounting waves of sensation and she felt cast adrift from reality. She was floating, a victim of sensual whirlpools, helpless before the onslaught, and she had to clutch her lifeline to reality, which was Talbot. So she clutched and moved her hands to clutch again.

His hands too moved over her, but she suspected he wasn't trying to save her. He was dragging her into the maelstrom which buffeted her. He was leading her into the riptide of rapture that would pull her under. She'd be lost forever. But she pressed against him wantonly and opened her mouth to his in encouragement, urging him on to conquest.

A little corner of her mind told her she was being melodramatic and totally spineless, and she could damn well save herself if she wanted to. Another part of her said, Hush! to that corner of her mind, and she devoted herself entirely to relishing the marvelous thrilling tides that washed over her, carrying her along helpless, to and fro, and wondrously adrift.

Her light blue pajama outfit came off again as effortlessly as always. Talbot had become quite skilled with practice. His clothes were a little more awkward, but she readily helped with them. As their skin became damp with sweat and their breathing grew ragged, Eileen suggested in a voice that started as a husky whisper and ended up a croak, "Let's go to bed."

"No!" his reply came like a shot and his hands tightened on her. Puzzled by his reaction, she rose toward reality from a sea of sensation.

"We might as well be comfortable."

"I like it here," he growled, and his mouth was rough as it closed over hers.

She started to protest, but his kiss took her back down to the depths and she didn't care where they were.

They became quite greedy, and her mind was swamped as, overcome with passion, she forgot everything else. They became single-minded, thrilled and thrilling, drowning in the sensual seas. Talbot sat on the sofa and pulled Eileen onto him. He rose and lifted her, his muscles bunching as he carried her effortlessly. He laid her on the floor and teased her, and finally he took her to the wall and lifted her against it, and he took her so wildly that a corner of her mind surfaced briefly to hope the wall would hold. She had a fleeting picture of them crashing through and falling into the hall. But the wall was solid. So was Talbot.

He drove her over the peak into rapture. She shuddered and gasped and clung to him as she writhed and wiggled and drove him to his own release.

They leaned there, panting, spent, glad for the solid wall, breathing with open mouths, perspiration glistening on them, their knees weak, their bodies trembling. With a grunt of effort, Talbot lifted her from him, then led her

over to the sofa, where he spread his shirt for them to sit on. They tumbled there and lifted leaden feet to the coffee table. He pulled her to his side and looped a friendly arm around her, holding her close. She mentioned the bed again. He said no, through his teeth, that he didn't want to lie in that bed. His words and tone registered but she wasn't capable of puzzling it out.

He slept there for almost an hour before she became too cool and eased from his side to go bathe. She was washing her hair when he entered the shower and blundered about trying to help her. He got soap in her eyes and became concerned and tried even harder to help. Somehow they both survived his efforts.

Afterward Eileen made coffee and they sat at the table, holding hands and sipping it. Talbot watched her with such a strange expression that she asked cautiously, "What are you thinking?"

"That I'll lock you away and keep you for myself."

"I like grocery shopping. Would you let me out occasionally to do that?"

He considered and said, "Only on birthdays and anniversaries."

"And window-shopping. I love the shops around Paley Park."

"Once a year at midnight."

"Only once? How about every season?"

"We'll dicker and you'll have to please me mightily before I'll consent."

"Please you with food?" She fought a smug smile.

"You know damn good and well what I mean."

"And are you pleased, my lord?" She gave him a sideways flirting glance.

"Mightily," he admitted. "But don't get too smug. I'm only resting up."

"Forget it," she advised.

"I want to see if you can break your record."

"That was my best shot." She opened her hand and let it drop limply.

"You may know that, but I don't."

"Believe it."

"Prove it."

She put the limp hand to her head and tried to look fragile and delicate. "I have a sore throat and a headache and I'm coming down with beriberi."

"That's a vitamin deficiency. It's not catching."

She frowned at him. "How did you get so smart?"

"All Illini are smart." He raised his chin with a superior air.

"The Illini are Indians. You're not an Indian."

"I like being in the woods," he began, then turned and pulled her close. "I can hardly wait for next week and getting you in the woods. I hope it's a beautiful warm sunny day, and I'll strip off your clothes and chase you and make love to you on the bare ground."

"Yeah! I'll be on the bottom. It's great for you, having me to lie on top of, but I get the rocks and twigs!" she protested, and the way he was avoiding her bed crept back into her mind. Did he have a floor fetish? But he hadn't minded using the bed at his place. Of course they'd used the whirlpool and the floor there, too, but mostly they'd been in bed.

Was it just her apartment, or was it her bed? Why would he want to avoid her bed?

CHAPTER EIGHT

SHE SAW TALBOT only once all that next week. She caught a glimpse of him in the Fifty-third Street crowd at noontime, but he didn't see her. She thought he had and she called and waved, but he turned and walked briskly away. It appeared a deliberate snub, but he must not have seen her, for why would he avoid her? Then an idea crawled back from banishment: He'd never taken her out in public. Was he ashamed of her? Why?

He'd taken her in the hansom cab in Central Park, but that didn't count. And when they'd window-shopped afterward, she'd worn the scarf on her head, which he'd provided. The World Trade Center for lunch had actually been concealment in a crowd; they weren't likely to see anyone they knew so far from midtown. The weekend they'd spent together he hadn't wanted to go out at all. They had walked, but he'd given her his sweat suit and a scarf... and sunglasses! Could he want to avoid being seen with her? Could he be ashamed of her?

Back at her apartment, she looked in her mirror and wondered if she should dye her hair. Maybe he didn't care for redheads. She examined herself critically and was sure she was ugly. There was no hope.

They had fallen into a routine. She called him every morning at ten o'clock, and he asked what time he could phone conveniently that evening. On the evening of the day of the suspected snub she was a little stiff when he called and she asked whether he had seen her on the street. Hadn't he heard her call to him?

"When was that?" he asked. Was his tone cautious?

"This noon."

"This noon?" He sounded as if he had to search his mind. "Let's see. I started down to Paley to meet Mel but remembered I had an appointment for lunch. Remember, I told you that. It had been a hell of a morning. In the rush I'd forgotten the appointment. Everyone wanted everything done yesterday. You must know how that is—no, maybe you don't," he added soberly.

"Do you want me to dye my hair?"

"Good lord! Why would you ask that? Your hair is beautiful!"

"And you're not ashamed to be seen with me?"

He paused just a fraction of a second. "Whatever made you think that?"

"I just wondered. We never go anywhere in public."

"We're going to the Catskills this weekend, and I can hardly wait. What about you? Are you excited about going? The trees won't be too far along, the color will still be there, although central Illinois has the prettiest leaves in the fall of any place."

She decided he was talking too much and trying to avoid her questions, but she followed with, "That sounds suspiciously like prejudice."

"No," he denied. "I've looked around with an open mind and compared, and it's true. The leaves in Illinois are always prettier." They talked of other things, and she curled up on the bed and listened and laughed and forgot the alleged snub at noon.

It started raining early Wednesday. In spite of the forecast Talbot was certain the weather would clear up. It didn't. He arrived on Friday sneezing with a cold. She fed him vitamin C with orange juice as they stared at her rain-drenched windows, unable to see beyond. They listened to the weather report on the radio. The storm covered the entire Northeast and would be around for the whole weekend. "If this was snow," the weatherman said, "the slopes would be perfect, but as it is some secondary roads are threatened by rising waters and travel is very hazardous."

Since Talbot had a four-wheel-drive vehicle, he was in favor of going anyway. "We could still get there before nightfall," he argued.

But Eileen put her hand on his forehead and said she really thought he was feverish and he had no business spending the weekend in a crude one-room cabin with outdoor plumbing.

"You're talking to a farm boy," he told her. "I know all about outdoor plumbing."

"You'd catch double pneumonia, and I'd have to drive us back. Four-wheel drive baffles me." She was practical.

"You're never too old to learn."

"We'll go another time," she promised.

But he was cross and petulant. "You don't want to be alone with me."

"Now that's childish."

"I'll be adult enough for you when we get there."

"We'll stay here, and I'll take special care of you," she promised tenderly, hugging his arm.

"You can take care of me there, too," he coaxed.

"Let's stay here," she countered, but she saw him look over at her bed, and his mouth went grim. She looked at the bed, too. She couldn't understand him. It was pretty, clean, and neat. Why did he resist her bed? He certainly didn't resist her!

"Do you ever—work here?" he asked suddenly.

"Sometimes." She went to her drawing table and showed him the cartoon she'd done of him, the cartoon that betrayed her feelings for him.

He studied it smugly, and asked, "You see me as a knight in shining armor?" He grinned at her.

"Not all the time," she teased, and he swatted her bottom. Then she handed him that unpublishable article about Homer, the man who almost raped her; that caused men to look at her in a cautious way. How would Talbot react to it? It was a test.

He leaned against her drafting table and read it soberly. She tried not to fidget. She searched for clues to his reactions as he read. The silence stretched out, and his expression didn't change. She regretted testing him. Men had feelings, too, and she shouldn't expose him to her streak of cynicism. She tensed as he finished and looked up at her.

But he nodded in understanding and said, "I've known men like that. Their conversation is—limited." He laid the pages on her table and aligned them with the edge, then asked, "Why don't you write instead of—doing what you do?"

"I'd have to be ticked off all the time to write that way. I'm happier doing people. You've seen my work." She meant the cartoon.

"And should I pay?" His lips formed a tight line and a muscle jumped in his jaw.

"For you, it's free."

"But the pay is good."

"Highway robbery." She laughed.

"Street robbery," he corrected, but she missed his meaning. Maybe he meant she drew unsuspecting people. "How long have you been in the business?" he asked.

"I really just fell into it. I was trained in computers."

"How *could* you do it?" he demanded, glaring at her.

"Well..." She shrugged, noting his unreasonable hostility. "I like the hours. I can choose when I work, and I meet a lot of really interesting—"

"And your parents know?" He glowered at her.

"Of course. Phoebe helps. Even Mother says I'm just like her, and Mother isn't overly fond of Phoebe."

"Yes... Phoebe," he said as if he remembered talking about her.

"I don't think I'm as blatant as she was. She used to shock the townspeople. But all the mothers used her as a horrible example, so Phoebe was really responsible for a whole generation of inhibited daughters. Their mothers would tell the daughters, 'Now quit acting that way or you'll turn out to be just like Phoebe Younger!'"

"So since it runs in your family, you didn't even fight it but just gave in and—did it, too."

"I can't see why you're so intolerant! I'm discreet. And it's a good living."

"They made you leave town?"

"No, no. I came to New York because I could make more money here. My folks don't like my living in the city, and they think New York is dangerous with so many kooks, but I always mention Uncle Joe, who now lives in Oklahoma. He's a lot like Phoebe." She laughed.

"And you don't embarrass them at all?" Talbot sounded amazed.

"Well, if I did some of their friends it might. In a small town that way, where everyone knows everyone else, there could be hurt feelings."

"And they don't *care*?" His indignation was rising.

"Who's to care?" she asked softly.

"Well, *I* do!"

"Why? Who's hurt? I'm very discreet. No one knows who my subjects are. And it's fun."

"You *like* it?" he snarled.

"Yes." She too became sober, less conciliatory, as her anger was stirred. She added in a last attempt to appease him, "I prefer women."

"You do *women*?" He was aghast.

Her anger rose, but she was even more puzzled. "Hadn't you known that? Why should that astonish you?"

"*Women! Women, too?*" he barked, outraged.

"Well, you do amaze me! Women have as many quirks and foibles as men. Men don't have exclusive rights to being weird. Women—"

"I want you to quit!" he commanded.

"Quit?" Now she was astonished. It was one thing not to be happy about another person's work, but to make someone quit was another thing entirely. Her back stiffened.

"I want you to quit," he repeated. "I want you to quit *right now!* I want you to promise me you'll never work again!"

This was ridiculous. "I'd be bored out of my skull!"

"If you need it that bad, I'll do my best. I love you, Eileen, and I want you."

"Why, Talbot!"

He fended her off and said with earnest conviction, "I'll get a transfer, and we'll go somewhere else and start fresh. No one need ever know. Quit and promise me you'll never *ever* work again. We'll even get married."

"Quit? Never work?" The words were almost whispered, she'd gone so still. "How could I sit home all day and do nothing? How could you ask me to be idle? You weren't kidding when you said you wanted to lock me away. Do you mean it?"

"It's the only way it would work. I couldn't ever tolerate knowing you were working. Choose. That—or me."

"You're archaic!" she accused.

"I'm as liberal as any other man. It would take a flaming pimp to appreciate you!" he shouted.

"As tightfisted as you are," she yelled back. "It would seem to me you'd welcome the extra income!"

"I'm *not* tightfisted, but I do care how money is made I'm an ordinary man with ordinary morals, and I want a wife who at least appears ordinary."

"So you *do* want me to dye my hair!"

"No, I don't!"

"And be a little house mouse. And fetch your slippers and deliver them to you on my hands and knees and carry them in my mouth."

"That might be an appropriate position!" He was blazing mad.

Her indignation exploded. "Are you saying I'm a bitch?"

He glared at her, his breathing fast, his anger high. Coldly he said, "You're not even a good bitch. You're nothing but a whore." And with that he stormed out of her apartment, slamming the door behind him.

Eileen reeled from his words, completely devastated. Her shock was so great that she was stunned into inaction. It was some time before the hurt he'd delivered with his angry words made her cry. She wept with stormy indignation that he could be so cruel and abusive. Then her tears turned gentle and self-pitying, and she cried herself into a headache.

The sight of her suitcase by the door, packed for the weekend, renewed her regret. But she mentally argued that she was well out of it. One part of her remembered his eyelashes, his kisses, his loving, his humor, and his smile.

The cynical part reminded her that he'd used her to get his way. She'd been nothing but a cheap pushover. The thought made her bitter.

The logical part mentioned how he'd almost never taken her out anywhere, how he'd always asked what things would cost him. The romantic part interrupted to sigh over the Chinese robe, but the cynical part observed that she'd never wear it because it would remind her of him and make her cry.

As the days dragged by, she suffered. She thought the year which was drawing to an end was like her dying heart, and she wondered if she should start a Baptist nunnery and build a Baptist convent in some dry gully out in West Texas and retire from the world. Then into her mind came a mental picture of her Baptist preacher's shocked face when she suggested the idea to him and even she had to smile. The poor man. She'd have to find another way.

She could build a retreat for spurned women. Her Quaker mother would have a *fit*. She would not tolerate self-pity. "God put you here to help. Go nurse the lepers, if you have nothing better to do."

Eileen became very homesick. She needed her unsympathetic mother to brusquely indulge her and scold her out of the doldrums. And she needed to cry some more. She'd go fishing with her Dad and drink tequila and quarrel with her brothers and sisters. She needed to go home.

Was she wounded badly enough to die? Lord, how she missed him. But how nasty he was. She was well out of it. She wondered if therapy could help him. He could be so darling. Why had he turned on her that way? He'd been furious!

Men are baffling. Maybe the duchess's idea of getting rid of all the men and setting up a sperm bank to continue the race wasn't so wrong. But soon baby boys would be born, and the whole miserable mess would start again. Why couldn't men be more like women?

Well, who'd want a female man? She imagined herself spreading a cloak over a puddle for Talbot, and his uproarious laughter. And in her mind she pushed him into the puddle and he sat up, dangerously angry and surged up

to chase her. She turned to flee—but not too fast...How could he have been so nasty? So hateful? She was well out of it.

The duchess ordered Eileen to find out what the matter was with him, but she stubbornly said nothing. She looked at the phone, but her logical self said she was better off without him. Her romantic self sighed gustily, and she pined.

She drew a cartoon of him with his upper half dressed in civilized clothing and a bowler hat. He was neat, orderly, intelligent, and composed. The bottom half was a naked ape.

Beth visited and asked, "What's the quarrel about?"

"What quarrel?" Eileen's backbone stiffened and her lips thinned.

"Between you and Talbot." Beth picked up Farand, who responded with great purrs.

"What makes you think there's been a quarrel? Why don't you believe we've just decided not to see each other?"

"Are you kidding? Go look at yourself in the mirror. He looks ten times worse!"

Eileen shrugged her shoulders to show her indifference.

"Call him and make it up," Beth advised. "You two are perfect for each other."

"That just shows what you know." Eileen walked over to her drawing table and grabbed the cartoon she'd done of the semicivilized Talbot. She thrust it at Beth, who looked at it, chewing her lower lip.

"Did he try to ravish you, Vestal Virgin?" Beth guessed.

Eileen shot her a quelling glance, and her eyes filled with tears.

Beth studied her friend and said kindly, "That bad, huh?"

"I don't know what you mean." Eileen looked down her nose, and her tone was short.

"Come on, now. This is Beth you're talking to. Tell me all about it." With deliberate casualness Beth continued to pet the cat, watching her hand and leaving Eileen free of measuring glances so that she could compose herself.

Eileen took a deep breath and blurted, "He demands that I quit work *forever*. He's hostile and jealous and threatened by it."

"I swear he loves you."

"He couldn't possibly!" Eileen snapped. "He's good company and.. he's loving." Her voice faltered. "But he's cheap. He always asks what it will cost him."

"His clothes are nice, and he pays his share of the tab without double-checking it." Beth frowned, remembering.

Eileen hesitated. "Tab? You've seen him?"

"He was with the group last Saturday. I believe he came on the chance he'd see you there."

"He had a—date?" Eileen's voice quavered.

It was Beth's turn to be uncomfortable. "Well, yes... but—"

Eileen gasped a hurt, uneven breath and turned blindly to the window. She gulped audibly.

Beth hurried to add, "The poor woman. He ignored her. I doubt he said five words to her all evening. He sat there, keeping the ashtray neat, looking godawful. I don't think he smiled once. She talked to Joe. and since they'd both been in a stock-market scramble, they were very intense. And Ohio cried—" "Did he take her home?" Eileen interrupted, not caring about stocks.

"I suppose so." Beth shrugged.

"And he said he'd *even* marry me!" Eileen told her bitterly.

"He asked you to marry him?" Beth straightened, more alert, and shot a raking glance at Eileen.

"Not really. He said if I swore I'd never work again he would *even* marry me. We'd go away somewhere and no one would ever know."

Beth frowned. "Know what?"

"That I'm a cartoonist! He's *impossible!*" Her tears spilled over, and she gulped and cried noisily. Beth was silent and just patted her shoulder, then whistled at Wooser while Eileen released the tears she hadn't known she'd been storing inside. Then Beth went into the kitchen and got a glass of orange juice for each of them.

She spoke of other things because further talk of Talbot was unsuccessful.

"I talked to Mother," Eileen offered.

"You called your mother?"

"I think I'll go home for a while."

"Why?"

"With Thanksgiving looming, I just feel the need to go home and—reevaluate my life."

"Reevaluate?" Beth inquired, becoming very alert. "What do you mean?"

"I may go to the West Coast." Eileen couldn't meet Beth's gaze.

"How could you leave the group?" Beth protested. "You're the only one who can think of something new for Ohio's ego."

"He's been doing very well since the review," Eileen reminded her. "He's sold several paintings."

Beth grinned in amusement. "Doesn't it make you curious to know who bought them? Could it be Joe in disguise? Could he have arranged the review? He has enough fingers in enough pies—he probably owns that newspaper."

"I hadn't thought of that. But Ohio is so stroked." Eileen smiled tremulously, and Beth frowned. Abruptly she looked at her watch, gulped down the rest of her orange juice and said she had to meet Mel. She gave Eileen's cheek a peck and left.

Alone, Eileen languished. He'd been with another woman. Had he kissed her? Had he exposed his eyelashes to her? Had he asked her to quit her job? Eileen groaned aloud. Farand sat on the coffee table with his tail swept around him like a train and watched her with tense interest. Eileen hardly saw the cat. Her thoughts were concentrated on Talbot.

Had he taken the woman home for the weekend and made love to her in the hot tub? He'd probably made love to every other woman in New York State in that whirlpool bath and told every one of them it was the first time.

It was another godawful day, but she dragged herself out of bed and went to hotel lobbies and drew in her sketchbook—only to find they were all pictures of Talbot. How depressing. Thank goodness she was going home. Her family would absorb her and ignore her lovingly and heal her. She would survive. There would be deep ghastly scars, but they would be invisible and no one would know she'd survived potentially mortal wounds. She drew herself as the great Greek sculpture of the arrow-pierced lioness, screaming defiance, dragging her paralyzed hindquarters.

It was six o'clock before Eileen dragged her hindquarters home and up the stairs. On the fourth floor she found a lurking duchess who greeted her with dancing eyes. She allowed Eileen to go on up to the fifth floor, but she trailed behind, lagging back. And she was silent. That was unusual for the duchess, and Eileen turned a couple of times to cast a puzzled glance back at her, but the duchess only smiled.

The reason for the duchess's avid interest rose in one fluid motion from his vigil next to her door and came forward. Eileen said, "Talbot..." in a kind of cautious wonder.

"You're a *cartoonist*!" he half-shouted at her in harsh, furious tones.

Since he hadn't told her anything new, she said, "Yes," admitting it and ready to take up the weapons of defense one last time.

"Just what the hell does Phoebe do?" He seemed extraordinarily wound up and looked a little untidy.

"My grandmother, Mrs. Younger, points out character flaws in her own cartoons. She would have a field day with you!"

The tension seemed to flow from his body, although his face remained haggard-looking. With a kind of wonder he said, "I thought you were a call girl."

The words stopped her dead in her tracks, and she looked at him, startled. "What?" She couldn't have heard right.

"I thought you were a call girl. The girl in pink..."

Rage engulfed her. "How *dare* you!" she cried. Without thinking, she swung at him widely in a dead arc toward his cheek. At the last second he dodged instinctively, and her fist went harmlessly past, throwing her off balance. He had to grab her to keep her from stumbling. "Don't you *dare* touch me!" she snarled.

He snapped his hands back two inches and said earnestly, "Eileen, listen to me. I looked at the wrong girl!"

"I don't care if you look at five hundred wrong girls! Get away from me. I've had all I can take of you. I think you're a penny-pinching, abusive *rat*!" She dropped her keys and her hands were cold and trembling, and she and Talbot knocked heads as they bent to retrieve the keys. But she snatched them from his hand and told him, "Get away!"

"Listen to him," the duchess advised. "I believe there's been a mistake."

Eileen whirled on the old woman. "He called me a whore!"

The duchess grinned, thoroughly amused. "Did he?"

"Duchess, please," Talbot began.

"And he thought *you* were a madam!" Eileen blurted.

Predictably, the duchess burst into a peal of laughter.

Again Talbot tried, "Duchess, please..."

"Can't I watch if I don't say anything?" the duchess begged. "I'm on your side."

"Yes," Eileen retorted, "you would be. He's a *man*!"

"Yes," the duchess agreed, scanning him.

Harried, Talbot abandoned the duchess and turned again to Eileen. "Eileen, listen. You've got to listen. She's right. I made a terrible mistake."

"I agree! You should never have come here, go home. Go back to your whirlpool!" The damned key wouldn't go into the slot, and her hands were shaking, and even worse than that, she was about to cry.

"I am not penny-pinching," he denied distractedly. "I thought that was how you made your living."

"You've insulted me quite enough—■" Eileen began hotly.

"Why don't you listen to him?" the duchess put in.

"Duchess..." he warned.

"Go away!" Eileen yelled. "Leave me alone!"

Down the hall a door opened and a man stepped out. In five years Eileen had never seen him before. "Some trouble?" he asked.

The duchess looked up. "Oh, hello, Harold." Trust the duchess to know him, Eileen thought. "Just a lover's tiff," the old woman explained as she strolled down the hall, took his arm, and tugged him back inside his apartment, leaving the debaters alone in the hall.

Eileen took advantage of the distraction to get the key into the lock. She popped through the door, slamming it shut after her. Talbot pounded on it and demanded that she open it this minute! After he'd done that several times—and replied reasonably to some inquiries from another tenant—she put the chain on and opened the door enough to hiss that she'd call the police if he didn't leave.

He stuck his wallet into the opening and said she was going, to listen to him and if she tried to call the police he'd tell them she'd stolen his wallet. She tried to push it out, but he held it in place. Neither one spoke as they struggled. Finally Talbot took off his shoe and put that in the opening. Eileen said he was harassing her. He said he would like to throttle her. Why hadn't she told him what she did for a living? She said she had. She'd talked about it endlessly.

"Yeah. That you 'did' women," he accused.

"I can't help it if you're preoccupied with sex. I did a cartoon of you—the real you."

"I saw it." His voice became husky with emotion. "You made me a knight."

"No. I tore that one up when I discovered the real you under those eyelashes."

"Eyelashes?" he asked, obviously confused.

She left the door, and he said, "Eileen?" several times to silence before she returned and thrust the cartoon of him—half-civilized, half-ape—through the door's small crack. He took it curiously. He loosened his grip on the

shoe, and she pulled it into the apartment, slammed the door shut, and locked it. She leaned against the inside of her locked door, thinking of him alone out there in the hall, holding that damning cartoon, one shoe off, one shoe on.

She carried the shoe around, hugging it to her chest until she realized what she was doing and threw it away from her. She went to the door several times and listened, but she heard nothing. She couldn't see anything through the peephole. Had he gone? Later she heard the murmur of the duchess's voice and his low rumble. Then there was nothing. She fought an impulse to open the door to see if he was really gone.

It wasn't long before her phone rang. It was still on automatic answering tape, and she stood listening to the ring stop and wondered if the caller was leaving a message. She waited through two calls.

When she finally played the tape back, his first message was distracted and earnest. He needed to talk to her. He would call at a specified time. The phone rang at that exact time, but the answering tape took the call.

The next evening at suppertime her street-door signal buzzed. She hesitantly punched the speaker. It was Mel. "Open up, sweetie. I need to see you," he said.

"What about?" she asked suspiciously.

"Guess."

"No."

The buzzer rang again. She just looked at it. Then again and again. She punched the button and said, "Mel, I love you, but I will not talk about Talbot Wendell."

"How well do you love Mel?" Beth inquired through the speaker.

"Less and less, actually."

"Will you see me?"

"What about?"

"The passenger list of the *Mayflower*," Beth replied, airily.

"Beth—"

"I'm an old friend. Are you avoiding me? Do you hate all of humankind? I'm harmless."

"Are you alone?" Eileen waited, but Beth was silent. "Beth!"

"Now I am. Some man was walking along and stopped to chat. You should have heard what he suggested we do."

"Beth..."

"May I come to the aerie?" she inquired.

"You think I'm a predatory bird?"

"No, I think you're a featherless fledgling."

"Are you coming up to quarrel with me?" Eileen demanded.

"Oh, I do have a chance of seeing you? How gracious."

Eileen punched the button, peeked out the peephole, and when she was sure the coast was clear, and holding Farand in her arms, she went to the top of the steps to wait for Beth. If she wasn't really alone, Eileen would see in time to dash back and lock the door.

She heard the duchess stop Beth, and they talked in muted tones, which made Eileen bristle. She felt she was being plotted against, besieged.

She was a little hostile when Beth pulled herself up the last steps, clinging to the handrail, complaining about being out of shape, knowing, Eileen

suspected, that her shape was mind-boggling, and saying she was going to quit smoking as soon as she got Eileen straightened out.

"What do you mean, straightened out?" Eileen demanded, suspecting that Beth intended to interfere with her life.

"You're truly a member of the group now that you've gone haywire over Talbot."

"I have not," Eileen replied stridently as she let Beth limp into the apartment ahead of her before she closed and locked the door, then released Farand.

"So he made a mistake. Are you going to ruin your lives in order to punish him?" Beth flopped down on the sofa and raised a comforting hand to her heart before lighting a cigarette.

"I thought you were going to quit."

"Tomorrow." Beth drew in a deep lungful and sighed hedonistically as she exhaled.

"Don't breathe," Eileen told her. "You'll kill Wooser with your pollution." Obediently Beth snuffed out the cigarette. "See him," she commanded. "Listen to him. What has he done to make you so angry?"

"He called me a whore."

Beth shrugged. "He thought you *were* one."

"He was ashamed to be seen in public with me." She paused before adding, "That's why he avoided my bed! He thought—"

"Your bed?" Beth invited further explanation with a tiny interested smile.

"He was catching a cold," Eileen explained. "We'd planned to go to the cabin, but he was running a fever."

"Could Mel and I use the cottage next weekend?"

"Take your own sheets and be sure it's cleaned up reasonably," Eileen said without thinking. "The key is under the flowerpot on the corner. That's why he didn't speak to me on the street."

"Because you put the key under the flowerpot?" Beth had lost track somewhere.

"No, because he thought I brought men here."

"That's possible," Beth agreed. "Are you going to forgive him?"

"I don't know." Eileen moved restlessly.

"He loves you."

"He thought I was diseased." Eileen shot Beth an indignant look.

"Understandable." Beth patted her knee, and Farand jumped up and purred before making himself comfortable on Beth's lap.

"Would you keep Farand for me while I'm in Texas?"

"No," Beth replied promptly.

"It would be easier for you to have the cat and the bird at your place than to come clear over here to feed them. Although the stairs would be good for you and improve your wind."

"I'm not going to be around. Mel and I have plans."

"Are you trifling with him?"

"I haven't decided," Beth answered. Then she asked, "Are you going to see Talbot?"

"Maybe. When I get back from Texas," Eileen replied in a pensive voice.

"When are you leaving?"

"The day after tomorrow."

"What flight?" Beth inquired casually. "Want me to go with you to the airport?"

"Not this time." Eileen got up to pace around aimlessly.

"Are you going to tell him you're leaving?"

"Lay off, Beth. You're getting pushy." Eileen gave her a cross look.

"Are you going to write to me? Or call me?"

"I thought you'd be gone."

"In and out." Beth wobbled a hand. "Give me a call if I can help. What flight?"

"It's too early for you."

"Going straight?" Beth looked down as she patted Farand's head.

"To Houston and over."

"Tell your family hello and give them all my love. Especially your cousin Bill." Beth grinned.

"I'll tell his girl."

"Girl? How fickle! He told me he'd love me forever."

Irritated, Eileen said, "Well, he did. For several weeks."

"Men." But Beth's tone was indulgent.

"Then if you think that, why do you feel I should communicate with Talbot?"

Beth sighed as if bored. "Because you love him, you dummy."

Eileen shook her head emphatically. "No."

"Then why are you so angry?"

"He insulted me. Offended me. He slept with me when he thought I was a whore!"

"He was attracted to you in spite of that, which is astonishing for a man like Talbot. Your problem is you *want* to be offended. Why can't you listen to his side?"

"I love you, Beth, but I'm really tired of you right now."

Beth put Farand aside and rose to her feet. "I know, darling, but I had to give it my best try. He's a love, really. If you don't want him, I'll sort through my file of panting virgins and find him a dandy, so don't worry about him."

"Why, Beth!" Eileen gasped in shock.

Beth grinned in a supercilious way and kissed Eileen's coolly turned cheek. "Have a good flight, pumpkin. Keep in touch." And she left.

Eileen ran out the apartment door and yelled down the stairs, "What will I do with Farand and Wooser?"

"Take them with you," came floating back up the stairwell.

Take them along? Her mother would not be thrilled with her bringing along a cat and a bird. She couldn't ask the duchess to take care of them. She wouldn't be at the airport before the duchess would have gone through all her papers—twice! She'd find the private folder of cartoons and the one of the duchess and Ken, and the duchess would chortle and publish it! No, it couldn't be the duchess. Then who?

That was when the basket of flowers was delivered. Red roses. A floor basket of red roses! They were from Talbot. "To my love with all my love,

John Talbot Wendell." That was a bold declaration. What a beautiful mass of red roses. What a foolish way to spend money. One rose would have been sufficient. But he'd sent a whole basket! What an extravagant spendthrift. Silly man.

She called Karen and told her the flowers were gorgeous, and Karen said lazily, "So's he," which made Eileen stiffen a little.

But she still asked, "Could you keep Farand and Wooser for me for a week or so?" and Karen casually accepted their care. Eileen said Farand would feel very much at home among all the greenery at the florist shop. Karen said she was sure that was so and offered to keep Talbot, too.

Eileen didn't actually quarrel with Karen, but she was in something of a temper when she hung up. Women were predatory. She'd never realized how much so. First Beth with her file of women all just waiting for Talbot. Now Karen offering to take care of him. She'd probably ravish him among the orchids. How strange that she'd never noticed women had such strong aggressive tendencies.

Then a tape recorder was delivered. It was from Talbot, with a sixty-minute cassette. She played it. She paced around the room as his voice flowed over her. She would stop and look at the recorder and she would see his face. And she listened while he stated his case.

"I love you," he began in an intense voice, and deep in her body she responded to him. His first words came quickly as he sought to catch her attention before she switched the machine off. "It was all a stupid mistake. I looked at the wrong girl!

"You see, we went to Paley Park last August and some men had been talking about a call girl. They said she was the girl in pink. They'd meant another girl entirely, and they even said she had golden hair, but yours is golden where the sun hits it, and I thought that was what they meant. I remember it surprised me that they'd call you golden-haired when your hair is so spectacularly dark red, yet there *are* those highlights.

"But I could only see you. You had on pink that day, and I couldn't tear my eyes away from you. So since I couldn't see anyone else worth commenting about, I assumed they meant you. But I do remember I said at the time that you didn't look like one.

"Then when I saw you at the Gallery, I was astounded that you could fit so easily into society when I thought you were what I *thought* you were. You still didn't look or act like one, and I was boggled by you. But I did resist.

"Then I found myself lurking around your apartment house, and I saw that mindless hunk come home with you—and not leave. I sat in Sam's that whole damn week arguing with myself.

"After that I saw you at dinner with that bloodless creep—and you asked me to dance with you. I held you in my arms and I was lost. Then at Sam's, when we shared that chair, I found my whole body electrified just from sitting next to you, touching you. I knew, call girl or not, I had to have you. But I fought it. I really tried not to. And I worried how I could ever take you home to my parents.

"I guess basically I'm pretty straitlaced, and I agonized over being seen with you in public. The conflict between wanting to show off your astonishing beauty and feeling I should never get involved with you simply tore me apart. I'd be with you and forget for whole periods of time what I thought you were. Then you'd say something about your work, or I'd look at your bed— and I'd remember.

"I'd try to stay away from you, but I couldn't. I suffered as much being away from you as I did being around you. It was hell.

"When you came to me that weekend and wore that swimsuit, you surprised me, but I found it charming that you could be shy with me. Then I wondered if it was part of the act. And when you made love to me so fantastically, I knew positively you had to be a pro. And you were so uninhibited and such a great companion that I was torn with jealousy over the other men in your life.

"I jogged every night until I was exhausted, hoping I could sleep and not wonder who you might be with. But I'd dream of you and wake up and pace around the room and sweat thinking how you might be looking at someone else. Or how he might be looking at you.

"Everything you said about your work could fit with my mistaken idea of what you did. You said you enjoyed it, and obviously you did like sex. You said the hours were of your own choosing, and Vince Worldman said you were a good businesswoman. That drove me wild!" Talbot's voice went reedy with emotion, and he paused for a minute. "You said you'd miss it because you like people. Then you told me you 'did' women.

"When you showed me the cartoon you drew of me as a knight, I knew you loved me, as I love you. We were meant for each other. If you could quit the profession, I'd marry you. When you refused to quit, I was wrecked."

All through the tape his voice had been intense, but when he said "wrecked," his voice broke and was so husky that she had trouble hearing the word. Then he took a deep, unsteady breath and went on, and now and then she could hear the tremor of barely controlled emotion, and she was touched.

"Mel called me. He and Beth asked why I was so violently opposed to your drawing. I didn't know what they were talking about and thought of the drawing you did of me as a knight. I told them you drew beautifully. They wanted to know why I wanted you to quit drawing. I asked what your drawing had to do with anything. And they told me that's how you make your living.

"I can't describe how I felt. I was afraid to believe it. I went right over to your apartment, but you didn't answer your buzzer. I punched the duchess's doorbell, and she let me in. The duchess was so curious about us that she almost danced, but I went right up and sat by your door to wait for you to come home—to me."

There was a pause as he took an unsteady breath. Then he said, "The only thing that sustained me during the whole disaster was the cartoon you did of me as a knight. That was how you'd seen me. I've kept the half-ape cartoon on my mirror where I can see it. I think it should have been all ape. I believe

you were kind to imply that I was half-civilized. How I ever thought you could be a whore I can't fathom.

"You were such a contradiction between what I thought I knew and the way you acted—and blushed. You are so graceful and sweet-tempered, and you're such a lady. How could I ever have been so deluded? I just don't know.

"Please forgive my blindness. Maybe I couldn't believe any woman could be so perfect. I love you, Eileen. The mind-bending thing is, I loved you when I thought you were a call girl. I wanted to marry you and change your life and save your soul. I love *you*, no matter who you are. My God, I would give my life for you. And I would give anything to begin again with you.

"Can we start over? I'll call you this evening at six o'clock, and I hope you've gotten the tape, listened to it, and will answer your phone and talk to me. It can't end this way."

The tape was finished. She listened to it several times as she packed. At six she would be on her way to the airport. She hadn't been fooled by Beth's casual questioning about departure time and route. Had she planned to leave as she'd told Beth, she'd get to the airport and there Talbot would be, and how could she violently reject him in a crowded airport?

She listened to the tape again as she gathered Farand's favorite toys and foods and put them in a box with the birdseed. Talbot talked a good argument. She just might write to him from Texas, and if she came back to New York, she might see him again. A woman might like to be teased about being loose, but the actuality of having someone believe such a notion took a bit of getting used to. After a couple of months, maybe she could again face Talbot and not be embarrassed.

Perhaps he had cause for considering her loose. She'd been pretty easy for him. And a little wild. She hadn't held him off or been discreet. How was she to know it could be so much fun? After the somber, perfunctory Tom, who usually would rather not, Talbot had been a revelation.

Thoughtfully she remembered the times with Talbot. At last she understood his sad expressions and changes of mood. She called a taxi as she dressed slowly. She stared in the mirror without actually seeing herself. When the taxi arrived, she paid the driver extra to come up to carry down her luggage while she carried the bird and the cat.

She put on her coat against the November chill and wrapped a scarf around her head before they went down the stairs. She tapped on the duchess's door and left the basket of roses with her. The old lady frowned and asked in a quavery voice, "You're going now? I thought you were leaving in a day or so." She sounded irritated.

"No, now," Eileen said firmly. She kissed the wrinkled cheek and, after removing one rose from the mass, put it between her teeth and picked up the bird and cat carriers.

"You're nuts," the duchess accused with conviction.

"I could be. Take care. I'll be in touch."

"Poor Talbot," the old voice said.

Eileen looked back. "I thought you preferred Ken."

"Only as a plaything," the old lady retorted. "Talbot's the kind for the long haul."

Eileen gave her a chiding look and went on down the stairs.

EPILOGUE

TALBOT WAS PACING in the third-floor hall of his town house as six o'clock approached. He went over and over the words he would say—if she answered her phone. His phone rang. He caught it on the second ring and said a hurried "Yes?"

It was the duchess. "She's leaving *now*."

"My God! Thanks." He hung up and called the airport. "When?" he asked. "What flight?" And he booked one. He went to his closet and, like a practiced traveler, knew exactly what to take and packed it efficiently. He called a cab. He tore off his clothes and dressed, grabbed up his bag and ran down the stairs. Glancing out the landing window between the third and second floor, he saw his cab waiting below. It had already arrived. He ran on down, jerked open the front door and stopped dead.

Eileen stood there with a rose and a man's shoe in one hand, taking off her scarf with the other. Beside her were a covered birdcage and a cat carrier. Outside, the cabbie was unloading a suitcase and a box. Trembling, Talbot dropped his suitcase and grabbed her upper arm, making her drop his shoe. They became entangled in the birdcage, cat carrier, suitcases, and box, which they transferred from the front stoop to the foyer inside. But Talbot didn't release his grip on her arm.

The cabbie spotted his suitcase and asked, "Need a cab?"

"No!" Talbot denied and fished in his pocket with his free hand, but the cabbie said he'd already been paid. He closed the door and was gone. Maybe he just stood outside the door, or maybe he drove away. Who knew? Who cared? He was gone from them, and they were alone.

Shaking from pent-up emotion, speechless, Talbot turned to look at the woman on the other end of the arm he held to make sure that it *was* Eileen. She'd slipped her coat off, and the garment hung from where he had his hand on her arm. The coat dangled between them to the floor as she stood before him, holding his rose.

She was pale and serious, and her eyes were wide. Her hair was a glorious halo, and her lips were parted and vulnerable. His unsteady free hand reached for her other arm, to hold her more securely, and he realized that her arm felt bare. He glanced down and found that it was, indeed, bare. She was wearing the strapless ice- blue lounge pajamas.

His eyes leaped to hers, and he saw his love reflected there. His fingers loosened, but he still trembled with the force of his emotion as he pulled her gently to him and enfolded her in his arms. His breath was released in a rush, and he relaxed as they held each other close.