

Prologue

Dave St. Clair awoke with startled suddenness. Experience warned him to stay perfectly still. Moving nothing but his eyes, he scanned the campsite, searching for anything out of the ordinary.

The Jeep was still where he'd parked it, facing back up the trail through the dense jungle beyond the small clearing. Protection, dubious but all they had, was the international press flag dangling limply from the Jeep's radio antenna. A bulging camera bag leaned against the base of the tree that had sheltered him and his photographer for the night.

Everything was exactly where it was supposed to be. He tried to relax and shake off the chilling premonition of danger.

Frowning, he listened. It was dawn. The sun was barely over the horizon, but already the air around him was hot and oppressive. The stench of rotting vegetation in the nearby jungle filled his nostrils. It was quiet, too quiet. No birds called. No animals rustled through the underbrush. Not a single sound,

save the ever-present hum of insects, revealed the life teeming in the tropical rain forest scant yards away.

Dave rolled out of his sleeping bag.

If his instincts were correct, one of two things was about to happen. Either they were going to get the scoop they'd come for or they were about to have company. Considering the reason that had brought Dave into the interior, he doubted the goodwill of any "company" that might suddenly drop in on the campsite.

Anticipating the scoop, Dave felt the adrenaline pump through his body as it always did when he was first on the scene of a big story. "Ramsey," he whispered, nudging the lump within the other dusty sleeping bag. "Wake up and get that camera ready."

"Coffee."

"Forget it," Dave called softly over his shoulder. He was already stretched out on his stomach near the edge of the ridge, his binoculars trained on the open plain below. "No room service this morning, unless you think that's the reason for that government car on the road down there."

While the photographer scrambled for a camera, Dave spoke quietly into a small tape recorder, describing the scene unfolding below him. The long black sedan, its government flag identifiable now even without binoculars, left the road and headed straight toward the ridge where the journalists had made camp. Suddenly, at least a dozen heavily armed rebels appeared and halted the car, mere yards below Dave.

Dave didn't need to command his companion to keep complete silence. The esteemed K.C. Ramsey

had twice as many years of experience as he had. Lowering the camera, K.C. held up two fingers. Reluctantly, Dave nodded agreement. A second roll of film was loaded and the soft whirr of the shutter began anew while Dave concentrated on the meeting taking place below them.

"El Santos." Dave recognized the rebel leader immediately, as well as the gaudily uniformed officer stepping gingerly out of the sedan. General Miguel de Lupas, commander of the army, cousin to President Palacios. The pieces fell together. The tip that had brought Dave deep into the interior was confirmed. A military coup was in the offing, and the conspirators wouldn't welcome discovery by the press. It was time to get the hell out while the getting was good.

Dave tapped his companion's shoulder. They grabbed only their knapsacks and the camera bag and tossed them in the back of the Jeep. Not risking starting the engine, they pushed the vehicle toward the trail.

Dave sent up a silent prayer at every creaking noise the ancient vehicle made as it rolled into the jungle. At the same time he cursed his own body's shortcomings. Every part of him ached. His back hurt from the strain and from too many nights spent with only a thin layer of kapok between himself and the hard ground. Dysentery twisted his guts.

The three days' growth of beard on his face itched. His whole body was covered with angry welts from insect bites. He was definitely getting too old for this kind of thing and most every thing else that went along with being an overseas news correspondent. His respect for the photojournalist accompanying him grew. K.C. had at least ten years on him and yet

was still flying around the world with obvious relish. Some people must take better to this life than others.

At one time he would have lain there on his belly until the meeting had broken up, gambling all for the big story. Once he'd actually brazened it out and walked right into the thick of it to get the scoop. Those days were past, long past. He'd finally admitted to mortality. Now, all he wanted to do was file the story and go home.

Hoping they were well beyond hearing range, Dave jumped behind the steering wheel and started the engine. The usually recalcitrant Jeep sputtered to life, then backfired. Viciously, Dave swore through his teeth, then rammed his foot on the accelerator. The Jeep lurched forward and they were off, bouncing over the curving, rutted trail that would lead them to safety.

Coming around a sharp bend, Dave's breath caught in his throat and his heart slammed against the inside of his ribcage. In a split second he figured the odds and transferred his foot from the accelerator to the brake. The Jeep shuddered and screeched to a stop. He started to point to the press flag, but the sullen faces and cold steel aimed at him changed his mind. Instead, his hands went to the top of his head.

"Follow my lead and stay calm," he said even though his blood was roaring through his veins at an alarming speed. "The worst that can happen is well be their guests for a while."

That assurance was hollow even to his own ears. As the blindfold covered his eyes, an image came to him, haunting him.

Lush ebony hair. Blue eyes that could see into his soul. Translucent ivory skin. Soft lips, moist

and inviting. Gentle, melodic speech that could soothe and excite.

Maggie.

He'd made a terrible mistake. Now it was too late to correct it.

One

Voices rose sharply in a stormy duet, ending abruptly with the slamming of the front door. The heavy oak and beveled glass shuddered in its frame. Vibrations rippled all the way to the back of the house, shifting the sampler on the kitchen wall to an awkward angle. The Tiffany lamp over the table swung once, twice, jingling merrily before steadying.

In the aftermath, there was an expectant silence, broken when Maggie St. Clair pushed open the kitchen door. The wood banged violently against the wall. The jewel-toned prisms of the lamp jingled again. The sampler lurched, hung precariously for a second, then crashed to the floor. Shards of glass skittered in every direction.

"Lawsy! What else?" Maggie stared down at the crumpled frame and broken glass that had protected Great-Grandmother McPherson's sampler. "The perfect ending to a perfect day! My models don't show up. I have a wingding fight with my daughter—and now this."

She gritted her teeth when the roar of a motorbike

sounded from outside the house. Looking to the ceiling, she asked, "Where was my head when I bought Laura that moped?"

Disgusted with herself for half expecting an answer, she rechanneled her energy toward cleaning up the mess on the floor. Her temper continued to simmer as she picked up the remains of the frame, stored away the sampler, and swept up the glass. Slamming the door of the broom closet, she caught her hand between the door and the frame.

Cursing her own stupidity, she thrust her bruised fingers under the kitchen faucet and turned on the cold water. The water relieved the throbbing, but the rising level in the sink set off her ire again. Laura hadn't run the disposal when she'd done the supper dishes. It was a small oversight of no real consequence, granted, but after all the other events of the day, it was the last straw.

Maggie flipped on the garbage disposal and the appliance whirled into action. The standing water gurgled and swirled, but went nowhere. Thunk! The swirling water and the humming motor stopped.

Damnation! Drumming her uninjured fingers on the sink, she glared at the bits of carrots, celery, and potato peelings floating in the murky water. Turning the disposal off, she pushed up her sweat shirt sleeve and fished around the debris-strewn water for the offending obstacle—the dishcloth that Laura had neglected to wring out and hang safely away.

Maggie gave the cloth a vicious yank and the fabric ripped. The sudden lack of resistance caught her off guard and she stumbled backward. Fighting for balance, she tripped over the book bag in the middle of the room, and landed solidly on her behind. Furious and frustrated, she hollered, "Laura Eileen St.

Clair! How many times have I told you to pick up your belongings!"

Getting to her feet, Maggie rummaged under the sink for the disposal tool, and went to work. "It's a good thing you're at your grandparents' house, little girl," she vowed to her absent daughter between tugs on the cloth and the tool. "Or, you'd be getting a plumbing lesson."

Eventually, after several minutes of tugging accompanied by muttered curses, the cloth was dislodged and the blades were moving freely. However, the water in the sink didn't drain when Maggie tried the disposal again. Resigned to one of the not-so-charming features of her charming old house with the elderly plumbing, she headed for the basement.

He couldn't sit out here in the car much longer. It was cold and dark, and he was beginning to shiver. His bones ached. His head throbbed. His eyes burned. He should have agreed to another day at Walter Reed Army Hospital.

Inside the house he'd been watching so intently, the lights were on. A warm glow beckoned from the porch light, all the rooms on the first floor, and one window on the second floor. Even the basement was lighted. Home, hearth, and family—exactly what he needed most.

His hand closed around the cold chrome of the door handle, but he didn't pull back on the lever. Instead, he uncurled his hand and shoved it back into the pocket of his trench coat. Pulling his hat down further over his face, he slouched into the questionable warmth provided by his turned-up collar. He cursed himself for being ten kinds of coward and an even greater number of fools. He should have

called, sent a wire, something. Some sort of notice of his arrival would have broken the ice, made it easier for both of them.

In an attempt to relieve the pounding in his brain, he closed his eyes and rested his head against the back of the car seat. This wasn't at all the way he'd planned this reunion and heaven knew he'd had plenty of time to plan it. Time. Too damned *much of it*.

He cursed the length of time and the circumstances that had separated him from his wife and daughter. At the same time, he offered up his thanks to the Almighty that time still existed for him. Time and a second chance. How hard had he prayed for both?

Cold gripped Dave's spine, not from the temperature but from remembered fear. In an attempt to rid himself of the images that flashed through his mind, he straightened his back and prepared again to get out of the car. His hand shook. Again, he hesitated.

Pull yourself together, St. Clair. You've been in tighter spots. You're about to face your wife—correction: ex-wife—not a firing squad.

He shuddered. How he hated thinking of Maggie as his ex-wife. *Not for long*, he vowed, reaching for the door handle again.

Maggie was beauty, warmth, gentle love . . . and she held his life in her hands as certainly as those guerrillas who had leveled their guns on him.

Armed with a wrench Maggie attacked the basement plumbing. She'd wrestled with the pipes just long enough to slop muck all over her pink sweat shirt and white pants when she heard a heavy banging at the front door. Alarmed by the insistence of the heralding, Maggie hastily wiped her grimy hands on the seat of her pants, raced to the stairs and took

the steps two at a time. In seconds she was through the house and flinging the front door open.

A man in a trench coat and crumpled hat was leaning against the porch. Maggie froze. The world tipped and shuddered, then seemed to open up and swallow her.

Pushing up the brim of his hat, the man straightened and took a step toward her. "Hello, Maggie," he said in a roughened, whispery tone.

A strangled sound pushed past her lips. "Dave . . . ?"
"The prodigal husband in the flesh."

Clinging to the door, Maggie stared at him, eagerly drinking in every detail. Old habits and instincts died hard. Her muscles geared up and her senses tingled. A surge of joy spread through her at the sight of him, safe and sound, and home.

His hair glimmered gold beneath the porch lamp, swept away from his square face, finishing in short, crisp curls at his nape. Maggie's fingertips tingled involuntarily at her memory of the texture and warmth of his hair. Her lips followed suit, remembering brushing across his neck and forehead where his hair lay in waves.

It had been his hair, that wavy gold-and-silver mass catching the light of an afternoon sun, that had first caught her attention the day they'd met all those years ago. And then she'd seen his eyes—golden brown, sparkling with mirth. Now her breath caught, but not from the excitement that had always filled her at the sight of him. No mischievous twinkle brightened the depths of those marvelous eyes of his this evening. They were glassy and bloodshot.

Quickly, she inventoried the rest of his features, startled at the changes she saw. His skin, above an unaccustomed beard, was pale, drawn tightly across his high cheekbones. His generous mouth was set

in a thin, grim line. His shoulders, always held so straight and proud, were slumped.

Involuntarily, she started to open her arms in welcome and comfort. Then, remembrance returned full force. Maggie quickly wrapped her arms around herself defensively. "You mean, prodigal ex-husband, don't you?" she snapped, immediately contrite. It was childish to be so peevish after such a long time. Dave had been her husband for thirteen years. Their divorce was two years old. It was long past time for arguing.

She swallowed hard and took a deep breath before proceeding more civilly. "I'm sorry, Laura isn't here right now. If you tell me where you're staying, I'll have her call you as soon as she gets home."

"That's some comfort at least," Dave mumbled, sagging downward until he sat on the railing of the narrow porch.

Maggie had only a second to wonder at his comment before he demanded, "Who in the hell was that punk kid who just roared out of our driveway on a motorcycle? How could you let such a bum in the house? It's a good thing Laura wasn't here. I don't want her anywhere near guys like that."

Maggie dropped her mouth open then closed it quickly. How dare he arrive unannounced and immediately start tearing into her for letting some "bum" in the house. Civility be damned. She wasn't his wife anymore and this wasn't his house. As for the "bum" she'd allegedly entertained in Laura's absence . . . Boy, was Dave in for a deserved surprise.

"The one with spiked red-and-purple hair?" she asked in a deceptively innocent drawl.

"Yeah," he said.

"That was a moped, not a motorcycle," she informed him, still keeping her delivery as smooth as

a magnolia petal. "What have you been doing? Spying on the house?"

Through slitted eyes, Dave glared at her.

Maggie returned his glare, lifting her chin in defiance.

Damn! Dave cursed inwardly. She was right. He had been spying . . . sort of. Shrugging, he turned his attention to the wisteria vine that screened one end of the porch.

"I sat out in my car for a few minutes before I came in," he disclosed, his gaze on the intricate pattern of vines and the few remaining leaves of the wisteria as if it were the most fascinating specimen on the face of the earth.

"More than a few minutes, if you saw that kid leave and only just arrived at the door."

Unable to meet her eyes, he offered, "I move slowly when I'm tired."

A few minutes was an out-and-out lie. He'd been sitting in a rented car, parked across the street, for an hour or more trying to rustle up the strength to approach the house like the swashbuckling adventurer he was supposed to be.

"*You* never move slowly, Dave. More likely you were gathering up some courage."

"The strength," he corrected, looking her in the eye this time. It was a half-truth, but he wasn't going to lose any more face by admitting that she'd hit the nail on the head.

He was literally home from the wars, seeking the bosom of his loving family. Instead, he was faced with an angry ex-wife who was turning the screws as efficiently as a medieval dungeon master.

"Where is Laura?" he asked, banking on his daughter being more receptive to his return and hoping that her appearance was imminent.

"That 'bum' on the roaring moped was Laura."

Dave grasped the post for support. He must not have heard Maggie right. Probably some congestion in his ears affecting his hearing. Leaning forward, he requested, "Come again?"

"Welcome back to the U.S., Dave. While you've been flying around the world, our daughter became a teenager. The person with purple hair who tore out of the driveway on a moped was indeed Laura."

"That . . . that . . ." Totally at a loss of words, he swallowed hard. "That was Laura? My . . . our little girl?"

Maggie nodded confirmation, feeling some compassion for the shock he must be suffering. For her, Laura's swing to the unconventional hadn't been so abrupt. The shiny blond braids had given way to color-moussed hair and bizarre outfits considerably more gradually than two seconds.

"Lots of kids her age look like that," she began, belatedly softening the reality. "It's probably a phase. She's only a freshman and I've noticed that most of the juniors and seniors have settled down. . . ."

Dave rose from the balustrade and started toward her. The porch light fell directly on his features and Maggie was struck again by how utterly awful he looked. "Dave, are you all right?"

"No . . . and yes," he answered enigmatically, reaching out a shaking hand.

Maggie caught him as he fell, a cry of alarm rising from her throat as she staggered beneath his weight. Somehow, she managed to keep them both upright and guide him to the closest seat—the wooden deacon's bench in the hallway.

"Sorry . . . not the way I wanted it," Dave mumbled as he tossed his hat aside then rested his head against the wall behind him. "I'm tired, dead tired."

Maggie didn't believe for a minute that his collapse was brought on by exhaustion only. Nor was it because of Laura.

Sweat beaded on his forehead. When she touched his face, her fingers were singed by the heat. His teeth were clamped tightly shut, probably to keep them from chattering. Though October was still fairly mild in Alexandria, Virginia, the evenings were chilly. With the fever he was running, he shouldn't have been outside in the damp air.

Dropping to her knees before him, she took his hands in hers. "Don't lie to me, Superman," she said, unwittingly using the teasing nickname she'd given him during the early years of their marriage. "You're running a temperature and I'm guessing you've got the flu or something."

With a deep sigh, he settled himself more comfortably on the bench. "That's what they said at Walter Reed," he disclosed.

"Walter Reed? You were so sick you've already been to the hospital?" Maggie was incredulous. Knowing from his letters to Laura that his last assignment had been in Central America, her imagination ran wild at the possibility of his having contracted some exotic jungle virus.

Her grip on his hands tightened as she queried, "How long have you been like this? Why didn't they admit you?"

"I'm not that sick," he declared, but neither his voice nor his appearance supported that opinion. "Stop with the questions, Maggie. My head hurts."

Maggie eyed him worriedly. "You should be in bed."

"That's what they said, and that's why I'm here."

Maggie dropped his hands as if she'd been stung. Not even the divorce had changed his attitude. During those last years of their marriage, it had seemed

as if he came home during his leaves only because he had no place else to go, or at least no place else he thought he had to be. So he was here merely because he was too sick to be doing what he loved best—ferreting out the details of a news event. Well, no more, Maggie promised.

"How lucky for you and especially for *Global News Magazine* that you've been so well that you haven't had to come home for three years!" she said, not caring that every word directed to a sick and weakened man dripped sarcasm.

Dave flinched. "Maggie . . . please. It hasn't been three years since I've been home."

"Two years and eleven months," she specified sharply. "Same thing! Time flies when you're having fun." She rose and moved to lean against the opposite wall. "You seem to have forgotten another little detail during your absence. This isn't your home anymore."

Dave shuddered. Looking up at her, he tried to focus so that he saw only one image of her. It was an effort, but worth it.

She looked good. Better than good. Wonderful. Sort of a strange design on her shirt and pants, he thought briefly. But, he wasn't seeing too clearly. If he were, the splotch would probably make sense.

Fire practically burning in those gorgeous dark blue eyes, she was a dream, a vision of all that was beautiful. He wanted to reach out and pull her into his arms. He wanted to bury his face in the glorious midnight wealth of her hair and get drunk on its sweet scent. He wanted to run his hands and lips over every silky inch of her, have her wrap those marvelous long legs of hers around him while he made passionate love to her for a solid week.

If only he could do just that. Then, maybe he

could forget all the events of the last few weeks. But, she wasn't his wife—and damned if he wasn't too sick to override any arguments and sweep her up those stairs and into bed anyway. Instead of all the things he'd have preferred to say to her, he stated softly, "I wasn't having fun."

Maggie's response was an unsympathetic, totally disgusted *harumph*.

The hallway began to tilt and Dave shook his head to clear it of the dizziness. Everything was getting hazier and hazier. He struggled against succumbing to the hellish nightmares of unconsciousness. "Three years ago, you told me never to come back."

Maggie didn't need reminding. She'd replayed every detail of that argument over and over. Dave had scheduled a month's leave, then cut it short because he'd been summoned by his editor to cover a hot story breaking in some far-flung corner of the globe.

Dave had never said no and the assignments had become more frequent and the arguments over his leaving more fierce. Yet, somehow he'd always convinced her that if he had any choice he would turn the editor down and stay with his family. She'd believed him, dutifully helped him pack and kissed him goodbye. But not that time. The shortened leave with his family had happened once too many times. That last time had been the limit.

"I gave you a choice," Maggie countered, her raven brows pulled sharply together.

Dave returned her glare through pain-slitted eyes. "A choice between my career and you."

"Your precious career wouldn't have suffered if you'd missed out on that one lousy story." The pain and frustration that Maggie had lived with for years and not been able to vent directly surfaced.

Too anguished to care that her target was ex-

hausted, feverish, and had no business being any where but in a bed recuperating, she fired another volley. "It wasn't your career that you were worried about. It was your precious ego! You couldn't believe that anyone except the great Pulitzer prizewinner could possibly do justice to a political riot in Chile, Indonesia, Iran, or wherever it was that time. Here's a hot news tip, Yankee, you're not indispensable!"

"Yankee?" he repeated, raising one brow. "Now I know you're mad."

"You're damned straight I'm mad. More than mad, Finished. That's what the divorce was all about. Even though you didn't bother to contest it—"

"Contest it? You didn't give me a chance. You hung up on me every time I tried to talk to you."

"I didn't have to talk to you. I knew what you had to say—the same empty promises you'd been making for years. I couldn't go on like that any longer. I—" she stopped abruptly, feeling tears prickling behind her eyes. She didn't want to feel the pain again. Folding her arms across her chest she looked toward the ceiling. "What's the use in arguing about it now?"

"Because we didn't argue about it enough then," he answered. "Maybe if you'd waited until we were face to face we could have worked it out. But instead, you filed while I was away and the whole damned thing was conducted long-distance."

"Seemed perfectly justified since so much of our marriage was conducted that way," she returned cuttingly, wanting to wound as she'd been wounded.

A muscle ticked in Dave's jaw and something passed through his eyes. Was it pain? Regret? She stared at him for a moment, wishing she knew. Finally, she sighed. "It's over, Dave."

"I haven't been replaced yet, have I?" he fired back. "Maybe I am indispensable—to you."

Maggie's spine stiffened. "I don't have another husband if that's what you're asking," she said, choosing her words slowly and carefully, not allowing any emotion. "Replaceable isn't synonymous with dispensable. I'm doing just fine without a husband. I had years of practice."

Dave sent her a long look before dropping his face in his hands. "I'm home and that's all that really matters," he said, his voice somewhat muffled and sounding very, very tired.

"But this isn't your home," she insisted firmly. "Don't be obtuse."

He lifted his head and sent her a wan smile. "Sorry, Maggie," he said in a faint whisper, and passed out.

"Dave!" Maggie's cry fell on unconscious ears. She lurched forward in an attempt to keep him from slithering off the bench. She succeeded only in following him down to the floor and protecting his head from bumping against the hard wood.

Cradling his head in her lap, she prayed he'd wake up soon. Not knowing what else she could do, Maggie loosened his tie and the first few buttons on his shirt. Listening to his breathing, she determined it was a little rapid, but not unreasonably so, considering the temperature he was running. His pulse was strong, though it, too, was a bit more rapid than normal.

"Oh Dave," she said softly, her anger and frustration dissipating. >

Holding his unconscious body close, it was hard to maintain the emotional distance she wanted. Even if he really had no right to ask it of her, he did need someone. His parents were dead. He had no brothers or sisters. Laura was all the family he had.

Absently, she brushed his hair away from his forehead. "What am I going to do with you?" she whispered.

"Take care of you," she answered herself, knowing she had no other choice. The man needed care. Lots of it, by the looks of things.

What would it hurt to allow him to spend the night? She could afford to give him one night's shelter. But no more than one night, she vowed. Laura would be back by the next evening and Maggie was going to make sure Dave was long gone from the house by then.

It wasn't that she wanted to deny Laura a visit with her father, but if Dave stayed with them for any length of time it would give the girl false hopes of a reconciliation. Maggie wasn't about to put her daughter through any unnecessary emotional turmoil.

Trying once more to awaken him with no success, Maggie grew alarmed.

She carefully scooted out from under him, and sped down the hall. When Laura was a baby, Maggie had learned to deal with high fevers. "Cool the patient down quickly but don't shock him." The directive was as clear as if she were reading it from a manual. Dave was far too big to throw in a tub of tepid water, so she opted for Plan B.

In the kitchen, she dumped a tray of ice cubes into a bowl. As she pulled open a drawer and extracted a clean cloth, she realized her hands were shaking. Taking a deep breath, she tried for calm.

"I don't believe this day," she mumbled as she leaned her forehead against a kitchen cupboard. An hour ago, she'd thought a clogged kitchen drain had been the topper to end all. What a laugh. Now, she had a very ill ex-husband lying unconscious on the foyer floor. "Oh Lord, give me strength."

She felt torn between a need to laugh and another to cry. trying was out of the question. She'd bawled her eyes out over this man three years ago and it hadn't solved anything.

Considering the obvious gravity of the situation, laughter was hardly appropriate. However, there was a certain ironic humor in it, she decided as she added water to the bowl of ice. How like Dave St. Clair to turn her world upside down with a dramatic entrance. Hadn't he always?

Picking up the bowl of ice water, Maggie couldn't help but smile as she recalled the first entrance he'd made into her life. Fifteen years ago, he had smiled at her across the cluttered editorial office of their college newspaper. With startling clarity, Maggie remembered that moment and her own giddy premonition that her life had just been irrevocably changed.

Holding her attention with that smile, he slowly made his way across the large room. "Hi, I'm Dave St. Clair and we're going to get to know each other." Mesmerized, Maggie had placed her hand in his.

They spent the next six hours talking and walking across campus. After he'd pulled the standard information from her—her major (Fine Arts), hometown (Alexandria, Virginia), age (nineteen), class (freshman), he'd carried the conversation, telling her about the career that lay just beyond his fingertips.

He was due to finish his master's degree in journalism in the spring. A series of articles he'd written for the *Daily Cal* about the living conditions of migrant workers had already captured national attention. His future looked glorious. He was glorious.

"You don't look very glorious at the moment, my erstwhile gold-armored knight," Maggie stated sardonically, remembering how she'd once romanticized Dave into a crusader for justice, out to expose corruption and champion the truth.

Setting the bowl on the floor, she dipped the cloth into the water and began to gently sponge his face and wrists. She tried keeping her mind on the pres-

ent as she cooled his skin, but memories rushed through her brain.

It had been at once exciting and frightening to be near him. He exuded self-confidence, adventure, courage, and recklessness. Yet, within his golden-brown eyes, she'd seen a sensitivity and gentleness that inspired trust.

At the end of that long walk, he'd pulled her into his arms and announced, "I love you and you're going to marry me."

His lips had hovered over her mouth for a moment, stealing the small gasp of shock that had escaped her lips. While she stood in stunned suspension, he covered her lips with his, gently coaxing her to open to him. His tongue had swirled softly through her mouth, exploring and claiming, gently but oh so thoroughly. It was a kiss that spoke volumes and promised infinity. She'd never really been sure whether a real tremor moved the earth beneath her feet when Dave's mouth had taken such sweet possession of hers, or if she'd imagined it.

However, coincidence or not, with one kiss her world had shifted off its axis. The deep gaze that had followed that first kiss had made her eager to hand over her life to his safekeeping, and she had nodded her agreement. At the end of that week, as his bride, she spent the night in his arms in a hotel in Las Vegas.

Plunging her hands fully into the cold water to bring her own temperature down, Maggie reminded herself that although a topsy-turvy world was wondrously romantic for a nineteen-year-old, it wasn't what she wanted now. She was thirty-four. She didn't live in southern California anymore. Her feet were firmly planted in the solid Virginia soil of her ancestors. She didn't have to, nor did she want to, contend with earthquakes—real or imagined.

Wringing out the cloth, she wiped his face again.
"Dave. Wake up."

His lashes fluttered slightly and a faint smile appeared on his lips. "Mmmm. Maggie. So soft. Always there when I need you." With a crooked smile on his face, he returned to his slumbers, his breathing deep and even.

Immediate concern for the state of Dave's health fled as indignation pulsed through her. "When *you* need me?" she answered back.

The frustrations that had been mounting for years poured out. "What about all the times *I* needed *you*? Where were you? Not here, that's for sure. You . . . you—

"Wake up. Damn you!" The ice cubes clattered against the edge of the bowl as Maggie grabbed it up.

Two

A voice was calling to him through the darkness. It was a feminine voice, faintly tinged by the melodic lilt of the South—just like Maggie's. He smiled.

"Don't you nestle down again, David Marshall St. Clair. Or . . . or so help me . . . I'll drown you." Several drops of water fell on his face and Maggie had the satisfaction of seeing them rinse off his smug look of contentment.

"Mmmm

"I mean it, Dave. Wake up!" Struggling to resist her impulse to douse him thoroughly, she splashed some more water on him.

"Don't want to. You'll go away if I do." He tried to hang on to the dream but the rain was washing it away as if it were a chalk painting on a sidewalk. Wiping at the droplets falling on his face, he opened his eyes. She was still there. He sighed.

Maggie. His beautiful sweet wife. He was safe.

A smile spread slowly across Dave's lips as he focused on her.

"Hi, Babe."

His voice, low and sexy, triggered Maggie's vital organs into backflips. Damn the man and damn his smile and damn his voice, she swore inwardly as with quaking limbs she lowered the bowl to the floor.

She'd sworn she would never again let Dave's charm and good looks get to her. Yet, here she was all aquiver just because he said "Hi, Babe"—just like he used to do when he'd just awakened after a night of . . . Don't think about it!

Ordering all her erogenous zones to go off full alert, Maggie concentrated on how best to get Dave up and out of her house. It simply wouldn't do her any good to keep melting into a pool of sensual memories every time the man looked at her or spoke to her. That was past and what was past had no business muddying up the present.

She didn't return his smile. "Hello, David."

Abruptly, his mouth turned downward and his brows furrowed. "What the . . . ? What am I doing on the floor?"

"You passed out."

He stared up at her as if she'd just delivered the prize ludicrous statement of the century. Rising to a sitting position, he declared, "Ridiculous. I never faint." Once he was on his feet, he grinned triumphantly. Then his color faded and he began to weave.

Maggie shoved him back down on the bench. Quickly, she pushed his head between his knees and ordered, "Stay there, person who never faints."

"On second thought, maybe I am a little weak."

"More than a little," Maggie said. "I need to hustle you into the nearest bed."

The instant Dave lifted his head and looked at her, Maggie realized the mistake in her choice of words. "I mean, you need to be in bed," she amended,

but the damage had been done. Dave's eyes sparkled with a familiar mischief that reminded Maggie of other times, and of the delights that had followed gazes exactly like this one. The cursed past was determined to jump into the present, no matter how many times she shoved it back where it belonged.

Even though his eyes were glassy and bloodshot, the look in them was beckoning to her, sending messages and invitations that were impossible to misinterpret. Her breath caught, her skin tingled, and the secret places of her body felt warm and fluid.

"David St. Clair, you're a very sick man," she stated, a reminder to herself more than to him of his physical state.

"Sick, but not dead, Maggie," he said, amusement turning up the corners of his mouth as if he realized what his gaze had done to her.

To her relief, he closed his eyes and leaned back against the wall.

"You're right." Crossing his arms across his chest, he sighed. "I need rest, lots of it. That bed of ours sounds like heaven."

Images of his large hands moving across her skin, two bodies fitting perfectly together came to mind. A dreamy haze settled over her as she remembered some heavenly times on that bed. . . .

Maggie brought herself up short the moment the thought crossed her mind. Heat burned in her cheeks. "No, it doesn't," she said quickly, too quickly, for Dave opened one eye and sent her a quizzical look.

Embarrassment swept over her again. The heat in her cheeks burned a bit hotter and she cursed one whole branch of her family tree. As if she were a ghost on Maggie's shoulder, great aunt Celia Shel-

don admonished, "Law, you can always pick out those McPherson women. Poor little red-faced things, the way they stutter and splotch whenever a man so much as looks their way."

Maggie was sure that with Dave's arrival this evening, every corpuscle in her veins had suddenly turned McPherson. "I . . . I mean . . . there is no our bed—"

Every inch of Dave's body tensed. He'd run a gauntlet of doctors and nurses to obtain a release from the hospital in order to get to her. Thoughts of her and that wide, comfortable bed had given him the stamina to drive his aching body through rush-hour traffic from one end of the D.C. beltway to the other. And she'd gotten rid of that bed? Their bed? *The* bed?

"You sold our bed?" he demanded in a chilling tone. Both eyes were open now, pinning her with accusation. "How could you?" A hacking cough, followed by several more, stopped any further tirade.

Needing to get her McPherson tendencies under control, Maggie escaped to the kitchen on the pretext of fetching a glass of water for him. The seconds in the kitchen were enough for her to rally her senses, and a controlled Maggie returned to the hallway.

"Here, drink this." She thrust the glass in Dave's hands, pleased to see that her own hands had stopped shaking. Blood did tell, as Aunt Celia had been so fond of reciting. To Maggie's relief, some of the blood from a more stable branch of the family was showing its color.

Dave drained the glass and handed it back to her. "Thanks. What time is it?"

Maggie shifted her eyes to the tall grandfather

clock at the end of the hallway, then back to Dave.
"Almost seven-thirty. Why?"

"Shouldn't Laura be home by now?"

"Ordinarily, but she's spending the night with my parents," Maggie answered, relieved that Dave's attention was on a far safer subject.

"Hmmm . . . just as well. I'd rather see her in the morning when I'm feeling better." He withdrew a plastic vial from his coat pocket, unmistakably a prescription. "Ill have to have some more water to wash these down with." He started to rise but Maggie shoved him back down again.

"You stay right there. IU get the water."

"I'm not going anywhere, Maggie," he said, his smooth baritone muffled and whispery. He looked directly into her eyes. "I promise."

For a moment Maggie thought she saw something in his expression that indicated he was promising more than to remain seated. Self-preservation rose within her and she rejected the idea that the promise was anything more than a vow to stay seated. Surely the man was too sick to be capable of innuendo.

No, he wasn't, she argued with herself. Dave St. Clair was capable of anything, no matter what his physical state. He hadn't earned her Superman sobriquet because he wore long blue underwear.

With more haste than was necessary, she sped down the hallway and back into the relative safety of the kitchen. Every inch of her yearned to be held close in his arms. It had been so long since she'd been pressed tightly against his hard body, kissed by his lips, caressed by those wide, strong hands. She wanted to hear him tell her he loved her, that he'd never leave again, that he was really home for good this time and wanted to start all over.

Stop it! She admonished herself. She'd been living

a celibate life too long. Hadn't she read somewhere that it was natural to want a former husband, especially when there was no one else in a woman's life?

She held her libidinous thoughts in check. Dave was a wonderful lover, but her pleasure would be temporary, she told herself. She'd bet everything she owned that he'd flit off as soon as he recovered. The man couldn't resist the call of the teletype machine. She should have named that cursed device a corespondent in her divorce suit!

Her libido firmly under control, Maggie pushed through the kitchen door once again and handed Dave another glass of water. His hands shook slightly as he took the glass, measured out two pink capsules, then washed them down.

"Can you make it up the steps now?" she asked.

Dave nodded. Moments later, he was sprawled across the king-sized bed that now occupied the guest room. "Thank heaven you didn't sell it," he murmured, melting into the mattress.

"Do you have a bag or anything out in your car?" she asked, edging backward toward the door.

His eyes still closed, he mumbled, "Don't need it. Don't need anything but some help."

"Help?" she asked dumbly.

"Getting undressed."

At her muffled gasp, he opened one eye. "Oh, come on, Maggie," he started, his voice full of exasperation. "Don't be a prude! I'm too weak to do it all by myself, or anything else if that's what you're afraid of. Besides, it would hardly be the first time you've taken off my clothes. For crying out loud, we've been married for fifteen years."

Goaded into action by his taunt, she moved toward him. "Thirteen," she corrected. His anger with her fired her own. Her hands were anything but gentle

as they grabbed first one foot and then the other and yanked off his loafers.

"It was fifteen years ago next month that we were married," he insisted as he sat upright and began shrugging out of his trench coat.

"And it was two years ago last month that we were divorced," she said, head bent as she peeled off his socks.

Ignoring her reminder of their present status, he continued reminiscing. "We took the shuttle flight from L.A. to Las Vegas. Remember that hotel?"

"No," Maggie lied. With shaking hands, she reached for his trench coat and then caught the sports jacket that followed.

Dave didn't miss the tremor that had snaked down Maggie's spine. He suppressed a smile as he recalled how with a touch on the right spot on her neck, he could make her squirm and tremble. Sometimes, he could do it with a word or a glance.

He knew only one thing had changed—their marital status. The electricity was still there, sizzling just beneath the surface. It had always been like that between them. A piece of paper had legitimized the actions they needed to appease the fires and another had taken away the legitimacy, but nothing would ever put out the fire.

Lying back down, he took a deep breath and let it out slowly, hoping it sounded like a bone-weary sigh.

"This bed's even better than the one in that Vegas hotel."

"I don't remember," Maggie lied again as visions of a wide bed with satin sheets flashed through her mind.

"I'll never forget it, or the hours we spent in it." Closing his eyes, a smile on his lips, Dave sighed again. The sigh sounded more authentic this time.

A yawn followed his sigh. Nice touch, he thought to himself as memories of their wedding night played across his mind. "That was some bed . . . you were so—" A yawn interrupted him. "So . . ."

"Beautiful," was all Dave could say when his bride of one hour stepped back into the bedroom. He'd wanted to hustle her into bed as soon as the bellhop had closed the door behind him, but instinct warned him that he needed to go slowly with her.

Maggie was so young, and so innocent. He'd rushed her into marriage so fast that she'd been denied a big fancy wedding with all her relatives in attendance. He wasn't going to compound his guilt by ripping off her clothes and throwing her on the bed two seconds after the hotel room door closed. He was determined to make this honeymoon, short though it was going to be, as perfect as was within his power.

The simple linen dress she'd worn for their wedding had been lovely, but a far cry from the long white gown he bet she'd always dreamed of. However the creation floating around her body now was everything a wedding-night ensemble was supposed to be. Her black hair framed the most beautiful face he'd ever seen, sheer lace hugged her full breasts, and yards of white chiffon fell to the floor. She was a vision, a bride of fairy tale perfection. He was glad he'd overcome his baser instincts and given her the time to change.

He opened his arms and she walked into them. "Mrs. St. Clair, you're a dream."

"It all seems like a dream," she drawled softly

as he folded her close. "How could I love you so much in three days?"

"You Southern girls fall in love as slowly as you talk," he teased, brushing her hair back and nuzzling her throat.

"Slowly?" She leaned back in his arms, her eyes wide and innocent as she looked up at him. "You mean Yankee girls fall in love faster than three days?"

"No," he corrected, planting a quick kiss on her nose. "Yankee men do. I fell in love with you the minute I saw you."

"My mama warned me about Yankee men," she teased, rising on her toes to press her lips to the cleft in his chin. "She said they play fast and loose."

"Not loose with their hearts." Catching one of her hands, he placed a kiss in its palm. "Somebody should have warned me that Southern women can steal a man's heart with one look from their beautiful eyes." Cradling her face between his hands, he kissed her, tenderly and slowly.

She had the most inviting, kissable mouth and he was sure that even in fifty or sixty years, he would never grow tired of exploring the wonder of it. He ran the tip of his tongue along the outline of her lips before sinking into the voluptuous sweetness beyond. He tasted and explored, then coaxed her to do the same.

Maggie's arms slid up his chest and then her palms pushed aside his robe and touched him. He was on fire for her, ached for her. Dropping his hands to her buttocks, he lifted and pressed her into the cradle of his thighs, appeasing his immediate need for her. She was all softness, all

giving, and he thought he might die with wanting to feel himself deeply sheathed within her.

Not yet, slow it down, he warned himself. Tearing his mouth from hers, he took in a deep, ragged gulp of air. "Ah, Maggie," he groaned as she pressed her lips to his chest.

He held her tightly against him, before sliding his hands around and up to her breasts, slipping his fingers beneath the lace covering. He sought and found the taut peaks, rubbing them lightly until they tightened further. He felt and heard the little gasp she gave, then felt his own tremble when she pressed herself into him.

He could stand no more. Lifting her in his arms, Dave carried her to the bed and gently laid her down on the satin sheets. "I love you, Marguerite St. Clair. I'll love you for the rest of my life," he promised as he lowered his head to kiss her.

"And I you," she promised in return, closing her arms around him as he joined her on the bed.

Dave's deep, even breathing told Maggie he'd fallen asleep. This time, it wasn't a faint, but a real sleep.

One night. I'll take care of him for one night.

She leaned over him and unbuttoned his shirt. When she pulled the shirttails from his pants and exposed his chest, she had to stop and rally her defenses before proceeding. The chest before her was so achingly familiar she fought to keep her palms from brushing across the hair-clouded pectorals and down the rippled belly.

His pants rode low on his lean hips and Maggie wanted to trace the golden line of hair that began at his navel. Her fingers and lips had done exactly that

countless times before. She knew exactly how he would feel if she touched him there, and she knew exactly how he would react. He was sick, weak, and exhausted . . . but not dead. Hadn't he told her that earlier?

Instead of touching him, she curled her hands into fists and kept them at her sides. She wasn't going to touch, but she could look. She did, then frowned at what she saw.

He was thinner than she ever remembered him. Was that a bruise on his side? Shaking off a suspicion that more than a bout with the flu was the cause of his present condition, she continued with her task.

As impersonally as possible, she unbuckled his belt and lowered his zipper. She was in a sweat by the time she got his pants off and pivoted his body enough to swing his feet up on the bed.

Throughout her ministrations, the smile never left his face. If anything, it increased. His dream was pleasant. More than pleasant—it was exciting. Only a blind woman would have missed the shape and strength of his arousal thrusting against his briefs. Maggie had perfect vision . . . and a perfect memory to match.

He'd been talking about their honeymoon when he fell asleep. If he was dreaming about their honeymoon, Maggie knew why he was aroused. Against her will, she grew warm and liquid all over and she could almost feel the cool, smooth satin sheets he'd laid her down upon that first night . . .

She felt both meltingly warm and jittery cold as she watched him shed his robe. With a whisper, the garment fell to the floor and Maggie saw her husband completely for the first time. "You're

so glorious," she murmured unconsciously, fascinated by the wonder of his body, the strength and power that declared him a man. She wanted to reach out and caress, to explore every magnificent inch of this man who was now hers.

Shyness and inexperience kept her from doing more than opening her arms to him. Then he was on the bed with her, holding her, pledging his love for her. When she returned his pledge and his mouth covered hers, she knew that moments before she'd lied. It hadn't taken her three days to fall in love with him. It had happened if not with that first smile, certainly with the first kiss. That had to be fast even by Yankee standards.

Dave's kisses were the sweetest and most addictive Maggie had ever known. As his lips moved across hers, his tongue slipped within and she was consumed. He cajoled, coaxed, then demanded her response, and she gave it.

"Ah . . . my love," he murmured against her throat. Gentle hands brushed down her spine and back up again.

He hooked his fingers in the slender straps of her gown. "This is beautiful, but you'll never need to wear it or anything else to bed again," he said as he pushed the straps down her arms, then lifted her so that he could slide the entire gown off her.

His gaze was worshipful and Maggie had never felt more feminine. "I love you," he vowed as he leaned over her to kiss her breasts.

Maggie curled her fingers into his hair and pressed his head closer. "Dave . . ."

He understood and took her nipple entirely into his mouth, suckling, pulling so exquisitely on the sensitive peak that a flash of quivering

heat exploded low In her belly. The heat spread upward and outward until she was writhing and arching toward release from the strange tension that had invaded her.

Wanting to prolong their pleasure, he brought her back down with soft words and gentle caresses. He stroked and explored her breasts, down her midriff, across her belly and down the length of her legs. When he arrived at the heart of her, she uttered a soft cry.

His fingertips caressed her, prepared her, then gently, slowly, entered her. Maggie quivered then arched instinctively as the heat began again and with it a pressure she didn't understand but knew he could release. "Dave . . . please she gasped.

He answered her plea with a kiss so intimate, she was shocked. Yet, he was so tender, so cherishing, her shock was immediately replaced with a joy so great that tears slipped from the corners of her eyes. She said his name again on a long sigh.

"Maggie . . . my sweet wife," Dave whispered as he kissed his way up her body, adoring her with his lips and uttering muffled, indistinguishable words. When his mouth took hers again, he made love to it as his fingers again sought and found the vulnerable bud of her greatest desire.

When Maggie was sure she could stand no more, he lifted himself above her. "Open your eyes, my darling. Look at me."

Maggie looked up into golden eyes that warmed her, assured her of the trust she had given him, and told her he adored her. Then, he entered her—slowly and gently, pausing when she

flinched and involuntarily shrank away. He waited until she had adjusted to him and her desire had heightened.

Slowly, he moved within her, steadily building a need so sweet and compelling that Maggie instinctively moved with him. She was claimed, and then staked her own claim as her need became more volatile. She was filled, yet wanted more. Raising her hips, she met his thrusts and hovered with him at the very edge. Completion was an explosion of rapture that rocketed her to a dizzying height. She clung to him for support and because she didn't want to fall from the heaven where he'd taken her.

She stared up at him, wonder in her eyes. "Oh, Dave . . ." She couldn't say anything else. There were no words to describe what she'd just felt and still felt.

"I know," he said simply as he kissed the tears from the corners of her eyes.

He shifted to lift his weight from her, but Maggie wrapped her arms around his middle. "No, don't leave me."

"I'll never leave you."

"But you did," Maggie whispered, wiping tears from her cheeks with the backs of her hands. "Except for the first three years we had together, you were always leaving."

Pushing herself up from the chair, she stood by the side of the bed gazing down at Dave for a long moment. She meant to turn off the lamp, but her hand reached out and brushed through his hair. Involuntarily, she bent and pressed her lips against his forehead, wishing with all her heart that things had been different. If only she hadn't loved him so

much, maybe it would have been easier to accept the little bit left over that he gave to her.

Dave moaned and Maggie quickly straightened, backing away from him. He began to move his legs restlessly. "No," he said hoarsely, then more strongly. "Don't. Not again."

His movements became more agitated. He thrashed about on the bed, and the covers slipped away. As if in defense, he curled his body into a tight ball, his back toward Maggie. The lamplight fell directly on him and Maggie gasped.

'Smudged purple streaks marred him from his shoulders to his waist.

Nausea welled up in Maggie's throat as she imagined the pain that he must have suffered, the force that had struck him to cause such marks. He'd obviously been captured by some group. Terrorists, guerrillas, reactionaries? It really didn't matter what they were called, she knew. Whoever they were they'd violated international press neutrality, and not only illegally detained a newsman, but assaulted him.

Devastated, Maggie leaned against the wall. Why hadn't someone from the magazine called and let her know he'd been captured? Maybe she wasn't his wife any longer, but she was the mother of his child and had the right to know that something had happened.

Why hadn't the capture been reported? Other newsmen's kidnappings were. Just how long had he been held?

Frantically, she tried to remember when his last article had been in the magazine. How long had she been placating Laura with assurances that the reason his byline was absent from *Global News Magazine* was probably that he was researching something really big? Two, three weeks? No, longer, much

longer. It had been almost two months—the same length of time since his last letter to Laura.

"Press . . . neutral . . . no!" Dave cried out in his sleep.

Maggie was appalled. What horror had he been through that he was reliving now? She climbed on the bed and wrapped her arms around him, wanting to give comfort and bring him out of the nightmare. He shuddered at her touch and became more frantic. He straightened his body and began flailing his arms so wildly, Maggie had to leap from the bed to get out of his range.

"No! . . . not again . . . won't go . . . Kate!" The last word from his feverish lips was a harsh cry, chilling in its anguish.

Kate? For a moment Maggie felt the sharp stab of jealousy, disappointment, hurt. And then the feeling fled, replaced by a greater pain. There could be only one Kate who would have been crazy enough to be along on this venture. K.C. Ramsey, Dave's favorite photojournalist.

Maggie's stomach knotted. She'd met K.C. Ramsey, and had immediately seen through the older woman's crusty facade to the mother-hen softness within, and liked her. "Oh, please, God. Let her be okay," she prayed fervently. She had firsthand evidence of the effect of the capture on Dave, a man, strong, healthy, and in his prime. Had K.C. survived?

Maggie wanted answers. She was tempted to call Dave's editor right then and demand the details of Dave's last assignment. It would serve John Malloran right if she woke him up in the middle of the night!

But Maggie didn't have the time to call Malloran. Dave's movements were more and more frantic, and his cries louder and more agonized. Throughout the night, she was busy sponging his sweat-drenched

body, changing sheets, and forcing cool liquids past his parched lips. Often she held him, speaking softly in reassuring tones until he calmed down and fell into a more restful sleep.

His fevered cries and mumbled words made little sense. All Maggie could deduce was that he'd been captured and the details of his confinement had been terrifying. Whatever Dave had suffered, Kate Ramsey had suffered also, and Dave felt responsible.

Just before dawn, he quieted, his fever low enough for Maggie to leave him alone. After a quick shower, she slipped on a nightgown and tried to snatch a few hours of rest for herself. Though she was weak with physical exhaustion, sleep was no easier for her than it had been for Dave. Her mind raced, filled with the possibilities of what Dave and Kate had gone through.

After an hour of tossing and turning, she was no closer to sleep than when she'd climbed into her bed. "John Malloran, you can lose sleep, too," she declared as her feet hit the floor.

Three

It was five-thirty A.M. on Saturday when Maggie made her call to Dave's editor. She didn't apologize for the hour, nor did she give the man much chance to clear his sleep-fogged brain. She merely identified herself and started firing questions at him, and John Malloran didn't know what hit him.

The few times he'd seen Maggie St. Clair, Malloran had thought she was extremely attractive and as gentle a Southern lady as he'd ever met. He cursed himself, now, for having fallen for that stereotypical facade. Maggie St. Clair was a Southern lady, all right. Beneath the magnolia-petal skin and soft drawling voice was an iron will and a stubborn determination that was the true strength of the South. Within seconds, Malloran was spilling out all he knew about Dave's capture.

"A small splinter group of extreme leftists who call themselves the 'Salvistas' took Dave and his photographer, Kate Ramsey. They held them prisoner for more than two weeks," Malloran revealed. "They weren't exactly the kindest of hosts. . . ."

"Go on," Maggie said tersely.

Malloran supplied the facts, quickly and succinctly. Dave had been confined to a hole in the ground measuring approximately five cubic feet. His captors weren't easily convinced that Dave wasn't a C.I.A. agent and used his denial as an excuse to beat him and torture Kate in front of him.

Maggie felt sick thinking of what that must have done to both of them. "How is Kate?"

"She'll be in the hospital a while longer. She . . . she'll heal."

Maggie was already listening with her eyes squeezed shut when Malloran described Dave's daily ordeals. "He and Kate were taken out of their pits once a day and marched to a wall to face a firing squad. Each day, the guns were fired over their heads."

And each day, Dave and Kate thought it was their last. Maggie didn't have to say the words. Malloran knew them. "Why, Mr. Malloran?"

"Dave and Kate were in the wrong place at the wrong time. The excuse those bastards used was that they needed to keep them quiet so they wouldn't spill what they knew to the wrong people."

"How safe is Dave right now?" Maggie asked, imagining an assassin lying in wait for Dave or a bomb being thrown at her house.

"Nobody's after him," Malloran quickly assured her. "The gang that grabbed him and Kate isn't that organized. You, your daughter, and Dave are perfectly safe. What Dave had found out didn't mean anything by the time he was released."

Rallying her remaining strength, Maggie demanded, "Why wasn't there any report that he'd been captured and why did I get the runaround from some nitwit every time I called the magazine and asked about his whereabouts?"

"Because of the sensitivity of the situation down there, the government put a lid on his disappearance until they knew who had him. They didn't want any leak, not family, not anybody. I and a handful of others are the only ones who knew what was going on. Believe me, Maggie, we don't just throw our correspondents out there and forget about them," Malloran said, but Maggie had her doubts.

As if he sensed he needed proof of his assertion, he described the procedure the magazine used. "They're all supposed to report in at regular intervals when they're out in the field. We knew Dave and Kate were missing almost immediately and reported it to the state department. They promised us they had teams searching for them. We were told to keep our mouths shut in case a disclosure would jeopardize Dave and Kate's safety. We didn't know anything until they were found."

"Which was?" Maggie inquired.

"A week ago."

"A week and you still didn't see fit to notify his family?" Maggie exploded. "Didn't you think we'd be worried? Dave normally writes to his daughter once a week, and she hadn't heard from him for over a month. Do you have children, Mr. Malloran? Do you have any idea what it's like to try to convince a fourteen-year-old girl that her father is perfectly all right when there's every sign that he's fallen off the face of the earth? You could have had the decency to save her at least this last week of worry."

Malloran didn't respond immediately. Finally, he said, "Dave asked us not to call you. I'm sorry, Maggie." He asked about Dave and then extended weak assurances that this sort of thing wouldn't happen again.

Maggie hung up the phone. She slid down the

wall and crumpled to the floor. Why did it feel as if she'd been there with him through the torture and the weeks of fear? Why couldn't she let go of the tie that bound her to him? She still cared too much but maybe with time, a lot more time, she'd be able to be distance herself from him. Maybe . . .

Or, maybe this time, having come so close to death, Dave would be scared enough to ask for a stateside assignment. "And maybe pigs will someday fly," she muttered.

Dave St. Clair didn't know the meaning of fear. It was a game, flirting with danger, and he always won. If he thought about it at all, he considered it small payment for all the adventure in his job, a grand adventure that took him all over the world and into the eye of every political storm.

Maggie balled her hand into a fist and slammed it against her bent knee. "And while he's off having the grand adventure, his women folk are sitting back home worried sick about him! Men! Nothing but little boys grown tall. In a roomful of them you'd be lucky to find an ounce of sense."

She realized she'd talked out loud to herself, and clamped her mouth shut. But still, she couldn't stop thinking and worrying.

He'd come too close to death this time. Maggie knew, and Laura would know, that Dave St. Clair wasn't invincible. He was as mortal as any other man. Maggie was determined Laura be shielded from that cruel truth until she was mature enough to handle it.

Even more committed to getting Dave out of the house before Laura returned, Maggie took the steps two at a time and was into the guest room in seconds. The speech she'd rehearsed every step of the way died on her lips as soon as she was inside the door.

Maggie saw Dave sprawled on his back, fast asleep,

breathing quietly and deeply, as peaceful as a baby. His hair was tousled across his forehead in the endearing way that invited her fingers to brush it into place. His arms were outflung, leaving him defenseless but at the same time open and inviting. Maggie couldn't bring herself to roust him up and out of the house right then.

What good would it serve? she rationalized as she absentmindedly dropped down to the side of the bed. She yawned. Chances were Laura wouldn't be back until evening . . . hours from now . . . plenty of time.

Against the polished wood floor, her bare feet felt like ice. Unconsciously, she pulled them up to the bed, snuggling them beneath the downy comforter. Reclining on her side, her head propped on her hand, she looked across the expanse of the bed at the sleeping man. His color looked normal this morning. The harsh lines around his eyes had smoothed out.

Reaching tentatively toward him, she touched the beard that covered his jaws and chin. It felt wiry and springy. For several moments, she let her fingertips graze across the bushy camouflage, wondering absently how long it had taken him to grow it. Maggie wished she could see the beautiful male features his beard hid. She knew that beneath the toast-colored bush, there was still a square jaw, a slight cleft in his chin, and wonderful laugh lines curving at the corners of his mouth with the slightest hint of a smile.

Seemingly of their own accord, her fingertips glided upward, skimming across his forehead. It felt cool, normal. Or was it too cool?

The comforter and sheet were crumpled to his waist, leaving his upper body bare, maybe chilled. Edging closer, she leaned over him and pulled up the bedclothes. He should be kept warm.

Yawning again, Maggie let her head drop to Dave's

shoulder. It felt good, natural, to pillow her head upon the mounded muscle, to align her softer body to the hard planes of his. She shouldn't be there. She'd denied herself that right two years ago. She'd move away in a moment. It was just that she was so sleepy.

As soon as she gathered enough energy, she'd get off this bed. Thank goodness Dave was so exhausted he hadn't sensed she was there. She'd be gone long before he awoke. In just another minute, she'd pry her eyes open . . .

A voice was calling from far away. Through the fog, Maggie tried to respond to it. Laura. Laura was calling for her. She'd been sick, feverish, and she was probably frightened and needed her.

No, it wasn't Laura who'd been sick. Someone else. Who? Maybe a dream. Maggie snuggled back into the warm nest of the bed.

"Mom."

Again, Laura's voice broke through the thick fog that held Maggie in its embrace.

Laura was definitely calling, needing something. She had to go to her.

Maggie tried to move her legs, but something held them in place. A heavy weight was across her chest, another clamped around her waist. It was like a bad dream.

No, not a bad dream. She didn't want to fight the hold on her. She felt safe. She wanted to stay in the warmth, the security, for just a bit more.

"Mom . . . ?" The call came again and Maggie couldn't ignore it any longer.

Struggling up from the depths of a heavy sleep, Maggie fought the constrictions upon her body. She had to get to Laura. She moved her legs again,

succeeding in freeing them, but when she pushed against the clamp around her middle, it tightened.

"Don't . . . don't go away," came a low, husky voice, blowing warm, moist air against Maggie's neck.

Maggie's eyes flew open. Reality hit her like the proverbial bucket of cold water. She'd fallen asleep next to Dave and at some point he'd wrapped his body around her. Any minute, Laura was going to walk in and discover them and it would look like . . . Oh, Lord, she couldn't let this happen.

"Dave! Let me go," she whispered.

The door opened.

Laura took two steps into the room. Her mouth dropped open when she looked to the bed. Shock, and betrayal, then outrage registered across her features before she took another step closer. Tilting her golden head slightly, she studied more closely the bearded man holding her mother. Then with recognition sparkling clearly in her eyes, she grinned.

"Whoops. Ah . . . welcome home, Dad."

"Hi, baby. Uh . . . see you downstairs, okay?"

"Sure, Dad. Take your time. I'm sure you're real tired." Laura backed out of the room, giggling. As she closed the door, she whispered, "You'd better not go in there, Gram. Mom's still in bed and she's not alone. The way Dad's wrapped around her I don't think they slept much last night."

"Laura!" a more mature feminine voice admonished. "I declare girl, you're much too . . ." The rest of Ellen Sheldon's comments were lost as grandmother and granddaughter retreated down the hallway. All Maggie heard was Laura's continued giggling and then her loud joyous shout.

It was too late to pull the cover up over her face, but Maggie wanted to. The silent laughter vibrating from Dave's chest didn't help her state of mind.

"There's absolutely nothing to laugh about. Let go of me, you . . . you—"

"How about Yankee scalawag?" Dave supplied. "That's what you used to always call me when you were miffed."

"Miffed? Miffed doesn't come close!" Maggie wrenched out of Dave's arms and scrambled off the bed. "Do you have any idea what that child is thinking?"

Dave grinned as he pushed himself up against the headboard. "I have a pretty good idea, which just goes to prove what you said last night. Our little girl has grown up."

"And just what are you going to do about it?"

He chuckled, his eyes dancing with the merriment that had been missing the night before. "Not much I can do about it. Little girls grow up. It's the natural way of things, Maggie." His soft chuckling evolved into a full-fledged laugh.

The laugh, a belly laugh no less, was too much. Maggie picked up one of the pillows and hit him in the chest with it. "This is no laughing matter. You know what I was talking about. We can't let her go on thinking that you and I, that we—"

"Spent the night in each other's arms?"

"We did not spend the night in each other's arms!"

Dave managed to bring his laughter under control and adopt a more serious expression. "But I remember your holding me."

"You remember that?" Maggie's eyes were wide with astonishment.

Dave nodded. His gaze met hers and held, the glow in his eyes soft and warm, pulling at her senses. "Thanks, Maggie. I really needed you last night."

Nonplussed, Maggie stammered, "I . . . I did what anybody would have done."

Shaking his head, Dave said, "Nobody else could have kept the demons at bay. Only you, Maggie."

In a twinkling, his expression changed. The teasing mischief was back. "Of course, what Laura saw this morning was different. *You* were in *my* arms and not against your will, I might add."

Maggie toyed with the idea of strangling him. "Don't you dare tell her that."

"You want me to lie to my own daughter? Tsk, tsk, Maggie," he chided. "Only a scalawag would do that and contrary to your opinion of me, I'm not a scalawag."

"You're really enjoying this, aren't you?"

"Yes, I believe I am." He closed his eyes and smiled in satisfaction. "Almost as much as I enjoyed waking up and finding your soft body all warm and cuddly in my arms. Your cute butt snuggled right up against my—"

"Stop it!" Maggie cut him off, all the more incensed as she felt the rising heat of a blush. She didn't need him to remind her of just what part of his anatomy she'd been snuggled up against, nor did she need him to tell her what effect her snuggling had had on him.

"Dave St. Clair, I believe I truly hate you," she said with as reasonable a tone as she could manage.

Her statement was met with a low, throaty laugh.

Maggie knew the reality of being so angry one's blood boiled. Right then, she was sure her whole body was going to explode. Picking up his pants, she threw them at him. His shirt followed. The canvas travel bag she'd retrieved from his car the night before barely missed his head. "You're obviously massively recovered this morning. Get dressed and get out of here."

She strode to the door and yanked it open. "I'm

going to go down there and try to undo all the damage you've done. It's cruel to give Laura any false hopes."

"Are they false hopes, Maggie?" he asked, his voice calm, his gaze steady.

"Of course they are," she answered. "Nothing's changed."

"You're right about that, my love. Nothing's changed. Nothing really important, that is."

Four

Shaking with fury, Maggie glared at the door she'd just slammed shut. The night before, her first instinct had been to send Dave off to the nearest motel or hospital. When would she learn to pay attention to her instincts?

She *had* paid attention to her instincts, a voice inside her reminded. Dave had arrived on her doorstep weak and feverish. She wouldn't have turned a stray dog away in that condition, let alone a human being.

"Dave could have taken care of himself better than a stray dog," Maggie muttered under her breath as she sped down the hall and into the room that served as both her bedroom and studio.

"A dog would have been less trouble," she added as she tore her nightgown over her head. She scrambled into the first things she laid her hands on, a pair of jeans and a baggy red sweater. Quickly, she ran a brush through her hair and stepped into a pair of thongs.

Preparing herself for the ordeal of dashing her

daughter's fondest hopes, Maggie started down the stairs. The poor child was probably making out a wedding guest list with Mama's help.

Mama!

Maggie came to an abrupt stop and grabbed the banister for support. Squeezing her eyes shut, she let out a long breath.

Laura's seeing her parents in bed together was one thing, but Mama finding out about it was quite another. Suddenly filled with queasy anxiety, Maggie felt as if she were a teenager who'd just been caught fooling around in the back seat of a car.

"Damnation!" She and Dave hadn't been doing anything, and even if they had she wasn't a kid. She let go of the banister and moved on down the stairs. She was thirty-four years old, well beyond the age of consent . . . and experienced enough to recognize the tingling sensation that had suddenly begun in the pit of her stomach for exactly what it was.

Maggie halted again, dizzied by the current of sensual excitement that flooded through her. Needs, long denied, had been aroused and weren't easily suppressed. It had felt good to be held in Dave's arms, to feel his hard body pressed to her softer curves. In a state of semiconsciousness, she'd been lulled into complacency.

What might have happened if Laura hadn't walked in? Nobody with even half a brain would have trouble guessing the answer.

Muffled voices and laughter filtered down the hallway as Maggie approached the kitchen. There was no doubt about it. She was in for it. Maggie gathered up her courage and pushed through the swinging kitchen door. Her gaze swung from her daughter to her mother as she judged their expressions. Mama was amused. Laura was grinning, and—

Maggie couldn't believe her eyes. Blond hair. Shining, smooth blond hair crowned Laura's head and curled loosely over her shoulders. Maggie had been in such a state of agitation earlier that she hadn't noticed the miraculous change in her daughter.

Not only was Laura's hair natural, but her face was shining and sweet, the face of a fourteen-year-old. A blush of pink heightened her lips, a touch of mascara darkened the gold tips of her long lashes, and a subtle application of a soft mauve shadowed her lids. Laura's was no longer the face of a punk rocker straight from the latest issue of *Rolling Stone*.

Her delight in seeing her daughter so radiantly normal temporarily diverted her thoughts. "Laura, honey, how lovely you look this morning. Your hair is so pretty that way," she offered, hoping the compliment wouldn't send the child immediately in search of the nearest can of mousse. After all, the teenage code clearly stated that if a mother liked it, there was something wrong with it. With bated breath Maggie waited for her daughter's response.

Laura smiled sincerely and stayed where she was. Maggie sighed inwardly with relief. "Thanks, Mom. Gram and Grandpa liked it too."

Something in Laura's tone tipped Maggie off that more than pleasing her grandparents was behind the fresh-scrubbed look. Running her fingers through her daughter's silky tresses, Maggie sent her mother a pointed look. " 'Fess up. Mama. How'd you get her to wash out the red and purple?"

"I fell into matinee tickets for Baryshnikov at the Kennedy Center," Ellen answered.

"Blackmail?" Maggie asked, striving for a straight face.

Ellen shrugged noncommittally.

It was blackmail. Maggie knew her mother. Normal-

looking hair and face—or no Baryshnikov. The woman always knew everyone's weaknesses and just where to apply pressure most effectively. Ever since Laura had seen the movie *White Nights*, she'd idolized the Russian dancer, and had even replaced Rob Lowe's picture with one of Baryshnikov.

Chuckling, Maggie gave Laura a quick hug. "Honey, you didn't stand a chance. If it's any consolation to you. Aunt Jenna and I never did either."

"Not even Aunt Jenna?" Laura asked, her large brown eyes reflecting total surprise.

"Well, not when she was your age," Maggie admitted.

Thanking Providence for the diversion from any explanation of Dave and herself in the same bed, Maggie suggested, "If you're going to the afternoon performance, you'd better hustle. Your teal sweater and paisley skirt would be appropriate, don't you think?"

Not giving Laura a chance to answer, she rushed on. "You could pull your hair back on one side with that black bow clip I picked up last week for you. Maybe you'll get to meet Baryshnikov, so you'll want to look your best. Mama, don't you know someone connected with the center who could get you two backstage?"

"Mom

Laura's plaintive cry dashed Maggie's hopes for a lengthy diversion. Even her worshiped "Misha" couldn't sway Laura from wanting to know every detail about her father's arrival. Baryshnikov may have starred in *White Nights*, but to Laura, Dave St. Clair was the white *knight* and he was home from the crusades.

"Laura, what you saw wasn't what you think," Maggie stated gently. Casting a quick glance toward her mother who didn't even believe in divorce, she

spoke more sharply. "Mama. Don't you jump to any conclusions, either."

Feigning affront, Ellen raised her brows. "I haven't jumped to any conclusions. It's perfectly obvious, daughter. Your husband is back home."

Maggie knew her mother all too well. Back home was back home in every conceivable sense of the word.

"Yeah. It's just like it used to be. Dad's home." Laura's bright smile split her face from ear to ear, for once unconscious of the metal wires and rubber bands that filled her mouth.

"Close, but no cigar," Maggie quipped darkly, thinking fleetingly that Baiyshnikov's performance in town was having all kinds of positive effects. Laura hated those rubber bands and stubbornly avoided wearing them. Yet, there they were, in place without a single reminder from Maggie. "Let's get our semantics correct."

"Semantics?" Laura asked, her expression puzzled, but her joy undiminished.

"The study of the meaning of words," Ellen explained sotto voce to Laura. Long retired from a brief career teaching English grammar to high schoolers, she had continued practicing her profession on her loved ones. She smiled at Maggie. "How so, dear?"

Maggie didn't return her mother's smile. Gritting her teeth, she directed her first correction toward Ellen. "Mama, Dave is not my husband. He's my former husband. He is home only if you mean in the broader sense—back in the country of his birth."

For emphasis, she elaborated. "He is here in this state, this county, this city which he claims as his official residence for voting and tax purposes. His being in this particular house is of no real signifi-

cance. It's purely temporary. Nothing more than a practical measure due to the circumstances."

Mama didn't need to say the words. Maggie could see them written all over her face. *Just what are those circumstances?*

Taking a deep breath and screwing up her courage, Maggie began, her words tumbling over each other. "When he arrived last night, he was sicker than a dog. He has a virus or something. I couldn't very well turn him out so I invited him to stay here and then his fever soared and I spent the better part of the night trying to get it down." Seeing no reason to alarm either Ellen or Laura, Maggie deleted the specifics of Dave's hallucinations and any allusion to his capture.

"Poor Dad," Laura said when Maggie had finished. "He's never been that sick before, has he?"

"Not in all the years I've known him," Maggie supplied, relieved that both Laura and Ellen seemed to be satisfied that a virus could fell a man like Dave so dramatically. "A virus can really be nasty."

"But aren't viruses contagious?" Laura asked. Her tone was guileless, but her golden brown eyes, replicas of Dave's, were dancing with mischief. Maggie's relief was short-lived. "Why were you in bed with him when we got here?"

"I . . . uh . . . was leading up to that," Maggie hedged, frantically groping for a feasible explanation. She glanced nervously at her mother and wished she hadn't. For the first time in her life, Maggie considered doing bodily harm to her own mother . . . well, maybe just tossing a bucket of water in the woman's face—anything to eradicate her "I-can't-wait-to-hear-this" expression.

"As I said before, your dad's temperature was soaring and I spent most of the night sponging him off

and giving him liquids," she reiterated as quickly as the words would form. "I needed to be nearby so I could hear him, and finally I guess I was so exhausted I fell asleep." She added a flip of her hand and a lift of one shoulder for good measure. "That's all there is to it."

She hoped the delivery of that last line was so airily nonchalant and innocent that her inquisitors would have no reason to question further. Surreptitiously, she glanced at her mother and her daughter. They weren't buying it. What suspicious minds they had.

Maggie nearly screamed when Ellen patted her hand and commiserated, "You must be so exhausted, daughter. What a night you had."

Maggie sent her mother a killing glance. Just what did she mean by that? Ellen's expression didn't reveal anything more than mild skepticism. Laura's was a mirror image of her grandmother's. She even had the same slight lift to her left eyebrow. Why hadn't she ever noticed how like Mama Laura had become?

What more did these two want? She'd told them the truth, most of it. As sure as God made little green apples, she wasn't going to confess every little detail of action and motivation that had led up to the moment when she'd fallen asleep beside Dave. She'd cut out her own tongue before she'd admit that she'd actually pillowed her head on his shoulder and purposely fitted her body against his. The only truth they needed to know was that it had not been her intention to fall asleep cuddled against his side. Awakening in his arms had been an accident—absolutely an accident.

Laura dropped the guile. "But you . . . could've

curled . . . up . . . on the chaise," she managed between giggles.

"That is enough, Laura," Maggie began, prepared to deliver a sharp rebuke. The little minx was totally enjoying putting her mother on the hot spot. "There will be no more—"

"Good morning, all." Dave's greeting effectively pulled all attention away from Maggie. He leaned against the door frame, smiling at the assemblage. Maggie sagged against the edge of the kitchen counter in gratitude. She'd been rescued.

Showered, dressed, and sans beard, Dave made a handsome rescuer, but not a vigorous one. He was pale, drawn, and too thin. Anybody could see that he wasn't well. Dave directed his attention solely to his daughter. "Sony I missed you last night, Laura."

Earlier, her exuberance at seeing her father had been controlled. Now, Laura let it run its course. She was out of her chair in a split second and across the room. Wrapping her arms around Dave, she declared, "I'm so glad you're home. I missed you so much."

Dave held her close, resting his cheek against her shining head. His hand was shaking slightly, more from emotion than from his weakened state, as he brushed it over her hair. "It's good to be home, honey. And I missed you, too." A bit shaky on his feet, he was the epitome of a weakened victim of a viral attack. Maggie was the only one who really knew how he'd earned his Superman nickname and how close he'd come to living up to it less than an hour before. But Maggie's discomfort with Dave's presence was momentarily put aside. She blinked away the tears gathering in the corners of her eyes as she viewed the reunion between father and daughter.

She noticed how like Dave Laura was. Inquisitive,

strong-willed, very much her own person. Golden-haired and golden-eyed, she was a female replica of her father, physically and mentally.

And Maggie knew that Dave's fierce love for Laura was unquestioned and fully reciprocated. There had been a special rapport between them from the first moment Dave had held his tiny newborn daughter. He'd looked down at her with wonder in his eyes and sworn that she'd smiled up at him. It had seemed ridiculous at the time to believe that a baby only minutes old was capable of smiling but as time went on, Maggie had come to believe him. Laura had always been all smiles for her daddy. Time and distance might separate the two, but the bond was unshakable.

Clinging to him, her questions and statements muffled against his chest, Laura talked nonstop. "I was so worried about you. Mom kept saying you were okay and that you could take care of yourself, but I was sure something had happened to you. I even called the magazine but nobody would tell me anything except that I shouldn't worry and that they'd forward a message to you. Did you get any messages from me?"

"Why haven't you had anything in the magazine for two months? What kind of story are you working on? How long are you going to be home?"

"Whoa . . . whoa! One question at a time," Dave said gently. He gave Laura another hug before setting her a little away from him. "Suppose you let me sit down, first."

"Not before you get a big hug from me." Ellen had risen from her chair and was walking with open arms toward her former son-in-law. "You are a welcome sight, David."

"Ellen." Dave held Ellen Sheldon for a moment.
"Good to see you, too."

"As wonderful as it is to see you, dear boy, you do look as if you've been through an ordeal," Ellen stated as she pulled away and held Dave at arm's length. "Looks like more than some ol' bug got into you. You don't look like you should be out of bed for at least a week."

Maggie groaned inwardly. If Mama thought Dave should spend a week in bed, then he'd end up spending a week in bed. He'd have to be capable of doing handsprings across the back yard before she'd let him up. The battle was lost. The only fight would be over where this bed he'd be occupying would be located. *Not my bed, Mama!*, she silently promised.

Tucking his arm in hers, Ellen led Dave toward one of the kitchen chairs. "You sit your good-lookin' self right down before you fall down. Maggie, fetch this poor boy a cup of tea."

"Dad? Do you want an extra cushion on that chair? An afghan?"

While Ellen and Laura clucked around Dave, Maggie filled the tea kettle. Standing at the sink, she looked out the window, hoping the tranquility of the autumn landscape would soothe her nerves. It didn't, nor did the sight of murky water rising in the sink. She'd forgotten all about the drain problem. The house drain was still uncapped. Lord knew what was seeping up and covering the basement floor by now.

A clogged kitchen drain and a flooded basement constituted an emergency, but an even more pressing problem was seated at the table. The plumbing could be dealt with later. Nothing was going to pry Maggie out of the kitchen and make her leave Dave alone with her mother and Laura. Ex-husband or

not, she was going to stand beside him through the next few minutes. Together, they might have a chance of resisting Mama's cross-examination.

Turning away from the sink, Maggie was gratified to discover that both Ellen and Laura had their backs to her. She and Dave hadn't talked about the capture, but he probably realized she knew about it. Also, surely he understood that she wouldn't want Laura to know about it. But, just in case . . .

With a slight wave of her hand, she caught Dave's eye, praying that he would be able to understand the message. Pressing her wrists together in what she hoped was a recognizable mime of shackles, she shook her head slowly. Dave's nod of understanding was barely perceptible, but enough for Maggie.

And don't let her convince you you have to stay here! She mouthed the words, but Dave wasn't paying any more attention to her. Laura was still firing questions at her father, barely waiting for his answers.

Though it was Laura who was doing most of the talking, now and again Dave's resonant baritone drifted across the room. It curled around Maggie, rubbing against every nerve until she felt absolutely wired.

Maggie drummed her fingers against the counter, wishing she had something to do while she waited for the water to come to a boil. She hadn't smoked in over a year, but right then she'd have given anything for a cigarette. Nonchalantly, she opened a cupboard, then another hoping against hope that there was still a pack tucked away somewhere.

At the third cupboard, still no cigarettes. Maggie's fingers curled around the neck of a bottle of brandy. She pulled them back as if they'd been stung. No matter what the provocation, nobody, absolutely no-

body of any quality or character drank strong spirits at this hour of the day. Or so she'd been given to understand when she overheard the hushed voices of her mother and aunts discussing some poor lady's unfortunate "tippling" habit.

Character and quality be damned! Pillar of society that she'd been. Great-grandmother McPherson had been a notorious "tippler" as well as a blusher. Blood did tell. Maggie reached for the brandy bottle again.

"Maggie, dear, you keep your tea in the cupboard to the right of the stove."

Maggie jerked her hand out of the cupboard and slammed it closed. She didn't bother to look over her shoulder and confirm that Mama's back was still toward her. Her mother still had eyes in the back of her head.

Steam was beginning to spout from the kettle and Maggie brewed the pot of tea. As she arranged a tray, she looked longingly toward the cupboard holding the brandy.

She had more than enough provocation to have a drink, maybe two. Lord knew she needed something to settle her jangled nerves. She was an adult and this was her house and if she wanted to serve brandy at twelve o'clock noon, that was her business. Besides, if she had to be cursed with the blushing gene, she might as well enjoy the tippling that had also been a trait of that side of the family.

She marched purposefully across the kitchen, opened the cupboard, and boldly removed the amber-colored bottle.

As Maggie carried the tray toward the table, Laura was asking, "Are you sure you want to have your tea down here, Dad? I can bring a tray up to you if you want to go back to bed right now."

Maggie got the tray to the table . . . just. "I don't think your father is—"

"You're right, Laura," Ellen cut in. "David, you're right peaked. Lookin' more like a ghost by the minute. Bed's the only place for you." She stood and reached for Dave's arm. "Come, dear. I'll help you up those stairs. You look too shaky to get there by yourself. The brandy's a good idea, Maggie. Have you any lemons? You mix up a toddy while Laura and I get your husband into bed."

"Mama! My hus . . . Dave wasn't planning on staying here any longer." Frantically she looked to Dave. *Help. Say something, you scalawag!*

Dave took in Maggie's widened eyes and hysterical expression, and nearly laughed, not at her expense but with joy that she hadn't changed. She was like an open book, and always had been. It was one of the many things he loved about her.

She was not only begging for assistance, but she was still furious with him. He could read the signs on every inch of her delectable body. Her hands were clenched into fists. Her spine was rigid. Her eyes were at once laser beams cutting into him and soft pleas for assistance. Her soft mouth was set in a tight line. She was all but spitting.

"What do you mean Dave isn't planning on staying any longer? Any fool can see he's in no shape to go anywhere." Slipping her arm around Dave's waist, Ellen started moving him from the kitchen.

"Maggie, take inventory and make out a list of what you'll be needing to get this boy well. Lots of fruit juices, I imagine. David, as soon as we get you tucked in. I'll go on home and start stewing a chicken. Some good clear chicken broth would be good for you later today. Tomorrow well try some homemade noodles to start fattening you up."

"Please, Ellen," Dave said, planting his feet as firmly as possible and managing to halt their progress toward the stairs. "You don't have to do this. I don't want to impose."

"Impose?" Laura echoed, clearly surprised by the suggestion. "Don't be silly, Dad. This is your home."

"You listen to your daughter. She couldn't be more right. Impose, my foot!" Ellen chimed in, fortifying Laura's protests. "You're kin, dear boy. And you're sick kin to boot. Now come along."

The ball was back in Maggie's court. If she didn't say something quick, Dave would be tucked upstairs once again.

"Mama. Laura. Dave has a reservation at Guest Quarters," she lied, naming the nearby hotel and hoping its reputation for seeing to its guests' every need would assuage her mother's concerns.

The look Ellen threw at her daughter defied simple description. "Cancel the reservation. Then call a plumber. You really should do something about that kitchen sink."

Mama, gracious and soft-spoken steamroller that she was, had taken over. If Maggie had believed it would do any good, she would have gladly staged a scene the likes of which the South hadn't seen since Lincoln was elected president. Instead, she was forced to stand rooted to the kitchen floor, impotent fury raging through her.

To Dave's credit, he did try to sway Ellen and Laura one last time. At the base of the stairs, he made his last stand. Gently removing assisting arms, he stated, "I don't want to put any of you to any trouble. All I need is sleep. The hotel will be perfectly fine. I can ring for room service if I need anything."

"Nursing care isn't on the room service list, not even at Guest Quarters," was Ellen's quick response.

Laura was just as quick with a reminder that he'd needed Maggie's care all through the previous night, so much care that she'd feared leaving him alone. "What'll happen if you run a temperature again tonight, Dad?"

"Well . . . I doubt that'll happen again tonight, Laura." Dave proposed a few other lines of defense for his removal to a hotel. Ellen and Laura denounced them all as foolishness.

Ellen's assessment of Dave's physical condition wasn't far off the mark. His head was beginning to pound again, and every movement of his body was painful. Climbing into the nearest bed sounded like heaven. Any fight he'd had in him was long gone. Meekly, he allowed himself to be guided up the stairs.

Maggie poured herself a cup of tea, and topped it off with a liberal splash of brandy.

Five

Monday morning, Maggie sat in her kitchen sipping a cup of coffee. Laura had left for school more than an hour ago. The house was quiet, but far from peaceful.

Reaching for the pack of cigarettes in the middle of the table, Maggie shook one out and lit it. She took a drag, blew the smoke out in a long stream, then stared at the cigarette between her fingers. "Filthy, smelly, expensive, unhealthy habit." She took another drag.

When she flicked her ashes into the ashtray, her eyes widened in horror. The thing was brimming with ashes and butts. Good Lord! It was barely nine o'clock in the morning and she'd already smoked half a pack. Her disgust grew when she started coughing.

Little wonder, Maggie decided, stubbing out her cigarette. After locking herself in her studio, she'd chain-smoked her way through what had been left of the weekend. Polluting her lungs was almost all she'd accomplished.

Propped on an easel was a canvas waiting to be covered with a sweeping portrait of the hero and heroine of a romance novel. It was still waiting.

In a folder on her desk was the background information of a real estate company who'd commissioned her to design a new logo. It hadn't seen the light of day. Not a single creative thought had entered her mind all weekend. She hadn't been able to concentrate on anything but the man lying in the room down the hall.

Sleep had been difficult. Her body had been abused further by the consumption of gallons of coffee. Her hands shook as she lifted her mug and drained the rest of still another cup.

"You've got to get control of yourself again," she ordered as she stood up from the table. "You've got things to do, places to go, and people to meet. It absolutely will not do for you to arrive at the office in a nervous fluster."

Reaching for her jacket, she eyed the large portfolio resting against the wall. The weekend hadn't been a complete bust. She had finished the preliminary sketches for the Paradise Islands Fruit Juices Company's new ad campaign.

She snorted in disgust as she rinsed out her mug and placed it in the sink. "Whoopee, whoopee, you got one thing finished—the only thing that didn't require any thought because you did all the thinking weeks ago. Some disciplined professional you are. That man comes back in your life and you put everything on hold. You *ain't* come a long way, baby. You've just been foolin' yourself."

She was satisfied with the sketches. All that remained was that she give a presentation befitting them. A lot was riding on her meeting this morning and a lot of people were depending on its favorable

outcome. Right Images, the commercial art firm she'd founded, would be put way into the black if she landed this contract. She'd be able to afford to retain all of her present staff, give them long-overdue raises, and possibly expand. Paradise Islands was the big chance. She'd have been a bundle of nerves even if her ex-husband hadn't landed on her doorstep.

Glancing at the clock, she realized she couldn't put off taking Dave's breakfast tray up to him any longer. Whether she wanted to or not, she was going to have to come face to face with him.

Throughout the weekend, Laura and Ellen had taken over the responsibility of seeing that Dave had plenty of fluids and took his medications. Maggie hadn't had any contact with him since Saturday afternoon when she'd presented him with pajamas, a robe, and slippers.

Rolling her eyes as she remembered that incident, Maggie picked up the tray and started toward the second floor. As the scene replayed itself in her memory, she chuckled. In retrospect, the look on Dave's face had been hilarious.

Dave had stared at the jumble of garments Maggie dumped into his lap. His brows peaked high. The whites of his eyes had been clearly visible and his mouth had dropped open. "Pajamas?"

"Pajamas," Maggie had echoed firmly. "You *will* wear them. I will not have Laura seeing your bare chest and back."

Interpreting the flash in Dave's eyes as anger at being ordered to wear pajamas, Maggie had exploded. "You are the most obtuse, stupid, insensitive idiot ever to have walked the earth. You've got bruises all over your back and sides. Do you want Laura to see

them? You'll head long before she would If she saw them."

Dave's mouth had opened, but before he could make any comment, Maggie had picked up one of the slippers she'd purchased for him and brandished it over his head. "Look. I didn't want you here, but since you are, I'm making the rules. You will keep yourself decently covered and you will be quiet tonight if I have to run in here and gag you!"

Turning on her heel, Maggie had stomped to the door, slamming it behind her. She had been several steps down the hallway before she realized she was still gripping the leather slipper. Retracing her steps, she had opened the door, tossed the slipper inside the room, and slammed the door shut again.

"Maggie, Maggie," she admonished herself as she mounted the stairs. "You keep slamming doors and y'all are going to have nothin' but kindlin' lyin' where all the doors are supposed to be."

You keep talking to yourself and you're going to get hauled away. Ceilings, disposals, picture frames, drainpipes. She'd been spending an inordinate amount of time chatting with herself or with inanimate objects.

Too much time to herself, she decided as she turned at the landing. She did much of her work at home and in solitude. Even the hours at the well-staffed office she maintained in the city were often spent alone, sketching at a drawing board or wrestling with the computer in the workroom. Her social life was nil. Most of her free time was spent trying to communicate with a fourteen-year-old whose vocabulary tended to be monosyllabic unless a phone was attached to her head.

"You should get out more," Maggie told herself as she nudged the bedroom door open with her hip.

"That's not the cure your mother prescribed, but if you're willing to go up against her, I'll try it."

The tray tipped and the glass of Paradise Islands' newest variety came dangerously close to landing on the floor. "I ... I didn't think you'd be awake." She righted the tray in the nick of time and placed it carefully on the bedside table.

"You always talk to unconscious people, Maggie?" Dave grabbed the pillow next to him and shoved it beneath his head.

I talk to anything that's incapable of speech. Since you last saw me, I've gone completely batty. When you realize that, you'll want to get as far away from me as possible.

"I guess I was thinking out loud," she said, her eyes ignoring her brain's commands and straying all over Dave. How dare he look so darned appealing. A night's growth of beard shadowed his jaws and his hair was rumpled. He was still pale, still too thin, and still too good-looking for her sanity. At least he was wearing the new pajamas and she was saved from having to view that chest of his.

Ordering her eyes forward, she crossed the room and opened the drapes. She folded her arms at her waist, and gripped her forearms with shaking hands. She studied the landscape, keeping her gaze riveted to the scene beyond the window. "It's going to be another pretty day."

"I guess so." With the eye of a successful reporter, Dave took in every detail of Maggie's appearance. Her hair was held away from her face with ivory combs, and coiled and secured to her crown. It was a no-nonsense hairstyle befitting a mature, serious woman, yet somehow managing to avoid looking severe. But then, with her face, Maggie would never look anything but soft and feminine.

A designer suit in a rich burgundy shade and a silky blush-pink blouse teased at her curves. Matching pumps added a couple of inches to her five and a half feet. It was a smart outfit, businesslike, but still feminine. Not the kind of thing one wore around the house.

"Looks like you're taking your own advice and going out. Got an appointment at Laura's school or something?"

He knew the question had been insulting before he saw Maggie's back stiffen. He'd get nowhere with her if he put her on the defensive every time he opened his mouth.

"Something," she answered sharply, annoyed with his assumption. Had he completely forgotten about Right Images? Of course, the company hadn't been much of a success while they were married, but it had grown steadily in the last two years. He couldn't know it, but it was about to take a giant leap forward . . . if she was successful this morning.

"I have an appointment with a client," she clarified. "I'll be gone most of the day, so you're going to have to manage on your own for a little while. The cleaning service will be here later this morning, but I've left instructions that they not bother you. Mama or Jenna will check on you at lunchtime."

Smiling, Dave asked about Jenna, Maggie's sister. "Did she give up living in Greece and come back to the homestead?"

"Much to Daddy and Mama's joy," Maggie answered. With a little prodding from Dave, she brought him up to date on her siblings and a half dozen cousins who were as close to her as siblings, relaying greetings from those who'd called her over the weekend. "You're lucky they haven't descended upon you."

"I imagine your mother's keeping the clan away. I'll thank her when I see her and beg for a few more days,"

Dave said, chuckling as he pictured all the Sheldons, McPhersons, and shirttail relations, as Ellen had described some of the masses who tumbled in and out of Robert's and her home. It was a large, loving family, encompassing anyone who could claim a kinship, however remote. Initially, Dave had had some difficulty determining exactly who Maggie's siblings were.

Throughout their years together, Ellen and Robert had opened their home and hearts to a goodly number of the cousins. For years, at least six assorted children had at any one time called Ellen and Robert's home theirs. However, Ellen and Robert were responsible for having brought only three of their large family into the world.

Thomas, their oldest, was steady like his father, quietly going about his life in the country, spending more time breeding Morgan horses than practicing law, and remaining single despite his mother's greatest matchmaking efforts. The very youngest of the entire clan was Jenna, the avant-garde poet, total rebel, everybody's darling and everybody's despair. Maggie was smack in the middle of both siblings and the cousins.

Not wanting to while away any more time talking about her family or anything else with Dave, Maggie checked her watch as if to emphasize that her time was short. It wasn't really, but she did want him to know that she had better things to do than to be at his beck and call. This wasn't the good old days of their marriage. "I'd best be going. I do have a client to meet," she repeated.

"Client? What kind of client?" Dave asked. He'd hoped his tone would indicate sincere interest, but the words had come out too fast and too sharp. He sounded as if he were grilling her, doubting her.

Maggie fixed him with a long, steady glare before naming the company. "You're drinking one of their

products. I'm presenting a new advertising campaign to them this morning."

Dave nearly choked on the juice he was in the process of swallowing. She'd just named one of the country's leading producers of fruit juice. The name was almost synonymous with breakfast.

"That's terrific, Maggie." He meant to praise her, but his voice came out strained. "I'm impressed. I had no idea your agency was big enough to handle the kind of campaign a company that size would want."

"There's a lot you don't know about me." Maggie tightened her hands on her forearms and studied the toes of her shoes.

"I'm sorry, Maggie."

Maggie's head shot up. "For what?" She raised her gaze to his and instantly regretted the action. His gaze was intense, directed to her very soul. She swallowed hard.

"For a lot of things, but for now let's leave it at insulting your abilities as a commercial artist."

Ignoring the tingling in the pit of her stomach, Maggie narrowed her eyes and moved a step closer to the bed. "Did you?"

Dave's gaze didn't waver as he met her cold assessment. "Not intentionally. You're good, Maggie. Granted, I haven't seen any of your more recent stuff, but I remember some of the things you did before. Unique and classy. That's your style."

She felt a rush of almost childish joy at his compliment and she didn't like the feeling. She didn't want to wiggle all over like a fat-bellied puppy who'd just received a pat on the head and a few words of praise from the master. Instead, she contained herself, except for a slight smile. "Thanks."

Relaxing the grip on her arms, Maggie looked at her watch again. "I really must get going. I have

some details to attend to at the office before the Paradise Islands people arrive."

She had an office? Where? Did she have employees? This time Dave managed to swallow his incredulous reaction. "Go get 'em, tiger. I'd wish you good luck, but I don't think you need it."

Maggie shrugged and smiled a little wider. She hadn't missed the flash of incredulity she'd seen flit across his features. So he's surprised, is he? Good!

Her blue eyes sparkled in triumph as she moved toward the door. "Everybody needs a little luck now and then." She had a hand on the doorknob, prepared to make her escape, when she remembered the reason she'd tarried in his room in the first place. "Uh . . . Dave . . . ?"

In the process of swinging his feet over the edge of the bed, Dave responded, "Mmmm . . . ?"

His closeness and the husky quality to his drawled response startled Maggie. Catching her lower lip between her teeth, she stared up at the ceiling. What could she say? What words could come close to conveying how she felt about his capture and the hell he'd been through? Her words came out in a rush. "I'm glad you didn't have any more nightmares."

Cautiously, fearing he might force her to bolt, Dave reached for her hand. Encouraged when she didn't pull away, he gently cradled her hand within his then brought her palm to his lips. "I know, Maggie. I'm sorry you had to find out. I never wanted the danger and ugliness to touch you."

He closed her fingers over his kiss then opened his hand. "It was selfish of me to come here in this condition, but I needed you. Being here, near you and Laura, is why the nightmares stopped."

Stunned by his admission, Maggie didn't realize her hand remained in his. His golden gaze envel-

oped her and held her in place. With superhuman strength she resisted swaying closer, moving her feet a few inches until she would be standing between his knees. Taking those few small steps and wrapping her arms around him would be the easiest and yet the most difficult thing in the world to do.

A silence stretched between them until finally she began to feel awkward. Lifting her hand away, she strove for a light tone. "Well . . . uh . . . you look much better, but don't overdo today just because you're all alone. Finish up your tray and then go back to sleep. It's the best medicine. I'll see you this evening."

She was gone. Dave let out his breath slowly, not realizing until then that he'd been holding it. There was still a tie between them, but it was so delicate and thin, he feared the slightest misstep on his part would break it.

He watched from the window as she left the house and walked to the garage. In a few moments a dark blue Lincoln Town Car left the garage, Maggie at the wheel.

That was some woman who'd just driven out of the driveway and that had been some car, classy and expensive. When had she bought it and with what? What happened to the Olds they used to have? He had a gut feeling he was in for a lot of surprises.

The Maggie who'd been his wife had been the answer to his dreams. She'd made him feel as if he could conquer the world and right all its wrongs. But this Maggie? It looked like she'd conquered the world herself. Laura wasn't the only St. Clair female who'd changed a lot during his absence.

He walked slowly back to the bedside table and absently lifted a glass from the tray. Stopping the glass midair, he stared at the orange contents. Para-

dise Islands must have a yearly advertising budget well in excess of seven figures and his Maggie was vying for a big chunk of it. No wonder she wore a designer suit and drove a status car.

Dave downed the juice and picked at the other things on the tray while he reflected on all that Maggie had revealed. What kind of gross income was Right Images pulling in, and what was Maggie's net?

"Plenty," he answered himself. That little number she'd been wearing had shouted sophistication, taste, and big bucks. She'd not asked for alimony in the divorce settlement, so she must be banking a pretty good income.

Lowering himself to the bed, Dave propped his elbows on his knees and cradled his chin with his locked fingers.

A thriving career, a perfect daughter, a comfortable home. Maggie had it all . . . or did she?

Laura had been a model of good grooming and good behavior each time she'd brought him a tray or sat with him. But Maggie had claimed that the helion on the moped was Laura. Dave's brows furrowed. Maybe there was a bit of her Aunt Jenna in the girl, and just maybe Maggie needed a little help coping with her. God, he hoped so.

Another thought struck him, totally unrelated to any conjecture about Maggie's ability as a mother. Turning his head, he stared at the bed.

A pain, deeper and more powerful than any he'd ever experienced, struck him hard. Maggie was a sensual, passionate woman. They'd been divorced for two years. Had there ever been another man in this bed?

Images flashed through his brain, images more alarming and painful than any he'd suffered in his nightmares. He was covered with a sheen of cold sweat before he took control of his all-too-vivid imag-

ination. No. Not his Maggie. She'd never be unfaithful to him.

His body calmed. His breathing returned to normal until . . . *Idiot! She wouldn't have been unfaithful. She didn't have a husband to have to be faithful to.*

Get control, St. Clair, he warned himself as he felt himself grow coldly rigid. Via letters, phone calls and a handful of visits, Laura had kept him pretty well-informed about what had been going on on the home front. He knew about the romance covers Maggie painted. He knew when Maggie had quit smoking. He knew about the battle Laura and Maggie had had over redecorating Laura's room. He knew Maggie had created some commercials.

But he hadn't known about the motorized bike, the Lincoln, the office, the reorganization of the bedrooms. If Laura hadn't mentioned any of those, would she have mentioned any men in her mother's life?

Dave staggered into the bathroom and took a good look in the mirror. He wasn't impressed with the image staring back at him and doubted anyone else would be either. He was sick and battered, and had a miserable track record as a husband. If there were any men in Maggie's life, they needn't worry about the ex-"husband posing any immediate competition.

Reaching for the can of shaving cream, he dismissed the idea of cleaning up until later in the day. His knees were beginning to wobble and his head to pound. Rest. He needed to get his body in shape before he could challenge the competition.

Weakness and pain overrode any revulsion he had toward climbing back into the king-sized bed. "I was here first, you bastards," he declared as he pulled the comforter up to his shoulders. "And I'll be here last."

He drifted off to sleep, planning his strategy. First on his list was getting some background information. He could pump Laura when she got home from school, but an informant's information should always be documented. He'd have to get in shape and go after every lead himself.

"I'll drive you," Maggie volunteered Thursday morning, the words out of her mouth before she really thought about them. After the shock of seeing Dave dressed and downstairs had worn off, gratitude had set in and she was feeling magnanimous. His being up and asking to borrow a car to drive to the hospital and visit Kate Ramsey had to be a sign that her "siege" was over.

Dave raised his cup to his mouth, took a sip, then slowly put it down. The cup clattered in the saucer, evidence that his hands were none too steady. "I wouldn't want to put you to any more trouble, Maggie. I realize how busy you must be since landing that big account. Congratulations."

"Thanks. Because of that campaign, we are pretty busy." Maggie shifted her position in her chair and played with her own coffee cup. She hadn't exactly lied. The office was hopping. She'd hustled off to her city office every morning and stayed there until six, creating an image of the busy executive woman. She was doing it again today.

Wearing a sapphire-blue silk dress under a textured cream-and-blue jacket, appropriately accessorized with a necklace, bracelet and earrings of semiprecious stones, she was in costume. The leather briefcase and large portfolio resting on the floor near the door were added props. It was all a smoke screen. Despite the big contract with Paradise Islands, a cou-

pie of hours in the office each day was more than enough to make sure everything was going smoothly.

"It won't be any trouble, really, Dave," Maggie insisted. "My office isn't far from the hospital. I can drop you off and then swing back for you later."

Within the hour, she was steering her big Lincoln past Walter Reed Army Hospital. "You can just drop me off at the door and come back for me whenever it's convenient," Dave suggested, but Maggie didn't stop. "That was the front door, Maggie."

"I know. I'll get a ticket if I park there. I'll have to get a place in the lot. Can you walk that far?"

"I think so, but—"

"If it's okay with you, I'd like to visit Kate, too. I've always liked her and I want to see how she's doing."

"But what about your work?"

"No problem." She grinned at him, then turned her attention back to the street. "I'm the boss, remember? I can drop in for a few minutes on the way home to pick up a few things. That's one of the pluses in my work. I don't have to be away from home much."

Stiffening, Dave studied her features, checking to see if her last remark had been a barb. Her expression was calm and pleasant. He relaxed.

Things were going perfectly. He'd get to see her office.

Anxiety replaced his elation minutes later when they were walking toward the hospital entrance. He hadn't realized that he'd have any qualms about visiting Kate. A trickle of sweat snaked down his spine while at the same time he felt cold. Seeing Kate would be a reminder of what he'd been trying so hard to forget.

In the elevator, Maggie seemed to sense Dave's nervousness. Standing close in the crowded car, it

was very easy and natural to slip her hand into his. Maybe they weren't husband and wife anymore, but they could at least be friends. She'd offer support to a friend under these circumstances.

Her hand remained locked within his while they traveled the long hallway, and when they entered Kate Ramsey's room.

It wasn't an easy visit. Kate's recovery was nowhere near Dave's, so they kept their visit short. Then Pete Ramsey, a photojournalist like his wife, and John Malloran, their editor-in-chief, waylaid Dave in the hall. An impromptu staff meeting of sorts ensued in a nearby lounge.

Feeling very much a fifth wheel, Maggie escaped to a chair in a far corner and tried to interest herself in the hospital's collection of outdated magazines. She flipped through the glossy pages, but her attention was on the conversation buzzing across the room, especially the golden-haired man in its center. His voice was strong. His laughter was frequent, hardy and full. His color was better, more glowing by the minute. Even his eyes snapped and sparkled with vitality.

Feeling a surge of both jealousy and hurt, Maggie reminded herself that it made perfectly good sense for Dave to be looking better than he had since his arrival. He'd spent five full days in bed. Of course he was stronger. Physically, he was well, or awfully close to it.

Yet, his physical healing didn't account for the animation she heard in his voice, the power and excitement that were emanating from his body. He was among his colleagues, again a part of the world in which he thrived. This was where Dave shone, where he got his real strength, and it was what made him who he really was.

Her vision blurred as she looked at the magazine open on her lap. Staring up at her was a Paradise Islands advertisement. It wasn't one she'd done, but one her designs would be replacing in the coming year. Hers would be better, she knew it. They would be classier, more colorful, more artistic—but insignificant when compared to the copy and accompanying photograph on the opposite page.

Without realizing it, she'd picked up a several-weeks-old copy of *Global News*. The article was the last one Dave had done before his capture. The photographs were by Kate. It was a moving account of a revolution's effect on the children of the warring country. She'd read the article weeks ago, but now she skimmed it again. That was Dave's world. Hers was the promotion of a blend of citrus fruits. Tame, safe, and very dull.

". . . be another Pulitzer in it for you," Malloran was saying when Maggie closed the magazine. She agreed. The article was even more moving with the second reading. Kate's photos were tragic and touching, sometimes whimsical, sometimes heartbreaking—matching exactly the tone of Dave's writing. They made a good team.

Painful as the result was, Maggie was glad she had come to the hospital with Dave and been able to wish Kate well. For a few moments, Dave had needed her and she was glad she'd been there for him. But the moments had been brief, just as the times he'd needed her during their marriage had been. Now, surrounded by his colleagues, he was in his element and in need of nothing—and nobody—else.

Six

Dave leaned back against the plush headrest and closed his eyes. Maggie was a success, all right. The office was buzzing with activity. Paradise Islands was the biggest, but far from the only contract she had.

How many were on her payroll? Five? Six? He couldn't remember for sure. The brief tour through Right Images had been just long enough for him to assess the place. Decorated in muted apricot and jade tones, lots of chrome and glass, the reception and work areas reflected taste and class—like the woman.

"Tired?"

"A bit," Dave answered without opening his eyes. They rode along in silence for several more moments.

"Sorry about—"

"Sony about—"

"You first."

"No, ladies first."

"I was just going to apologize for dragging you through every inch of my office. You should have

said something. If I'd realized what an effort this trip had been for you, I wouldn't have taken so long. You must have been bored to tears."

Bored? Awestruck was more like it. Dave turned his head and opened one eye. "Nope. It was interesting," he stated and sincerely meant it, but for more reasons than the obvious. Interesting and gratifying.

Neither Tim, the computer graphics expert, nor Bob, the film man, was any competition. Nice enough guys he supposed, but too young and too slick for a woman like Maggie. The competition wasn't at the office.

"Sure it was interesting," Maggie said sardonically. "I saw the way your eyes glazed over when Tim started explaining how the computer kaleidoscoped images."

"It was fascinating," Dave insisted.

"Admit it, you didn't understand a word he was saying."

Dave shrugged. "Okay, so I don't speak computerese. What was happening on the screen was interesting, though." He gave Maggie a quizzical look. "Do you understand how he makes all that happen?"

Maggie shook her head slightly and sighed. "Not really. That's why I hired him. I supply the idea and initial art work. Tim transfers it to the computer and makes my still images come to life. Then Bob takes over and records it on film. Finally, the sound is added."

"Ah . . . that's where the synthesizer and what's-her-name come in. Right?"

"Tanya," Maggie supplied.

"You've got quite a team."

Maggie took her eyes from the highway long enough to smile directly at Dave. "They're a good bunch. That's why I don't have to be there all the time."

"Hiring good people and setting up the system right in the first place takes talent, Maggie. Real executive talent. I'm impressed and envious." He looked out the window, watching the colorful countryside whiz by. Executive ability wasn't something everyone had. Only time would tell whether he did. Oh, Lord, what if he failed?

Envious? Maggie didn't understand. Successful, confident Dave St. Clair envious of anybody? Never. He was just tired, probably still shaky from his ordeal. "If that was a compliment, thank you."

"It was and you're welcome."

"Speaking of compliments, I have one for you. I agree with Malloran. That piece you and Kate did on the children of war-torn countries was wonderful."

Dave's features were alight with pleasure, his eyes sparkling, his smile wide. "You read it? When?"

"When it first appeared and again this morning at the hospital."

"My turn to apologize. I'm sorry you had to hang around while Pete and Malloran and I were talking shop. I know how much you dislike Malloran."

"I don't dislike John Malloran," Maggie said. "I don't know the man well enough to have an opinion one way or the other about his character."

"You used to put on a pretty good show of disliking him, then," Dave returned. "Every time he called, you began storming around the house."

"Every time he called, you left," she stated bitterly.

"If it's any consolation, I wasn't really thrilled with leaving, either."

Maggie's head whipped around and the car swerved slightly. Righting the wheel, she apologized for the reckless handling. "How can you say that, Dave? You were a bundle of excitement every time Malloran

called with a new assignment. You acted as if you couldn't wait to get to the airport and on your way."

"Of course I was excited. He gave me the premier assignments. How long do you suppose that would have lasted if I dragged myself all down-in-the-mouth to the airport each time?"

"You tell me," she retorted angrily. "Premier. Hah! Most dangerous is more like it and you loved it. The more dangerous, the better. Every time you took an assignment, you put your life on the line. The nightmares you suffered when you were sick are just a taste of what we've had to live with."

"We, meaning you and Laura? Or was it mostly you?"

Maggie turned the car into the driveway and pulled it into the garage. Gathering up her purse and the folders she'd tossed on the seat, she kept her face averted from him. "Of course I worried. Wives worry when their husbands are in the middle of the latest hot spot in the world."

Dave caught her wrist, stopping her escape. "And now?" he asked in a quiet voice. He tipped her chin up with his finger. "Do you worry now?"

Their faces were too close. Maggie had no choice but to look directly at him. "I'm not your wife anymore," she said, evading a direct answer.

"Your choice, not mine, Maggie." Shifting on the seat, Dave turned so that their bodies were facing.

"You didn't fight the divorce, Dave." Maggie was, uncomfortably aware of his closeness. "I supposed you wanted it, too."

He let go of her wrist and slid his arm around her waist, drawing her still closer. "Misguided gallantry on my part. I thought it would make you happy. Your happiness was all I ever wanted. Are you happy, Maggie?" he said against her lips.

She tried to pull away, but her chin was caught by his fingers and his other hand cradled her head. "I ... wasn't happy being married to you," she whispered.

"Never?" He pressed his lips to the corner of her mouth.

"No. I mean yes. Oh, you know what I mean."

He nuzzled his way along her jawline and she squirmed as she always did when his breath brushed the sensitive place behind her ear. The movement brought her breasts against him. Her nipples responded to the warmth of his chest and the steady thud of his heart within the muscle-layered wall. A tiny cry of protest broke through her lips. "Don't do this," she begged weakly.

He ignored her breathy plea. "You didn't answer my question," he said as he pressed soft kisses along the column of her neck. "Are you happy, now?"

"I . . ." was all Maggie could get out before Dave's mouth silenced her completely. Deep and demanding, his kiss drove away all rational thought and Maggie gave herself up to its sensuous rhythm.

At some point, she moved her hands up to his chest, but she had no will to push him away. Instead, she fitted her palms against the curve of his pectorals, refamiliarizing herself with their shape. Then, slowly, she slid her hands upward until they curled around his nape and her fingers were buried in crisp waves of golden blond hair.

Nobody kissed like Dave. Possessive. Hot. Tender. Persuasive.

Nobody could make her respond like Dave. She was transported back to a time when she'd lived for his lovemaking. Her body was totally compliant, accepting the gentle guidance that sent her drifting

downward until she was lying upon the plush upholstery of the car seat.

Dave had followed her downward, one hand pillowing her head, the other skating over her body. Kiss followed kiss, interspersed with incoherent words and soft sighs. Maggie felt the warm rush of liquid heat that signaled her readiness. Dave rocked his hips against her and she felt his hardness, a reminder of his virility.

The urge for fulfillment was powerful within them both. Dave's breathing was fast and heavy. The throaty, wanton cries were Maggie's.

"Maggie . . . Maggie," he murmured as he buried his face in the crook of her neck.

"Dave . . . please." Maggie's sanity was returning and she fought through the blanket of sensuality he'd wrapped her in. She shouldn't have let this happen. Hadn't she grown up at all? Developed any willpower or independence from this man?

His nimble fingers were at work on the buttons of her dress. "Stop . . . please. We can't do this," she said in a weak attempt to call a halt to what would inevitably lead to their making love right here on the front seat of her car, parked in the garage, in the middle of the day.

Dave slid his hand inside her dress and flicked a lace-covered nipple with his thumb. "We can. We are." His mouth covered hers again as hungrily as his first kiss had done.

Maggie managed to turn her head. "No!" She went limp beneath him. "Let me go, Dave."

Raising himself above her, Dave studied her turbulent blue eyes, her kiss-swollen lips, her flushed cheeks. He couldn't stifle the groan that emitted from his throat as he took in the rosy tips of ivory breasts peaking through their lacy veil. "I'm not

letting you go, but I'll let you up as soon as you answer my question. Are you happy, Maggie?"

"I'll be happy as soon as you let me up and I can get out of this car," Maggie answered between clenched teeth.

Dave shook his head slowly. "Not good enough. The truth, Maggie. Are you happy?"

Maggie let out her breath and squeezed her eyes shut. Breathing deeply, she mentally counted to ten before opening her eyes. There was no way to evade the question any longer. "I thought I was before you dropped back into my life. Now, I honestly don't know."

Smiling Dave dropped a light kiss on the end of her nose before lifting himself away from her. "I'll settle for that."

Maggie scrambled across the car seat and was nearly out of the garage when he asked, "What's for lunch? All that exercise has worked up my appetite."

Already angry with herself for having lost control in Dave's arms, his remark pushed her closer to a blue-blazed fit. Cobalt eyes narrowed in fury, and every one of her hundred and twenty pounds stiffened. Maggie turned slowly back toward him. On the shelf near the door rested a bag of bonemeal. It was temptingly close to her hand.

"You know where the kitchen is. Fix your own lunch. I have things to do." She started out of the garage again.

"Uh . . . Maggie?"

"What?" she snapped, turning once again.

"Maybe buttoning up your dress should be the first thing you do. That is, unless you're into teasing that poor guy next door—"

The bag of bonemeal sailed through the air. Maggie didn't wait around to see if she'd hit her target, nor

did she waste time closing up the front of her dress. Folders and purse clutched against her chest, she headed for the back door.

Leaning against the closed door, she tossed the folders toward the counter. She missed. Papers scattered across the brick-patterned linoleum. Looking toward the ceiling, she swore long and loud. After a colorful assessment of her own mental capabilities, she went on to impugn Dave's parentage, and indeed his entire heritage.

Maggie was in the midst of declaring Dave St. Clair the lowest "damn Yankee" to have ever stepped foot on the sacred soil below the Mason-Dixon Line when the knob turned and the door rattled. She slid the bolt and attached the chain.

Dave pounded on the door. "Maggie, let me in!" "When hell freezes over!" Leaning against the shaking door, she looked to the ceiling and muttered, "Lord, don't let this door turn to kindlin' now. I promise I'll treat them more gently in the future."

"Maggie, this damn Yankee would like to come in and apologize."

"That damn Yankee can stand out there and apologize."

"Maggie . . . this is ridiculous. I feel like a fool standing out here banging on the door."

"Then stop banging on it."

Dave paused his harassment of the door and brushed some more of the whitish powder from his clothing. "Maggie, what is this stuff?"

"Bonemeal."

Dave rubbed some of the powder between his fingers and studied it. "Anybody I know?"

"You are a very sick man, David St. Clair."

"That's right. Let me in. I want to go to bed."

The velvety tone of his voice and his choice of

wording caused a shiver to snake down Maggie's spine. Her body was still tingling with awareness of just how much he wanted to go to bed. His need for a bed had absolutely nothing to do with his illness.

Not responding to his plea, Maggie moved away from the door. Opening the cupboard, she found the last remaining pack of cigarettes she'd stashed there. She lit one up, hitched her hip against the edge of the counter, and took a long drag.

"Maggie . . . ? I'm sorry," he said, his tone seemingly sincere. "That remark was out of line."

Maggie continued smoking while she considered his apology. Which line was he apologizing for? The crack about the neighbor or wanting to go to bed? Whichever, he sounded sincere and she supposed it was childish to leave him on the back porch any longer. She stubbed out her cigarette and reached over, slipped the chain, slid the bolt, and opened the door.

She had intended to ask him what he knew about the "guy next door," but words failed her when she saw him. Her aim must have been perfect.

If he was still angry, there was no way of knowing. His features were completely obliterated by the chalky white powder covering his face" and liberally dusted over the front of his shirt and pants.

Maggie struggled to keep from laughing.

Plucking at his shirt front, Dave asked, "This stuff poisonous?"

Maggie shook her head and turned away to hide the laughter shaking her body. "Nothing but pulverized bones."

Shuddering, he went to the sink and started splashing water on his face. "Sounds pretty ghoulish. Where do you get this stuff—the local mortuary?"

"Don't be ridiculous!" Finally, she got herself un-

der control. She yanked open a drawer, pulled out a kitchen towel, and tossed it on the counter near the sink. "It's a common fertilizer for spring bulbs and perennials. I bought it at the garden store."

"You never used to be much of a gardener, Maggie," Dave admitted as he scrubbed at his face. "When did you develop a green thumb?"

"Since Jerry, 'the guy next door,' gave me a few tips on fertilization," she informed him haughtily. "He's been a big help with the beds around this house. There are so many and they were so empty. He really showed me how to put some life in them."

Dave froze. Keeping the towel in front of his face longer than was necessary, he quelled the surge of jealous rage that rose in reaction to her comments. She was talking about flower beds . . . wasn't she?

Jerry . . . Jerry. He searched his memory for any information about the guy and found it. Laura had written that a widower with grown children had moved into the house next door. He worked for the federal government, like half or more of Alexandria. So good ol' Jerry liked to putter around in the rose beds. Dave pictured a balding, potbellied, closing-in-on-retirement type. Harmless.

"That's nice," Dave commented benignly as he hung up the towel. "The yard must look very pretty in the spring and summer. With your eye for color and balance, it must look like something out of *Better Homes and Gardens*. You've got a lot of talents, Maggie."

In the process of gathering up her work sheets, Maggie mumbled an acknowledgment of his compliment. "I'd better get at all this." She waved the folders as she prepared to escape from the kitchen. "There's plenty of food in the fridge. Fix whatever you want."

"Fine, I'll do that," Dave said as he watched the door swing closed behind Maggie. Then, he watched it swing open again.

"Uh . . . since your health is so improved, I assume you'll no longer need to stay here. Feel free to use the telephone to make any arrangements for accommodations for whatever is left of your leave."

"Was that a polite way of saying you're kicking me out?"

Maggie gave an impatient shrug. "You really ought to find a place of your own, you know. Someplace to use as a base when you're in the States. I have all your clothes, books and things packed in the guest room closet."

"You really are kicking me out," he stated slowly, incredulity slowly turning to a darker, stronger emotion.

"It's the usual arrangement when a couple is divorced. In our case, it's been a bit delayed." Growing more and more uneasy from the look in Dave's eyes, Maggie started to back through the door as she edged away. The sunshine liberally strewn through Dave's brown irises was fast turning to fiery lightning bolts. She gulped and fought the urge to start bobbing and weaving to avoid being struck.

Backing away as well as backing down, Maggie allowed, "If you're truly exhausted from this morning's outing, by all means go up and take a nap. Tomorrow or the next day'll be soon enough. I . . . uh . . . was just suggesting you think about getting a place of your own."

One more step and she was clear of the door. It swung closed with a whoosh. Maggie stared at it for a brief moment, sure that at any minute, she'd see a smoking hole appear. One didn't, and she quickly made good her escape to her studio.

The weekend had come and gone and Dave was still in residence, showing no indication of moving. That's what she got for being so gracious. "So lily-livered is more like it!"

Supplied with a substantial number of the chocolate chip cookies Laura had baked, a thermos of coffee, and a couple of apples, Maggie headed for the safety of her studio. The room had become a combination sanctuary and prison ever since Dave had crumpled on her doorstep.

Thanks to skylights in the ceiling and plenty of side windows, the room was far from a dungeon. It had its own full bath and a phone, and also functioned as her bedroom. It contained everything she needed—except a refrigerator and stove. Furtive foraging expeditions to the kitchen supplied adequate sustenance.

Self-imprisonment in one's work haven did have some benefits, Maggie admitted. Once she'd established control of her brain, she'd been really industrious. Hence, she'd finished or was way ahead of schedule on all her projects.

Savoring a cookie, Maggie took the stairs a bit more slowly as she pondered the perfection of the cook. Tickets to Baryshnikov had been the carrot that had initially spurred Laura to shed her bizarre trappings. But, the demure makeup, natural coiffure, and impeccable appearance had remained. The girl had even taken to communicating in full sentences—delivered with a smile, metal and rubber bands notwithstanding.

There could be only one reason: Dave. Maggie made two marks in the credit column of an imaginary chart with his name on it. One for being indirectly responsible for the amount of work she'd accom-

plished in a week's time, and the other for the delightful change in Laura.

"I probably should thank him," she said as she entered her studio. "Laura won't keep this up after he's gone, but I might as well enjoy it while I can."

"Pardon me?" A voice sounded from behind her.

Maggie froze. Caught flapping her mouth, again! Turning around, she lied, "I said good morning."

"Good morning to you." He grinned and the glow from his eyes was like a ray of sunshine spearing through the shadows of the hallway. Two strides and he'd covered the width of the hallway and was inside her sanctuary. "It's going to be a good morning and an even better day, don't you think?"

Throat suddenly dry, she nodded her head. He was far too close for comfort. She took a deep breath and instantly regretted it. The air all around her was filled with the scent of freshly showered male flesh, lightly embellished with the tangy fragrance of his favorite after-shave.

His hair was still damp and curling from his shower. A crisp white shirt contrasted sharply with his tanned neck. Perfectly tailored glenn plaid suit pants hugged his waist and flat belly. The matching jacket was hooked over his shoulder.

Damnation! Why did he have to wear that suit? It had always been one of her favorites, plus it conjured up thoughts she didn't want to have right then. The suit had been specifically tailored for him. Since he'd been too busy to go to the tailor himself, she'd taken the measurements. Getting the length of his inseam had led to other measurements that hadn't been on the tailor's list. The session had taken an entire afternoon.

"Going somewhere?" she asked when her larynx rid itself of knots.

"The office," he returned.

"Oh ... " A wave—of disappointment? loss? impending loneliness?—swept over her. Why wasn't she thrilled to hear that announcement? Surely it meant he would soon be flitting off to parts unknown, which was exactly what she wanted.

"I wondered if I might borrow one of the cars. I noticed you still have the Olds."

He looked fit, bright-eyed, groomed to perfection . . . yummy. She could feel her vocal cords beginning to tangle again. Quickly, she nodded and said, "Take either one. I'm working at home today. The keys are on a hook near the kitchen door."

"The Olds'll be fine. Thanks."

She'd assumed he'd be on his way, but instead he remained standing inches away. "Well, have a nice day."

"Thanks. You too. Guess I'm off, then," he announced, showing not the slightest sign of going anywhere. His gaze was centered directly on her lips as if he were about to hone in on them. Old instincts made her want to rise on her toes and sway forward, but she caught herself up short.

Clutching her food supplies to her chest as if they were a shield, Maggie shrunk farther into the room. She wished she could hide somewhere and for a moment considered ducking behind the screen that separated her work area from her sleeping area.

Too obvious and too late. He already knew she was wearing her favorite painting attire, a faded, old, gray sweat suit. Planning to devote the day to the commissioned paperback cover, she'd not put on any makeup, and had fastened her hair on top of her head with a few haphazardly placed and mismatched barrettes.

She was a mess and he was devastating, and he followed her into the room!

Dave shoved one hand into a back pocket and walked around Maggie's work area, taking in every detail and every change that had transformed the master bedroom so it incorporated an artist's studio. There was nothing left in the room to indicate that he'd ever shared it. He shouldn't have been surprised by that, but he was. The evidence that she'd put their marriage behind her hurt.

"So this is where you've been hanging out." Tilting his head, he took in the skylights and commented, "Nice touch."

"They provide better light."

He stepped around the screen and raised one brow when he saw the antique tester rising so high off the floor. Like a drawbridge, a set of steps was folded up against the side, denying easy and immediate entrance. The tall posts at each corner rose like a castle's watch towers. "You always sleep there?"

"Uh-huh," Maggie acknowledged from her perch on a stool across the room.

"Pretty narrow, isn't it?"

"It's a three-quarter size," she supplied as she busied herself opening paints and arranging brushes. "Plenty of space for one person."

Dave studied the bed a bit longer, assessing the width and comfort of the plump mattress. *A cozy fit for two. Prepare yourself, princess. I'm going to storm your tower.*

Like a banner, a lace-trimmed black nightgown hung from one of the posts. Unable to stop himself, Dave reached for it and savored the feel of the silky fabric, imagining how it would feel warmed by Maggie's body just before he drew it off her. The airy floral blend of Maggie's perfume drifted upward and he brought the fabric to his face, breathing deeply of the scent. Not everything had changed.

What was he doing behind that screen for so long, Maggie wondered. He'd never shown any great interest in antiques. He couldn't be that fascinated by her bed and that was about all there was to look at back there. She was greatly relieved when he stepped around the screen.

"I guess I'd better get going," Dave said, but he still seemed reluctant to leave. He was almost through the door when he turned back toward her.

That look was in his eyes again. That heavy-lidded golden scrutiny that usually preceded a kiss. Maggie shifted uncomfortably on her stool. If he did kiss her, she knew she'd kiss him back. The magic would build, and she'd find herself in the same kind of fix she'd been in on the car seat. This time, a bed was too close.

"Did you have any breakfast?" she blurted, hoping to break the enchantment he was creating.

"It's a breakfast meeting. Don't you ever wear your hair down anymore?" he asked, spearing his finger through one of the escaped curls that lay on her neck.

"Not when I work." Dave's fingertip brushed against her skin and Maggie felt the feathery touch all over her body. "Are you going to discuss your next assignment?"

"Yes." He trailed his finger down her spine. Oh, *dear heaven, she's not wearing anything under that sweat suit*, he thought when his fingertip encountered no evidence of elastic stretched across her back.

"Do you know where it'll be?" Maggie asked, curling her back away from Dave's finger.

"Yes." His groin tightened painfully as he realized how easy it would be to slip his hands beneath her sweat-shirt and cup her breasts within his palms. Abruptly he raised his hands and caught her shoulders. Pulling her off the stool, he folded her close and lowered his head. "Wish me luck, Maggie. This one's the big one."

Before she could grant or deny his appeal, he was kissing her.

Seven

Grinning with satisfaction and triumph, Dave maneuvered the Olds out of the station parking lot and headed for home. The days of meetings and interviews with all the bigwigs at *Global* were over. Malloran's recommendation had clinched the appointment. Everything was going as smooth as glass.

The decision wouldn't be final until tomorrow, but all indications were positive that the job was as good as his. Being appointed temporary assistant editor-in-chief and promised the head honcho position itself when Malloran retired at the end of the year, Dave was about to land the plum assignment of his career.

It meant a lot of changes, but some of his old methods were applicable. Hence, he was tackling this new job the way he'd always gone about any assignment in a new country. He had two rules that had always worked. One, get the lay of the land first. Two, get to know the natives and adopt their lifestyle whenever possible.

After two days of fighting traffic and parking prob-

lems in the nation's capital, Dave had gone native. Like the rest of the army of commuters from the environs who descended upon Washington each day, he'd opted for public transit—D.C.'s famed rapid-transit system, the Metro. It only made sense, as one of the stops was practically at the magazine's front door. Parking at the other end was plentiful and only minutes from the house. The only glitch was figuring the fare, a system more confusing and intricate than Central American politics.

Dave opted for the only sensible solution, the farecard. The ticketing machines would do all the figuring and let him know when he'd used up his twenty dollars' worth of travel.

Grimacing at the thought of the endless series of those cards stretching before him, he turned onto Kingshaven Drive. Autumn was in full blazing color all around him. It was a beautiful day, and everything was falling into place. His grin returned. This was the life he wanted, farecards and all.

Maggie tossed a shovelful of peat moss into the newly dug hole, dusted off her hands and prepared to tackle moving the camellia into its new home. "Didn't look all that big at the garden store," she muttered, panting as she lifted the plant from the edge of the yard where it and several others had been delivered.

Camouflaged as a broad-leaved evergreen shrub, she lurched across the yard in what she hoped was the general direction of the hole she'd just finished digging. "It'll be beautiful. It'll be beautiful," she chanted with each step, convincing herself that all her purchases had been worthwhile.

Feeling at odds with herself that morning, she'd

decided a change of pace was in order. Thanks to the magnitude of work she'd accomplished the week before, she could afford to take the day off and putter in the yard. Fresh air, that's what she needed.

The temperature was in the seventies. The air smelled like spring. The soil, dampened from a light overnight shower and warmed by the bright sun, was fragrant, signaling its fecundity.

Succumbing to a primeval agricultural need, Maggie had driven to the nearest nursery. There, she wandered up and down the rows of shrubs and trees appropriate for fall planting and finally selected two camellias, an oleander, and an Indian azalea. A small mountain composed of sacks of cypress mulch rose next to the miniature forest. That should have been enough, but she'd gone on to select a bucket of mixed daffodil bulbs for broadcasting amongst the new shrubs.

Arms and back already aching, Maggie was recognizing her folly. No wonder the garden store had offered free delivery. She was a volume customer.

Staggering beneath the weight of the camellia, her foot encountered empty space. Letting go of the plant, she grabbed at the air but there was nothing. She shrieked as she hurtled forward.

Thick arms caught her around her middle, saving her from landing face first on the new shrub.

"You okay?" rumbled a deep voice near her ear.

Still shaken by the near disaster, Maggie nodded, gratified to sink back against the solid wall of muscle wrapped around her. "Lucky for me you were around, Jerry. How do you always know when I'm in trouble?" she asked, her feet still on the edge of the hole.

"Intuition, I guess." He laughed. Moving backward and pivoting, Jerry brought Maggie to solid ground.

"There's something about a drunken bush with legs that I find hard to resist." He peered over her shoulder to the deep hole she'd dug. "Are you planting something or digging for oil?"

The grin remained on Dave's face until he turned into the drive at 1836 Kingshaven. What was going on? Who in the ... ?

Two heads, a man's and a woman's, turned sharply at the sound of screeching brakes and flying gravel. Dave was out of the car and striding across the lawn before the last pebble settled.

"Hi, what brings you home so early?" Maggie greeted as she pushed away from the black-haired giant's arms.

"Home?" the giant asked, puzzlement—or was that shock?—written all over his big face as he looked first at Maggie and then back to Dave.

"Home," Dave repeated, his jaw firmly set. "The nice day brought me home early so I could enjoy it with my *family*. I'm Dave St. Clair, Maggie's husband."

"Ex-husband," Maggie corrected, glowering at Dave and trying to avoid the very possessive arm he was wrapping around her waist. She tried to extricate herself gracefully from his hold, but nothing short of ten sticks of dynamite would have accomplished her release. "Dave. My neighbor, Jerry Rule."

This mountain of muscle is good old Jerry, the aging widower next door? The pottering gardener who also shares recipes? The man can't be much past forty and he looks like an ad for a health club. "Rule."

"St. Clair."

The ritualistic shaking of hands was stiff as each man took the other's measure. Maggie shifted her

eyes from Dave to Jerry, expecting to hear a referee order them to their corners, then wish them luck. Or, was that her job?

Literally stepping into the fray, she began chattering. "Dave's staying with Laura and me temporarily. He had a bad case of the flu when he arrived and was in no shape to go apartment-hunting until now. How's the search going, Dave? Maybe you should give him the name of your real estate company, Jerry. I remember your telling me how efficient they were in helping you relocate."

From his greater height, Jerry Rule glared down at Dave. "So that explains the lights in the guest room. I'll be happy to give you the name of my agent. She'll have you relocated within days."

How'd you like to have your face relocated? And how do you know where the guest room is? "I wouldn't want to put you to any trouble. There's no hurry. I've enjoyed being able to spend so much time with Maggie and our daughter."

"Laura's a great kid. It's been fun helping her with her algebra homework. Reminds me of when I used to tutor my daughter, Liz. She's in college now."

Rule leaned back on his heels and crossed his arms across his massive chest. The action stretched his knit shirt tight, showing the rippling action of his muscles. The sleeves slid higher over his bulging biceps.

So the guy had muscles, and brains enough to master ninth-grade algebra, Dave allowed. He had a daughter in college. He'd start showing his age soon. That chest would slip to his belt line. Maybe it already had and he'd wound himself into a belly belt.

"I've been helping Laura with her Spanish homework and composition assignments," Dave countered.

Maggie decided it was time to nip this "try to top

that" game in its early stage. "Gentlemen, I've got some bushes and bulbs to plant."

That was the wrong way to stop the challenging. Both men volunteered to do the heavy work for her. Jerry immediately went to work lowering the first camellia plant into the ground while Dave set a record changing clothes.

Leaning back on her heels some time later, Maggie decided having two men trying to outdo each other had some merits. That is, if you could tolerate the tension filling the entire yard while they went about it. All she'd had to do was point her finger and her two champions jumped to the task. As the afternoon wore on, she began to feel like Scarlet O'Hara on the day of the barbecue.

Fiddle dee dee. Men and their silly little wars, she mimicked inwardly and giggled to herself. Yet, the motivations behind the little war going on in her front yard were as confusing as those that had led to the regrettable conflict between the states.

Since Monday morning's kiss that had left her shaking with need for hours, Dave hadn't touched her. He'd gone off every morning to the magazine and come home every evening around six. He'd been pleasant and courteous, but focused his attention on Laura throughout each evening. So why the sudden preening and posturing, smashing heads with the nearest male as if it were mating season in the Rockies and she was the only doe in the region?

And Jerry? The new bag of bonemeal she'd purchased that day was coming dangerously close to going the way of its predecessor, only at a different target. They'd been neighbors for more than six months and there had been absolutely not the slightest sign that he was interested in her as anything more than a friend. Suddenly, he was full of leering glances, double entendres, and macho displays.

The situation was laughable and embarrassing, but Maggie was neither laughing nor blushing. Thank goodness, vestiges of her McPherson ancestry had disappeared and the staunch, sensible Sheldon was dominating. Maybe if she'd been born in Alexandria, Louisiana, rather than Alexandria, Virginia, she'd be enjoying this situation more. She'd always suspected her compatriots from the deeper South were more into the whole "belle" syndrome. Or, maybe having been married to a damn Yankee for thirteen years, she'd lost her knack for and enjoyment at playing "helpless little ol' me."

In a flurry of shining chrome, red paint, scattered gravel, and flying turf, a flashy sports car zipped past the Oldsmobile and came to a screeching halt beside the house. Maggie groaned. Jenna, her totally unpredictable sister, was just what she needed to cap what was already a ludicrous afternoon. She measured a portion of bone meal into a hole, put in another bulb, and covered it with soil before straightening.

"Hey, Mom! Dad! Come see Aunt Jenna's new car," Laura hollered as she hopped out of the passenger side of the restored Jaguar. "Isn't it great? It's a classic. She let me shift gears." She was dancing around the car, pointing out every special feature of the racy vintage sports model. "You should have seen Joy Harrison's face when Aunt Jenna roared up in front of the school and picked me up. She totally lost it."

Jenna Sheldon, displaying her inimitable style, strode languidly around to the front of the car. Her tall willowy body was displayed to advantage in a silky red jumpsuit and a long fringed white scarf draped over her shoulders. Her head of gypsy-styled raven curls had been ruffled by the wind to glorious

and fashionable disarray. Silver bangles jingled from her ears and wrists. And she was wearing heavy-soled, ankle-high boots, laces gone and tongues flapping. On Jenna, the boots seemed the perfect accessory.

I'm the artist in the family and I dress conservatively, Maggie thought as she crossed the yard. Jenna majored in library science and dresses like . . . like Jenna.

"Whatever are y'all doin'?" Jenna's brows rose as she surveyed Maggie's muddied knees and grubby hands. Her emerald eyes slanted as she took in the two men advancing toward her car. "Maggie," she whispered. "Quick, who is that hunk with the wavy black hair?"

"My neighbor, and yes, he's single," Maggie supplied, recognizing the predatory look in Jenna's eyes.

"You mean you've got Dave imprisoned in the guest room and that gorgeous mountain of male pulchritude waiting on the other side of the hedge?" She whistled softly through her teeth. "Woo-wee, sister, you are positively a glutton. Didn't Mama teach you to share?"

A remark like that from anybody but Jenna and Maggie would have taken instant offense. "I learned my lessons well. Take them both," Maggie returned and truly meant it.

Jenna launched herself at Dave. "David, I've been positively dying to see you. Mama's been like an ol' broody hen protectin' her chicks, keepin' everybody away till you got yourself all well. Whatever is my sister thinkin', makin' you plant trees and tote around heavy ol' bags of that disgusting mulch? You're sure to have a relapse at this rate."

Standing to one side and listening to this line of stereotypical "belle" talk, Maggie fought to keep her

mouth from dropping to her chest. What on earth was Jenna up to?

Laura, mouth agape and eyes as big as saucers, stood rooted to the ground staring at her favorite aunt. A chance glance at Jerry indicated he was positively spellbound by Jenna's display. Dave was sending questioning looks over Jenna's shoulder. Maggie had no answers.

"I'm feeling quite fit, Jenna," Dave said when he was finally able to get a word in edgewise. It was a lie. Hefting those forty pound sacks of mulch and carting them across the lawn had left him rubber-legged and exhausted. But he'd have dropped before he would have pleaded weakness in front of the ever-helpful hulk of a neighbor. Thank heaven, Jenna arrived before he had. If he were lucky, she'd force him to go inside and prop his feet up.

Jenna stepped away from Dave and sent a brilliant smile toward Jerry. As if on cue, her cheeks blushed a becoming rose. "Oh, I am forgetting my manners," she drawled. "Please forgive me. I'm Maggie's sister, Jenna Sheldon."

"Jerry Rule, Maggie's neighbor," Jerry supplied, his dark eyes flying over the sleek lines of the Jaguar and its owner. Nervously, he stuck his hands into the back pockets of his jeans. "That's a beauty. Had her long?"

"Two hours," Jenna revealed. "Laura and I were about to give it a test drive in the country if that's okay with her mama and daddy. You want to come, too? I'm not used to all that power yet. I might need a big strong man like you to help me control it."

The man was practically frothing at the mouth, Dave thought. Was it the car or Jenna? He looked over his shoulder and saw that there was still one more bag of mulch. He could do it. The price his body would pay to lift that last bag would be worth it

if it meant he would be rid of Rule. "Go ahead, Jerry," Dave encouraged. "I can finish up here."

The man didn't need any more urging. With Rule fastened into the passenger seat, Jenna behind the wheel, and Laura squeezed in the tiny space behind them, the vintage Jag roared out of the driveway and down the street. Maggie and Dave watched the car until it was gone from their view. Slowly they turned to each other and began to laugh.

"Was that really Jenna?" Dave asked in amazement. What had happened to the sophisticated world traveler? The one with the hauteur to rival Queen Victoria?

"It looked like her," was all Maggie could offer. "I don't know what that act was all about, but knowing my little sister, there was a purpose. Come on, let's plunk the rest of these bulbs somewhere, throw the rest of the mulch at the bushes, and call it a day. I don't know about you, but I'm bushed."

It wasn't until Dave began laughing that Maggie realized her pun. Still chuckling they went to work. A dozen daffodils were still above ground and Dave got a lesson in the use of a hole digger and the proper use of bonemeal. Working as a team, they finished up in record time.

"How do you suppose Jenna came by that car?" Maggie mused as they were putting away the garden tools.

"Sold her memoirs?" Dave suggested, raising and lowering his eyebrows suggestively.

"Who knows," Maggie returned, dusting her hands on the seat of her jeans. "Jenna's been full of surprises since the day she was born."

Arms around each other's waists, Dave and Maggie crossed the yard toward the house while Maggie gave Dave details about her sister he would never have guessed. Over glasses of iced tea, she finished

with, "I think all that Southern belle stuff was for Jerry's benefit. He's in for a lot more than a test drive in a classic sports car."

"He's been broadsided," Dave agreed with a wink. Sprawled back in his chair, every muscle complaining, he'd never been more satisfied in his life. If Rule had had any interest in Maggie, it wasn't returned. He was sure of it. And now, thanks to Jenna, the man's attention had been diverted.

Relief over being rid of competition living right next door wasn't all that he was satisfied about. He and Maggie were enjoying the first companionable time with each other since his return. Scratch that. It was the first in years.

Dave couldn't remember a project he'd worked on together with Maggie since they'd painted a chest of drawers for Laura before she was born. The transformation of the house into a home had been all Maggie's doing. She'd chosen the furnishings, the decor, and now the landscaping. All he'd contributed was financial backing, and he wasn't even doing that anymore.

He and Maggie had been lovers, but had they been friends? He'd never thought about their relationship in those terms. He'd defined his love for her in physical terms, the depth of passion he experienced with no one else, a need to know she was his.

He knew he could arouse her passion without much effort. The sparks were still there and probably always would be, but passion wasn't all he wanted from her. He wanted all of her and he no longer knew her, if he ever really had. He wanted, needed, to be Maggie's friend. He needed to share it all with her.

"Celebrate?" Maggie asked, suspicious of Dave's excitement. The man was bubbling over with energy. This kind of exuberance could mean only one thing. He was on to some big news break and would be dashing off to a far corner of the globe. Laura was going to be so disappointed. Dave's stay had provided the longest stretch of time Laura had spent with her father since the divorce.

For her daughter's sake, Maggie had hoped for at least another week, even if it entailed housing Dave for that much more time. Once she'd gotten over the initial unease of having him here, it hadn't been all that bad. They'd settled into a nice peaceful coexistence. She might even call it friendship if there weren't always that undercurrent of awareness stretching between them. She dared not touch him for fear of lighting the fuse.

"Don't just stand there, you two," Dave repeated as he unknotted his tie and opened the top button of his shirt. "Hit the showers. We've got celebrating to do."

"What are you celebrating? A new assignment? Another Pulitzer? What?" Maggie interrogated, continuing to empty the dishwasher.

"I'll tell you what we're celebrating when we're out celebrating," he replied. "Laura, I want you there too."

Dave pulled Laura away from her lounging position against the refrigerator and danced her around the room. "Put on your fanciest dresses, my ladies. We're going to dine on caviar, drink champagne, float a barge down the Potomac, dance till dawn."

Twirling Laura, then pulling her into his arms, he started humming "Dancing in the Night." He maneuvered her toward the hallway then gave her a playful swat on the derriere. "Get going, princess. We have seven o'clock reservations. I know you

women, it'll take that long for you to be satisfied with your already beautiful selves."

Laura took two steps down the hallway, then turned back. Head down, shoulders slumped, her feet dragging, she started, "Uh . . . Dad? It sounds really wonderful but I . . . uh . . . I was going to go to the football game tonight with Tammy Lucas and then spend the night at her house. There's a dance after the game and we . . . we . . . were hoping that . . . well, there's this guy—"

Melodramatically, Dave fell backward, a hand across his chest. "I'm wounded. You'd pass up a gala evening with your old dad for a chance to dance with some kid with sweaty palms?"

Laura sent a pleading look toward her mother. Maggie sympathized. To a fourteen-year-old girl, hot dogs and a Coke at a football game, and then a dance afterward where hundreds of gyrating teenagers would have their ears assaulted by loud music had a lot of appeal. A lot more than a sophisticated evening in the city with her parents.

Trying to be diplomatic, Maggie said, "I'm sure Laura's very happy for you, whatever it is you want to celebrate. But she's not too fond of caviar and far too young for champagne, and—"

"I've been replaced by some guy a little closer to her age?" Dave finished for her.

"You said it, not me."

Dave smiled and winked at Laura. "You're off the hook, kid. Go to the football game and have a good time."

Still looking miserable, Laura wavered. "There's other football games and dances, but you might not be here."

Quickly, Dave slid an arm around Laura and kissed the top of her head. "I'm not going anywhere any

time soon, sweetheart. I promise. Now if you can keep a secret, I'll tell you what I'm celebrating."

Their golden heads bent close together, Dave and Laura walked out of the room. Maggie was left alone to wonder what Dave's promise really meant. And was he still going to go through with his celebration evening without Laura?

He was.

Nothing Maggie could say would put him off. The reservations had already been made. Did she really expect him to eat dinner at Jean Louis At Watergate all by himself?

Briefly, Maggie considered suggesting he find someone else. But the enticement of dining at one of Washington's finest restaurants was irresistible. What would it hurt to spend an evening out with her ex-husband? Since that toe-curling kiss Monday morning he had treated her purely platonically. Tonight would be nothing but two friends celebrating the good fortune of one of them.

At promptly seven o'clock, Maggie was being ushered to a linen-draped table at one of the city's most posh restaurants. As soon as she was seated upon the velvet-upholstered banquette, a long-stemmed red rose was placed across her service plate.

Roses, deep velvety red ones, were her favorites. Unable to resist the fresh dewy bud, she lifted it to her face and breathed deeply of the delicate scent. Was the placement of a rose on the lady's plate standard practice at Jean Louis, or was the rose a gift from Dave? Beneath her lashes, she studied him from across the candle-lit table.

The flickering flame from the candle highlighted the glittering flecks in his eyes. The corners of his mouth turned upward in a slight smile, a little hesitant as if waiting for something, some signal before it spread to its full brilliance. Maggie had her answer.

"Thank you," she said simply as she laid the rose next to her plate and was rewarded with one of Dave's high-voltage smiles. She was saved from any further comment by the appearance of the sommelier. A nod from Dave and their glasses were filled.

Dave raised his glass to Maggie. In a velvet-edged tone, he toasted, "To my good fortune in being out with the most beautiful woman in all of Washington."

Maggie's eyes widened in reaction to Dave's words. A shiver of trepidation shimmered down her spine and her tongue froze. Heat pounded in her cheeks. Thank goodness for the dim lighting.

An appalling realization struck her. This was her first "date" in over fifteen years. And what about Dave? Where had he learned all this sophistication?

How much experience had he packed into the past two years, when she'd thought he was slogging around through the jungles and revolutions throughout the world? Obviously, quite a bit.

Well! She wasn't the sweet young wife keeping the home fires burning anymore. She'd been in a few high school theater productions. Once a trouper, always a trouper. She could be sophisticated, witty, urbane. She'd just pretend.

"Maggie?" Dave's voice cut into her consciousness, a reminder of the minutes that had gone by since he'd made the toast.

Covering her lapse, Maggie raised one brow and smiled. "Sorry, darling," she drawled. She raised her glass to Dave's. "To your good fortune and the reason for this celebration. Which is?" She lifted a brow and tried for the Mona Lisa smile that was her mother's specialty.

Eight

"Our anniversary," Dave supplied smoothly and tapped the rim of his glass to Maggie's.

"Our anniversary!"

She couldn't even pretend to be sophisticated enough to deal with that bombshell. Adroitly, Dave caught Maggie's champagne flute as it slipped from her fingers.

Completely flummoxed, Maggie sank back in her chair and stared wide-eyed at Dave. Embarrassment flooded through her when she realized that other diners were staring at her. She sent them a wan smile as she attempted to compose herself.

Leaning forward again, she spoke very softly, yet firmly. "That virus you picked up in the jungles has affected your brain. We are not in this restaurant celebrating our anniversary."

His smile didn't fade as he pressed the fragile crystal back into her hand. "My brain is perfectly fine. Check a calendar, sweetheart. We were married exactly fifteen years ago today. That's a long time, Maggie. It should be celebrated. How could you forget?"

"I haven't forgotten anything," she stated between clenched teeth. "I'm perfectly aware of the date and perfectly aware that the date has no particular significance anymore." Her fingers tightened around the crystal in her hand and came dangerously close to crushing it into tiny slivers. "Anniversary celebrations are for marriages that still exist. Ours doesn't."

Needing something to fortify her, Maggie gulped half her champagne, choking when the bubbly liquid fizzed its way down her throat. Eyes filling, she reached for her water goblet. The water soothed her throat and she was able to talk again. "Let's start over. We're out to celebrate some momentous occasion that you're very pleased about. And that occasion is . . . ?"

"The future, but first we'll celebrate beautiful memories." Dave leaned forward, caught up her hand and lifted it to his lips. "We did have some good times, Maggie. A lot of the years we were married were good ones." Between paying homage to each of her fingers, he said, "I wasn't with you for every anniversary and I'd like to make up for the ones I missed."

The sensations aroused as Dave's mouth lingered at each fingertip, caressing the sensitive pads with his lips and tongue, were almost unbearable. They tugged at her heart and softened her emotions until she felt as if she were nothing more than a quivering mass of awareness. A creeping languor weakened her limbs.

Dave's eyes were compelling and magnetic as they, too, caressed her, bathing her with their warmth. Maggie shivered and squeezed her eyes shut against the heartrending tenderness of his gaze. She pulled her hand away and hid it on her lap, safely out of his reach. Unable to lift her voice above a whisper, she said, "It's too late, Dave."

"It's never too late," he said with quiet emphasis. "As long as we're alive, it's not too late."

Before Maggie could form a thought in reaction, Dave's mood changed. His eyes took on their familiar sparkle and his smile was equally glittering. He gestured around the room. "Pretty ritzy place, isn't it? Remember when a big night out for us was pizza and beer at the beach?"

Maggie wanted to resist this trip down memory lane, but it was difficult. Dave was right. There *had* been good times during their marriage. The marriage itself was dead. She'd certainly spent a lot of time mourning its passing. Perhaps it was right to hold a wake on its behalf and remember all the good times. Maybe then, she'd be able to put away all the hurt and truly step forward. Perhaps the past should be celebrated before toasting the future.

Maggie took another sip of her champagne, surprised to discover her glass had been filled to the rim. Lord, the man really was a sorcerer. He'd held her so mesmerized, she hadn't been aware of anything but him. Now the spell had been lifted and she heard the soft music in the background, the hushed voices of their fellow diners, the muted clink and tinkle of silver against china, crystal against crystal.

Returning Dave's smile, she relaxed and gave herself up to the evening. "Okay. Let's talk about those good times in the early days. Remember the sunsets on the ocean? As lovely as this restaurant is, it can't compare to the beauty of a deserted California beach on a summer evening. With the ocean gently playing against the shore and the sun shimmering across the placid surface, it was truly breathtaking. The colors were magnificent. Pink, gold, azure, and salmon."

"Hey," Dave cut in teasingly. "Who's supposed to

be the wordsmith, here? You're supposed to paint it. I'm supposed to describe it."

Sapphire light sparkled with gaiety in Maggie's eyes as she challenged, "Can you describe it better?"

The waiter came for their order and Dave was granted a few moments to formulate his thoughts and pull upon every adjective he knew. As soon as they had handed the leather-bound menus back, he launched into his description.

"The purple shadows gathered on the cooling silver sand, while the deep blue waters of the Pacific provided a fertile canvas for the brush strokes of the dying sun. As the brightest star in the galaxy drifted downward it cast glittering shades of garnet, periwinkle, vermillion, and cadmium. The orchestra of the deep played a symphony against the shore."

"Oh, stop!" Maggie protested, nearly choking on the caviar toast she'd just popped in her mouth. "That was awful. If anyone hears you, your awards will be taken away."

"But I haven't even gotten to the part about the midnight gathering in the cloudless sky above," Dave returned.

"Don't, please," Maggie begged, leaning away so that the steward could fill her glass again. "I concede. You're a walking thesaurus."

Over warm seafood salads, they reminisced about Laura's babyhood. Dave confessed that he'd carried her first tooth around in his wallet all these years. "I always wondered what happened to that tooth after you played tooth fairy," Maggie admitted. "You had the silliest grin on your face when you walked back in our room."

"Didn't I ever tell you what happened? When I reached under Laura's pillow, she didn't move, flutter an eyelash, or anything. I was sure she was

sound asleep. I was tiptoeing out of her room when she whispered, 'You're too big to be a fairy, Daddy. Don't tell Mommy. She doesn't know I know.' "

Maggie giggled. "That little devil!"

They launched into a lively review of favorite anecdotes about their daughter, then into reminiscences of other times shared. The waiters came and went, removing courses and setting the next before them, but neither Maggie nor Dave was aware of the service.

The delicate flavor of the Pheasant Veronique was equally unnoticed. Maggie and Dave's attention was centered on the first Christmas tree they'd put up after their move to Alexandria. With Laura tramping along between them, they'd climbed every hill and dale in the woods at Maggie's brother Thomas's horse farm until they'd spied the perfect tree.

"That monster would have filled the Rotunda at the Capitol building," Dave quipped. "I don't know how we got it in the house."

"Where there's a will there's a way," Maggie suggested.

Dave's eyes sparked with some undefinable emotion as he gazed at her. "I do have the will," he declared.

"And you usually find the way," Maggie added absently as she studied the array of miniature pastries that had magically appeared in the center of their table.

"That is my intent," Dave stated.

This time Maggie caught the change in intonation.

She brought her head up sharply. His expression was bland, but her instincts told her to stay alert.

"You promised elegant dining, a cruise on a river barge, and dancing until dawn," she reminded as she forked a strawberry tartlet toward her mouth. "Are the cruise and dancing still on the agenda or were they a ruse like the mystery celebration?"

Maggie hoped they were still on. A cruise and dancing did sound like fun and now that she'd gone this far with the evening, she was prepared to go the distance. She hadn't had a romantic evening out on the town since . . . when? Since the last time she and Dave had managed to celebrate their anniversary together—their tenth, if she wasn't mistaken.

She reminded herself to keep up her resistance to his charm and make sure this evening didn't end up in bed like that one had. The riverboats that cruised the Potomac were normally brimming with passengers. Any establishment that offered dancing would probably be packed on a Friday night. There was safety in numbers, and she feared she'd badly need it.

"I'd never lie to you, Maggie." Dave's assurance cut into Maggie's appraisal of the rest of the evening. "There is something to celebrate and we have been doing just that."

"Oh, come on, Dave," she taunted gaily, covering the return of her discomfort that they were truly celebrating their anniversary. "You really didn't plan all this to celebrate our anniversary. Why are we out on the town?"

"In good time, sweetheart," he promised. He looked at his watch and frowned. "By my calculations, we have exactly twenty minutes to get to the Sixth Street pier if we want to catch the last cruise up the Potomac. Grab your purse and wrap and let's get going. We could use a little exercise after this meal. You did wear your running shoes, didn't you?" he asked innocently, knowing full well that tucked beneath the table was a pair of sandals with spiked heels.

The dainty strapped creations were hardly the thing for running, but they certainly did great things for Maggie's legs. Those exquisitely long legs of hers

were near perfect to begin with. However, the effect on their shape and length by the height of those shoes had left him speechless when she descended the stairs at the beginning of their evening.

The emerald dress draped her body perfectly, hinting at the gently curved thighs that brushed within the silk with her every step. When she'd turned her back to him so that he could help her with her jacket, he'd been treated to a panoramic view of her luscious ivory skin. He'd nearly ripped the rest of the dress from her. If Laura hadn't still been home, he would have made love to Maggie on the foyer floor.

All evening, Dave had speculated about what she was or wasn't wearing under the tissue-thin fabric. His aching groin was proof of where his speculations had taken him.

Maggie didn't make a move to leave, but went on enjoying the delicate pastry on her plate. Gobbling up such a chefs masterpiece seemed blasphemous. Besides, she'd caught a glimpse of the prices on the menu and was not about to waste one expensive tidbit.

"Oh, sure, I wore my runnin' shoes, darlin'," she drawled, her accent far heavier than was natural to her speech. Was it her Southern heritage or the amount of champagne she'd consumed that was slowing her speech down, Maggie wondered fleetingly.

"I have a special pair to match this little number I'm wearing." She waved lightly at the classic silk sheath she was wearing, surprised at how flippant and carefree she was feeling. "I believe I'll skip a mad dash to the pier if y'all don't mind. I do believe this city has such a thing as taxis."

A yellow cab deposited Dave and Maggie at the pier with five minutes to spare before cast-off. As

they strolled up the gangplank, Maggie was struck by the realization that in all her years of living in the D.C. area, she'd never once taken an evening cruise down the Potomac.

Stars, scattered around a crescent moon, decorated the darkened sky. The waters of the historic old river were placid and slow-moving as they wound through the city. The lights from the city's many buildings mingled with the illumination of the memorials and statuary. It wasn't the sun setting over the Pacific, but a breathtaking view in its own right.

It was a perfect evening. The temperature was mild, though a slight chill rose from the river. Maggie snuggled a little closer to Dave's warmth and was glad for the arm he wrapped around her. A vague premonition of danger teased at the edges of her consciousness and she shivered.

Assuming she was still cold, Dave stepped behind her, opened his coat and encircled her. It seemed the most natural thing in the world for Maggie to melt against his warm, hard body and rest her head against his shoulder. It was also just as natural for Dave's lips to brush against her temple.

"Remember standing like this as we watched those California sunsets, Maggie?" he asked, his lips so close to her ear his breath sent tingles down her throat. "The best was that weekend we drove up to Monterey."

"It really was beautiful up there. Do you ever miss it?"

"There's a lot I miss."

"Me, too."

"Do you miss this, Maggie?" he pressed his lips to her throat, exactly where he knew the touch triggered a reaction that shot all the way through her. "Or how about this?"

He turned her in his arms and immediately claimed her mouth. His tongue played at the edges of her lips until she couldn't resist opening to him. He caressed her tongue with his and coaxed her to do the same. She did and a low groaning sound rumbled in his throat as their kiss deepened.

He spread his feet and Maggie stepped closer, shifting her thighs between his in desperate need to blend her body with his. They were ravenous for each other, taking what they had been longing for.

Warning bells sounded in Maggie's head telling her she shouldn't have let this happen. This was no mere kiss. It was a prelude to lovemaking. They were surrounded by people now, but they wouldn't be when they left the boat and drove home. She was being dishonest if she continued like this, but her inner warnings were weak defense against the onslaught of Dave's kisses.

Unaware of the battle Maggie was fighting within herself, Dave launched another assault on her senses. His hands slipped within her jacket and found the expanse of skin bared by her almost backless dress.

Maggie no longer felt the chill rising from the river. Her skin tingled and burned in response to the caress of his strong hands across her back. Nor did she care if making love with Dave might be a mistake. He'd asked her if she'd missed this and she'd given an honest answer. Yes, she'd missed his kisses, his touch, his lovemaking. She hadn't been able to continue as his wife, but she hadn't stopped loving him.

Dave raised his head, and swallowed hard. His features were strained. His breathing was heavy, making speech difficult. "God, how much longer is this ride?"

It was a matter of but a few more minutes before

the boat was alongside the pier. To Maggie and Dave it seemed like hours. The six-mile trip from the city to Alexandria seemed like six hundred. The door hadn't clicked closed behind them before they were in each other's arms again.

After a medley of kisses that curled Maggie's toes, Dave murmured against her lips, "I promised you dancing, too."

"You still want to?" she managed between gulps for air.

One corner of his mouth turned up in a half smile. "Oh, there's a lot I want to do, but let's start with dancing, the next to the last thing on the agenda. I want to make it perfectly clear that I *do* keep my promises."

Leaving her in the darkened hallway, Dave turned on one small lamp in the living room, selected several albums and placed the records on the turntable. He slipped off his jacket, then turned to her, arms held wide. "Welcome to the St. Clair Ballroom. Music till dawn for your dancing pleasure."

The music might have lasted that long, but the dancers did not.

Held close to each other, their bodies blended perfectly as they moved to the soft music. To Maggie, nothing was so right as being held in Dave's arms, feeling his heartbeat against hers, his lips against her temple, her cheek, her mouth.

His fingertips traced patterns on her bare back and Maggie's yearned to return the favor. She unlocked her hands from behind his neck and loosened his tie, then went to work on his shirt buttons. Dave's fingers were just as busy at the hook and zipper at the back of her dress. They moved away from each other in order for Maggie to step out of the dress pooling at her ankles and Dave to shrug out of his shirt.

Yearning to feel her breasts pressed against his bare chest, to run her hands over the smooth muscles of his back, Maggie started to open her arms to embrace him. Dave stopped her, holding her away from him while his eyes roved slowly and seductively downward.

The backless design of her dress had precluded the wearing of a bra. Her breasts were naked to his gaze. She wore only a pair of emerald silk tap pants and sheer stockings. Dave groaned. "Better than my fantasy of what was under that dress."

Gently, he covered her breasts with his hands, then bent his head to kiss one sensitive dusky rose peak and then the other. Maggie clutched at Dave's shoulders for support as she felt her knees weaken. He coiled one arm around her waist, bent her upper body over it, then took her breast more fully into his mouth. He rolled her nipple with his tongue and suckled hungrily.

She was mindless with a tingling excitement and called his name.

He answered by gathering her up in his arms and carrying her out of the room. "I've waited this long, I can wait until I get you into our bed," he announced.

His long, brisk strides, taking of the steps two at a time, belied the patience he had proposed. In seconds, he was placing her on the king-sized bed, their bed. And in those seconds, his patience fled completely. Their remaining garments flew willy-nilly around the moonlit room.

He covered her and they embraced flesh to flesh, molding curves to planes. Unable to defer unity any longer, he sank into her, deep and strong, pulsing with his heated need for her. With his mouth, he caught the sigh that escaped from her lips. Cradling her head with his hands, he took her mouth as

deeply and rhythmically as his manhood claimed and was claimed by her womanhood. They surged and ebbed as their passion drove them quickly to climax.

Throughout the night, they loved, each time satisfying their hunger, then renewing it. In the last hour before the dawn, Dave said, his voice hushed and reverent, "Maggie, I love you. I've never stopped loving you."

Maggie squeezed her eyes shut to keep the tears brimming there from flowing down her cheeks. She believed him. "I love you, too, Dave. I always have."

"Ahhh . . ." He sighed sleepily. "I knew it couldn't be too late. Nothing could change what we had. It was too perfect."

His deep, even breathing told her he was asleep. Maggie let her tears flow. "Nothing will change what we had," she whispered into the darkness.

But it hadn't been perfect. Perfection had been achieved in bed where they shared and gave and became one. Out of bed? Each of them had built and lived a life separate from the other. She wondered if they'd ever truly known each other.

Nine

Sunlight warmed Dave's face and bright light filtered through his eyelids. Smiling contentedly, he shifted to his side and nestled his head into the pillow, not yet willing to put the night behind him and start a new day. It had been a night to be savored.

Reaching across the bed, he encountered nothing. Disappointment chilled him. He'd so wanted to wake up with Maggie in his arms, kiss her awake, begin the day pledging their love as they'd pledged it all through the night. Had last night been a dream?

He opened his eyes. A mixture of relief and amusement swept through him and his smile returned. Last night hadn't been a dream. One stocking was draped over the headboard. Reaching for it, he drew it through his fingers, fascinated anew by the silken texture and the images it invoked. His groin tightened and he groaned softly with the pleasure-pain of it.

pair of briefs, his bare foot encountered a scrap of silk. He looked down and chuckled. If he'd really needed further proof of last night, he had it. Beneath his foot were the emerald silk tap pants he'd practically ripped from Maggie's body. Scattered around the room were his clothes and Maggie's. Another stocking was draped over the lamp next to the bed.

He dressed hastily, anxious to seek out Maggie. He found her in the sunroom at the back of the house. Her back was to him when he stepped inside the room, heavy with the fresh scent of the profusion of healthy green plants that hung there. The room was gay with the bright splashes of primary colors on the plump cushions of the wicker furnishings, and the paintings, hers, that hung on those patches of white wall that weren't made of glass.

Maggie was curled into the corner of the sofa, her chin propped in one hand, her gaze directed out the window. Wearing a pair of tight black pants and an oversized pink print shirt, her bare feet tucked up beneath her, she looked much like the college girl she'd been when they'd first met.

Soundlessly, Dave entered the room and was reaching for her before he spoke her name.

She started. Her head swiveled sharply toward him. Upon seeing him, she seemed to pull more into herself. "Dave."

Lowering himself to sit beside her, he curled his arms around her. Instead of melting against him as he expected, Maggie remained rigid.

"Not had your morning coffee, yet, my love?" he teased, covering his disappointment that last night hadn't left her as mellow as he. He consoled himself with the knowledge that Maggie wasn't always in the best of humor first thing in the morning. He

guessed from the tousled hair and lack of makeup that she'd not been up much longer than he.

"I've had plenty of coffee," Maggie stated, her tone flat and expressionless. Pushing out of his arms, she uncurled her legs from beneath her and moved off the sofa. "There's still some in the pot if you want a cup."

He caught her hand and tried to pull her back down beside him. "I can think of a much better way to get my blood pumping than a cup of coffee."

Maggie resisted the tug on her hand and quickly put several feet between herself and Dave.

She couldn't bear to look at him, for if she did, she'd never resist tumbling right into his arms. Like so many, many other mornings after a night of making glorious love, the afterglow kept all the shadows at bay. But not this time. This time their problems weren't going to be ignored.

"I'll get you a cup of coffee," she said as she started out of the room.

"Maggie?" The sense of contentment he'd awakened with evaporated and was replaced by foreboding. "What's wrong?"

Maggie halted, but kept her back to him. "Nothing's changed, Dave," she said so quietly, he barely heard her.

Dave exhaled audibly. "That's a relief," he said as much to himself as to Maggie. "You really had me going there. Babe. But, something's bothering you. What is it?"

Maggie couldn't answer. She'd spent the last several hours preparing for this scene and now that it was upon her, her courage had deserted her.

Inside, she was a mass of screaming self-recriminations. Aloud, she said nothing. Her answer to Dave's question was a slight shake of her head.

Alarmed, Dave rose and came to stand inches behind her. Gently he curled his hands around her upper arms, then ran them up and down in a way that was meant to be assuring. To Maggie, or himself? He wasn't sure.

All he knew was that he needed to touch her. By touching her, holding her, he'd surely be able to shore up that slender thread that tied her to him.

Rubbing his hands over her arms, he leaned over her and nuzzled her ear. "Thanks to last night, at least I know whatever's bothering you couldn't be anything to do with us. What is it? Laura? Something happen with your family?"

She couldn't let this go on any longer. Stiffening, Maggie turned to face him. "Last night is the problem," she stated firmly.

In reaction, Dave let his hands drop away from her. He felt a fury rising within him that matched the one he'd experienced when he'd received those damned divorce papers. "What do you mean last night is a problem? Maybe I'm dense or something, Maggie, but you're going to have to spell it out for me."

"Last night was a mistake." Before her courage deserted her completely, Maggie explained. "It... it didn't mean what you think it did. I'm sorry I gave you the wrong impression."

"Gave me the wrong impression? Are you claiming you faked your enjoyment? Sorry, babe, I'm not buying it," he said sarcastically. "At the risk of sounding like the supreme egotist, I know you were satisfied. Your body sang."

Maggie's eyes were blue lasers as they glared up at him. "At the risk of inflating your ego further, I was satisfied. Sex was always good between us. That hasn't changed, as I certainly found out last night."

Dave's expression was thunderous, his voice not far below a roar. "You found that out, did you? What was last night? Curiosity to see if you could still make it with your ex-husband?"

"Yes!" Maggie fired back, every inch of her bristling. She was glad for the anger. It was easier to use it as a shield against him. "But that's about all it proved. Don't expect a repeat. I am no longer your wife and I won't be your mistress for the remainder of your stay."

Dave took a step backward as if she'd struck him. "My mistress? Where in the hell did you get an idea like that? I told you I loved you last night and I distinctly recall your returning the sentiment. I assumed we'd be spending the day planning our second wedding. People in love usually get married."

"Not necessarily. Loving each other is beside the point." Her face was red and her body was shaking. It wasn't McPherson blood causing those reactions, but rather pure unadulterated frustration and anger directed as much at herself as at Dave. She damned herself for having been such a selfish fool the night before.

"Mistress or wife, no matter what you call it, it's a part-time job. I will not be your part-time anything sitting back here for weeks, sometimes months, worrying whether I'll ever see you again. I will not put myself through the torture in order to be a plaything for you when you're on holiday."

"Plaything?" he said in contempt. "That works both ways, sweetheart. You weren't passive last night. You never are. Your hands were all over me. If you want to talk about playthings, I've provided you with one."

Maggie sent him a withering stare. "I

She started out of the room again, but Dave caught her arm and spun her back to face him. "Is it the separations, the danger, that you can't handle?"

"They'll do for a start," she told him, wriggling in his grasp. "Some women can live with it. but I'm not one of them."

Dave's anger fled and he smiled softly at her. His grasp on her arms lessened and when he was sure she wouldn't take flight again, he let go. Very carefully, he cupped her face between his palms, "Maggie, sweetheart, you don't have to put up with the separations anymore. That was the last thing on the agenda last night, the one thing we never got around to."

He kissed the tip of her nose and grinned mischievously. "I guess we got detoured after the dancing."

The raven brow that lifted and her cold glare told him he'd be wise not to bring up how they'd spent the hours before dawn.

Dropping his hands from her face, he tucked them into the back pockets of his jeans. Instantly, Maggie began backing away. "Maggie, please. Will you stop running away and sit down. I think what I have to say will make a difference."

"I doubt it," she replied stubbornly, but did seat herself on one of the chairs.

"We'll see," he said, flashing her another high-voltage grin. He looked as smug as the Cheshire cat and Maggie would have liked to dump one of the ferns on his head.

"I won't be covering the news firsthand anymore," he began, gratified to see Maggie's eyes widen in surprise. "I'm being groomed to take over Malloran's job as editor-in-chief of the magazine when he retires on the first of the year."

Maggie didn't blink an eye and Dave assumed she

was so stunned by the announcement she was speechless with joy. "No more trips, Maggie. No more danger, just staying at home at a regular eight-to-five job. That's what I've been doing for the past week. I've even taken to riding the Metro, like the other commuters. I've got one of those crazy farecards upstairs in my wallet if you need proof of that."

"Your byline?" she asked, her expression unchanged.

Uncomfortable under her steely gaze, Dave replied, "Retired," with more gaiety than he felt at the prospect of giving up his byline.

Maggie folded her arms across her chest. "You'll never be satisfied with such a tame job. You won't last till Thanksgiving."

"Thanks a lot for the vote of confidence," he snapped impatiently. This conversation wasn't going at all the way he'd expected. He wasn't particularly confident in his ability to remain satisfied with a desk job, but he'd be damned if he was going to admit it openly to Maggie, not now, maybe not ever. "I'd hoped that the woman I loved and who professed to love me would be willing to stand by me."

"You'll have to stand by yourself like you've always done. Or with your colleagues. They've shared most of the last twelve years with you. Why not the rest?" she demanded, bitterness tinging her words. "I'm not going to jump back into marriage with you and then discover that you're packing your bags two weeks later because you've discovered you're bored with a desk job. I've built a life without you and I'm going to continue living it."

Dave's eyes were insolent as they assessed her. His expression was leering. "You're a pretty passionate woman, Maggie. You said you'd missed making love and I believed it. You proved just how much you

missed it last night—all night long. I'm surprised you've lived without a man this long. Or do you have someone waiting in the wings?"

Maggie straightened her spine and shoulders and sent him a killing glare. There was no other man in her life, but she wasn't going to let Dave know that. "I do want a full-time husband."

Dave managed to mask his flinch. They'd argued before and that last one that had precipitated the divorce had been a doozy, but she'd never been so cool and cutting. His eyes narrowed on her and he asked, "Are you interviewing candidates for the job?"

"I most certainly am," she lied. Crossing her legs, she began taking unusual interest in the color of her own nail polish.

"Then I'm submitting my resume," he said, keeping his voice deceptively calm. "I'd say that last night's interview should put me at the head of the field. Nobody could have satisfied you the way I did."

Through gritted teeth Maggie informed him, "There is more to being a husband than satisfying a woman in bed, though I'll give you points for that. You're very good. You've obviously been keeping in practice."

"Maybe or maybe not," he replied noncommittally. "Sex is like riding a bicycle. Once you learn, you never forget. You just get on and ride."

"You really are disgusting!"

"But good," he reminded with an infuriating leer. "Like I said, last night should put me at the head of the field. Nobody else is going to get so many points for stud service." He pointed to the plants filling the room. "Gardening expertise couldn't earn as many points with you as bedroom expertise. Putting life into your bed requires a real pro—like me."

Maggie opened her mouth and quickly closed it. "Oh! You—you—"

"Scalawag," he supplied with a grin so maddening the closest fern screamed to be sacrificed on his head. "Or maybe Yankee scalawag."

Rising to her feet, she pressed her hands to her sides to keep from grabbing down the plant swaying just above her head. She was in no mood to have to clean up potting soil and broken fern fronds. "Get out of my house this instant!"

Dave started to say something more, but changed his mind. Tight-lipped, he sent her another glare before turning on his heel and exiting the room.

Feeling as if her legs would crumple, Maggie dropped to the wicker sofa. She pulled her legs up beneath her and curled herself into a tight ball. Tears fell freely down her cheeks. In her misery, she hugged one of the throw pillows to her chest, needing to hold on to something to keep from shattering into a thousand pieces.

She could hear the movement of Dave's feet in the room above her. Moments later those same feet were descending the steps but far more slowly than they'd ascended. She hugged the pillow more tightly when she heard his tread advancing along the hallway toward her. There was nothing left to say, so why was he coming back in here?

Wiping the tears from her cheeks with the heels of her hands, she stared out the windows, unwilling and unable to look at the man hesitating at the doorway. The storm of their anger had passed, but the hurt was still there, so deep she felt numb.

Dave swallowed hard, hating himself for causing the tears that streaked Maggie's beautiful face. If only everything that had been said could be called back. It couldn't. Nothing was going to erase the hurt they'd inflicted on each other . . . at least nothing that could be done at the moment.

"I'll let you know where I am when I get settled," he said finally.

"Yes, Laura will want to visit you," Maggie returned, her voice flat, devoid of all emotion.

"I know. I'll try to find something nearby so it'll make it easy. I'll move all the rest of my stuff out when I get a place." You're stalling, St. Clair. Get the hell out of here before you make matters worse, he chastised himself. Picking up his suitcase, he quietly retraced his steps.

Maggie let out her breath in a long shudder as soon as she knew Dave was beyond earshot. She held herself together until she heard the back door click shut. Then, the dam burst and deep sobbing joined her tears.

Dave tossed the case he'd packed into the car and started to lower himself onto the seat.

"Dad, where are you going?"

He turned at the sound of his daughter's voice. Guilt and pain shot through him as he took in her worried features. He tried for a reassuring smile. "Laura. When did you get home?"

She ignored his question. "Weren't you even going to wait and say good-bye? You promised you'd never leave again."

Dave opened his arms and Laura flung herself at him. "Honey, honey," he soothed. "I'm not really leaving. I promised you those days were over and I'll never break that promise to you. I'm only relocating. Not far."

Not revealing any of the argument he'd just had with her mother, Dave explained that he was moving to his own apartment. "I've inconvenienced your mother long enough. It was more than kind of her to let me stay this long."

"Didn't your new job make any difference to her?"

Choosing his words very carefully so as not to make Maggie look the bad guy, Dave replied, "I've given your mother a lot of reasons to be skeptical, honey. My being gone so much isn't the only problem we had." He wished he knew exactly what those other problems were. Right now, all he could do was give Maggie some time and space. Then, he'd start to work on whatever else was standing between them.

"She kicked you out again, didn't she?" Laura stated more than asked. Before Dave could reply, she informed him that she was coming to live with him. "I don't want to be one of those kids who spends every other weekend with their dad. I want to see you every day."

He wanted that too, but he couldn't let her come with him. He wasn't going to add any more hurt to the mountain he'd already heaped on Maggie. Dave placed his hands over Laura's shoulders and held her a little away from him.

Laura was everything a man could want in a daughter. And it was all Maggie's doing. He'd made a lot of mistakes in his life, but using his daughter as a pawn wasn't going to be added to the list. As gently as possible, he turned down Laura's request to live with him.

"Stay with your mom, Laura. She needs you and you need her." Dave pressed a kiss to Laura's forehead. There were tears clouding Laura's lovely sunny eyes. Now he'd made both his girls cry and he felt the lowest of the low.

He forced the best smile he could manage and promised, "We're going to get this whole thing straightened out, honey. Promise me one thing."

Laura sniffed. "Anything."

Dave chuckled. "I'm going to ask two promises,"

he quickly corrected. "First, never promise any man anything."

For that he received a disgruntled, "Oh, Dad . . ."

Pushing her chin up, he begged for a smile. When he got it, he extracted the second promise. "Don't ever question that both your mother and I love you."

Leaving the house this time was harder than any of the times before, but Dave forced himself to back his car out of the driveway. "It's temporary," he vowed as he drove up the street.

Ten

Dave shifted the news copy in his hands, resisting the temptation to pull out a blue pencil and rewrite most of it. Grammatically, it was perfect. It communicated. It was smooth, succinct, interesting, and worthy of print.

But it wasn't his style. It wasn't his article.

There was nothing wrong with it.

He initialed it and tossed in the basket along with the others that would be appearing in the magazine's next issue.

Swiveling his chair, he propped his elbows on the arms and tented his fingers together. He stared at the floor-to-ceiling expanse of glass that formed the back wall of his office.

The city, the nation's capital, lay before him. Several floors below him, the sidewalk was packed with people jostling each other as they hurried about their business. Some of them were no doubt going about this country's business. Others were conducting other countries' affairs. News was being made beneath him.

News was being made all around the world.

None of it was being reported by him. None of the interviews with the movers and shakers of the world were being conducted by him.

The clatter of typewriters still used by the die-hards sounded from the large open room beyond his door. The teletype machine rattled constantly. Phones were ringing. At least a dozen computer display screens flashed copy being created. The editorial floor of *Global News Magazine* was a beehive of activity.

Dave was second in command over all of it and the people who made it happen. In a few weeks, he'd be the head man. It was exciting.

"I *am* enjoying this," Dave announced to the window. And he was—most of the time. But there were those times when a hot tip came in and he felt like a race horse quivering at the gate, every muscle tensed and ready to spring.

He swiveled another quarter turn and flipped on his own personal computer. It had taken most of the first week for him to make the transition from typewriter to word processor, but he'd finally succeeded.

The faithful portable typewriter that had been all over the world with him had been rescued from the hotel where he'd headquartered before the capture and shipped to him. It rested in a place of honor on the shelves that banked one wall of his office. It was retired from its travels, just like its owner.

Next to the typewriter rested a bottle of antimalarial tablets, another relic from his days in the field. It served as a reminder of the less-than-glamorous aspects of the life he'd left behind him. Dysentery, heat rash, athlete's foot, aching bones from nights sleeping on the ground, dodging bullets and grenades. Those were aspects he no longer had any

taste for and was more than delighted to have left behind him. The thrill of the work had at some point stopped outweighing the discomforts.

He sent both the typewriter and the brown glass bottle a respectful salute before placing his fingers on the computer's keyboard.

The battered manual was a symbol of the past. It was a small, lightweight machine, perfect for the nomadic life he'd led. The electronic marvel beneath his fingers was plugged into the wall, its function totally dependent on electric current. It couldn't go anywhere, but it didn't need to.

"And neither do I," Dave mumbled as he began writing the editor's column that carried his byline. That was the one thing Maggie had been right about. He hadn't been able to give up writing altogether. Nor had his ego allowed for never seeing his name in print again. And so the new column, an editorial comment and overview of each week's issue, had been created.

"And I sleep in a nice, clean bed every night," he reminded himself, except it wasn't the right bed, not yet.

Everything was going according to his plan, he decided as he rode the Metro home to Alexandria that evening. Almost everything. He hadn't won Maggie over yet, but he would.

He hoped it would be soon. His furnished apartment was a dismal place, and he had done nothing to personalize the bland atmosphere. It was nearly as grim as some of the hotels he'd stayed in during the years abroad.

"Mind if I sit here?"

Dave turned at the sound of the male voice and smiled warmly when he recognized its owner. "Can't think of anyone I'd rather share this ride with. Good to see you, Robert," he greeted his former father-in-

law and truly meant the words. He genuinely liked Robert Sheldon and had been trying to think of a graceful way to make contact with him.

"Likewise, Dave. Sorry I haven't made some sort of contact sooner. Maggie tells me you're the new editor-in-chief at *Global*. Must be quite a change of pace."

"That it is, sir." The understatement of the year, Dave admitted inwardly. "But I'm not the chief, yet."

"You will be." Robert winked at him. "You've got what it takes."

The two men passed the next several moments in purely desultory conversation. Dave supplied a general description of the kind of work he did. After a bit of urging on Dave's part, Robert Sheldon revealed humbly that he'd spent the day presenting a case to the Supreme Court.

"And you're riding the Metro with us common folk?" Dave chided good-naturedly.

"It's fast and easy. No hassle. Same reason anybody with any sense rides it."

With a slight tip of his head, Dave acknowledged his agreement with Robert's excuse for joining the commuter masses. "So you're still fighting for justice, are you, sir?"

"Like to step into the harness now and then," Robert admitted a bit sheepishly, as if he needed an excuse to continue practicing law.

"You'll never really retire," Dave teased lightly.

"It's hard to give up something you love," Robert commented, his gray eyes intent on Dave. "Don't give up, Dave. Everything'll work out."

Dave studied the older man. He was the last person he would have expected to step into an affair of the heart, but the statement clearly had been about Maggie rather than his work. "I don't intend to, Robert. Got any advice?"

After a few moments of thoughtful silence, he spoke. "You'd best start out learning to be friends with her," he said in the melodic drawl that labeled him a true son of the Old Dominion. "She's like her mother. Has to feel needed and a part of her man's life. Share it all, son. The good and the bad. My Maggie's a lot stronger than you may ever have given her credit for. She's got a strong need for identity, too. Maybe because she's a middle child. Didn't you ever wonder why she went so far away to college?"

Dave thought for a moment, realizing how clear it all was now. "I've been a selfish bastard, haven't I?"

Robert laughed softly. "No more than any man deeply in love." He patted Dave's knee reassuringly. "You'll be all right. She needs you, you know. And I believe you're coming to know how very much you need her."

"I've always needed her, sir," Dave stated.

Robert's gray eyes twinkled merrily, his mouth curled into a knowing smile. "You knew it. I knew it. But Maggie didn't know it. That's the way of it, son, and what makes the relationship between the sexes so fascinating. What seems so obvious to one is invisible to the other."

Thoughtfully, Robert offered, "Women are such intuitive creatures, far more than we males. Yet, they need the words. Not just once, but continually. Strange, isn't it?"

Dave frowned. "They're strange all right." Strange and different in a wonderful, exciting way that made them completely irresistible.

Before Robert had suggested it, Dave had determined he wanted Maggie's friendship. He'd thought they'd begun one, but then it had been shattered. In the space of a few minutes, the small step forward had been pushed back a dozen feet. He never should

have forced the physical side of their relationship so soon.

How to go about regaining the ground he'd lost, Dave pondered as he let himself into his apartment. Maggie wasn't even speaking to him at the present. The drawbridge around her castle had been pulled up and locked in place. He'd have to have help, someone on the inside.

He picked up the telephone and shamelessly enlisted the assistance of his daughter. He'd promised never to use Laura as a pawn, but an ally was something different altogether.

"I've invited Dad for supper," Laura announced.

Bent over the oven door, basting the chicken she was roasting, Maggie barely kept from tumbling into the roasting pan. "Is he coming?"

"He'll be here in about fifteen minutes."

Standing quickly, Maggie whirled around. "Fifteen minutes! Laura, how could you?"

Laura held her ground. Her chin was up in a defiant pose, every feature set in belligerence. "Dad's my friend. You always said my friends were welcome for supper any time because you always fix plenty."

Was this an example of that old saw, "Hoisted by his own petard"? Maggie wondered fleetingly. Wiping her sleeve across her brow, Maggie tried for a reasonable tone. "Laura, honey, inviting your father for dinner without getting my permission first is hardly the same as bringing a friend home after school."

Laura shoved her hands deeper into the pockets of the baggy jacket that swamped her slender body. "I don't see why," she maintained, nonchalantly. "He's my friend and it's not like you don't know him." She turned pleading eyes toward Maggie.

"Please, Mom. You said I could spend as much time with him as I wanted."

Definitely hoisted by her own petard, Maggie decided grimly and made a mental note to look up the mysterious petard. "Set another place and watch the rice while I go run a comb through my hair," she said as she sauntered casually out of the kitchen.

As soon as she was sure Laura was occupied and wouldn't notice, Maggie shifted into high gear. She took the fastest shower on record and slipped into a fresh set of clothes so quickly anyone watching would have thought a cyclone had hit the bedroom.

No way was Dave St. Clair going to see her looking limp and frazzled after a particularly trying day. She was the coolly successful executive who ran her business so smoothly it almost ran itself. She was in control of her life and it was a calm, settled life, completely independent of anyone else.

She was in the process of snapping a silver brace let on her wrist when she heard the front doorbell. Taking a last look in the mirror, she was satisfied with the impression she'd make.

She wore winter-white wool slacks and a sapphire-blue silk blouse, with silver accessories at her throat, ears and wrist. Her hair was a black cloud framing her face and falling just to her shoulders. Her makeup was light, but enough to mask the shadows under her eyes and skillfully convey a healthy natural blush to her pale cheeks.

If Laura made one remark about the dramatic change she'd made in herself, Maggie would cheerfully strangle her only child.

Drawing an insouciant aura around her like a veil, Maggie descended the stairs and greeted their dinner guest. "Good evening, Dave."

Maggie glanced at her watch and frowned at the hour. "It's getting late, Laura. You have school to morrow." She hoped not only that would Laura take the cue and go to bed, but that Dave would go home to his own apartment. He'd been invited to dinner and then stayed the rest of the evening—just as he'd done for a solid week.

It won't last much longer, Maggie told herself. She could afford to be gracious about all these visits. Dave would surely chuck that desk job any day now. All those excited narratives about his work were a smoke screen. He was miserable, bored out of his mind. She was sure of it.

An assignment he couldn't resist would come along and away he'd go. And after he was gone, Laura couldn't accuse her of having denied her any time with her father.

At a nod from Dave, Laura took her mother's suggestion. "Good night. Dad. Good night, Mom." After a quick kiss for each of them, she was up the stairs.

Trying not to be obvious, Maggie looked across the room to Dave, hoping for some sign that he would be leaving soon. There wasn't any. The news paper was back up in front of his face.

"Anything really interesting in tonight's paper?" she asked.

"Yeah. There's a color insert advertising a delightful blend of papaya, orange, and grapefruit juice that's quite tantalizing." He put the paper down and smiled at her. "Yours?"

Maggie couldn't stop the smile that came to her lips. "Yes, it's mine."

"It's good, Maggie. Makes me want to rush right out and stock up on Paradise Islands juices."

"Laying it on a little thick, aren't you?" she returned.

"Maybe," he admitted. "But it is a good ad."

Dave folded the newspaper and placed it on the library table at his shoulder. Methodically, he started clearing the coffee table of the few scattered magazines and objets d'art and placing them on the floor beneath. "I have a favor to ask."

"What sort of favor?" Maggie eyed the completely cleared table with growing apprehension. What sort of favor required a table top?

- "We're thinking about changing the look of the cover of the magazine, beginning with the first issue in January. I've brought along several mock-ups and I'd like your opinion on them."

His request pleased her more than she wanted to admit. "But, Dave, don't you have an art department for that?" she felt compelled to ask.

Dave shrugged dismissively. "Of sorts. It's really another name for the photo lab."

He produced a briefcase from behind the couch and within seconds, he was laying the mock-ups across the table. "I'd appreciate any comments or suggestions you might have about the use of color, type style, type size, and placement of the logo."

Intrigued, Maggie crossed the room and sat down on the couch beside Dave. Studying the samples he'd laid out, she discarded several, condemning them as too busy, undignified, or dull.

Deep in thought, Maggie tapped her fingernail on the one in the center. "I like the basic format of this one the best, but something's still not quite right." She thought another moment and then asked, "Have you considered a different colored border? Something other than red?"

"But isn't red the most eye-catching color?" Dave asked, though he'd wondered himself if a color change wasn't at the top of the list of changes. "We don't want our magazine to be overlooked on the newsstand."

"That's just it," Maggie pointed out. "All the news magazines have red on their covers. Borders, back grounds for the logo, red letters. What if you used a deep green, say British racing green. It would be classy and stand out against all that red."

Dave narrowed his eyes as he stared at the cover. "I'm having trouble visualizing it. I never was good at that sort of thing."

Maggie jumped up from the couch. "Wait right here." She was out of the room in a split second.

Dave smiled to himself as he leaned back against the cushions. It just might work, Robert, he said to himself. At least, she's talking to me and has agreed to help. And I'm not even faking it. I really do need her help.

At the sound of Maggie's footsteps on the stair case, he leaned forward again, as if he'd spent the whole time she'd been gone studying the covers left on the table.

Maggie dropped down beside him again, producing a box of colored markers. She rooted through the box until she found the one she wanted. Hesitating before she made the change she'd suggested, she asked, "May I?"

"Go ahead," he told her. "I wouldn't have asked your opinion if I didn't really want it."

Maggie didn't need any more encouragement. With sure strokes, she covered the existing red border and logo with dark green. Sitting back, she studied the cover critically, tilting her head from side to side. "Not quite right."

Quickly she added a thin white inner border and then a very fine line with a black pen. She did the same with the logo. "What do you think?"

Dave picked it up and studied it, then carried it over to the mantle and propped it up. From several feet away, he studied it carefully. "I think I like it."

"Just think?" Maggie demanded, a bit disappointed that she hadn't gotten his wholehearted approval.

Dave sent her a sidelong grin. "Got any brand X newsmagazines around here?"

"Guilty," Maggie admitted and shuffled through the basket at the end of the couch. She produced two of *Global's* leading competitors and placed them on each side of the sample cover she'd altered.

Taking up a position next to Dave, she asked, "Now what do you think?"

"I think I should recommend that *Global* hire another St. Clair," he began, draping his arm around her shoulders. "It's perfect, Maggie. Thanks."

Giving her a squeeze, he meant to give her a light kiss on her temple, but at the last second, Maggie turned her face up to him. No matter that warning bells told him he should keep his physical need for her on ice, the temptation was too strong. He had to kiss her.

Restraining himself, he touched his lips to hers, first with a whisper of a kiss. Then when she didn't draw away, he settled his mouth more firmly over hers. Hungry for the sweet taste of her, he gathered her into his arms and claimed her mouth.

Maggie rose on her toes and wrapped her arms around his neck, shocking herself with the eagerness of her response. Would she always turn into a mindless ball of putty with only one kiss? The answer was yes and she didn't like it.

Dave felt the change in her instantly and slowly released her. Resting his forehead against hers, he brought his breathing back to normal. "I'm sorry, Maggie. I hadn't meant for that to happen. I'm afraid my thinking goes haywire around you," he admitted as he set her away from him.

Maggie stared up at him with wide-eyed fascination.

His thinking went haywire around her? It was heady information. In all the years they'd been together, she had thought it just the opposite.

Reaching for his jacket, Dave announced, "I guess I'd better be going. Walk me to the door?"

She nodded agreement and with a sense of unease moved ahead of him. Say something, you ninny, she admonished herself. In the hall, she spied the trench coat he'd tossed on the bench when he'd arrived. Picking it up, she said, "Don't forget this. You might need it tomorrow morning. The weather's turning colder every day."

When she handed it to him, he closed his hands over hers and held her there. "Don't bolt away from me, Maggie," he directed.

"But I wasn't—"

"Yes, you were," he maintained. "I promise no more caveman tactics." Before she could refute his appraisal of what had just happened in the living room, he abruptly changed the subject. "I haven't properly thanked you for dinner. It was delicious as always."

"Thank you," she managed, having trouble thinking at all under the intensity of his gaze. He was right. She did want to bolt away from him. Standing this close, feeling his warm hands closed over hers, was driving her just a little bit crazy. Her lips were still throbbing and moist from his kiss and every part of her was clamoring for more.

Like all the evenings before, he'd been at his most charming and she was having increasing difficulty remembering exactly why she'd divorced this gorgeous man in the first place.

"Thank you for helping with the dishes," she mumbled as she felt herself being pulled closer to him.

"There's a much better way to thank you for dinner," he whispered as he lowered his head.

He brushed her lips with his own once, twice, then covered her mouth with his. Maggie's hands, still clutching the trench coat, were caught between them as Dave wrapped his arms around her. It was a sweet kiss, over so quickly that Maggie's eyes were still closed when Dave relieved her of his coat.

"Let me take you to dinner tomorrow night." He shoved his arms into the sleeves of his coat, but his gaze never left her face. His anxiety over her answer made him impatient.

Maggie hesitated, weighing the wisdom of going out with Dave. They'd end up in bed, she was sure of it. She needed more time, more evenings like they'd had this week. Something was building between them, something far more precious than they'd ever had before. She wanted more time to explore it before overshadowing it with the strength of their desire for each other.

Something snapped inside Dave as he watched a war of emotions flicker across her features. Bedeviled by the memory of their argument in the sun-room, he sneered, "You interviewing somebody else tomorrow night?"

Feeling utterly stupid, she stared at him, having not the slightest idea what he was talking about.

"Interviewing?"

"You know. As part of your campaign to find a full-time husband," he supplied. "Tomorrow is Friday. Makes sense that you probably have a date with one of the other candidates."

All the soft feelings she'd been having for Dave disappeared. The truce they'd settled into with his first dinner appearance was over. He'd broken it, but she was not going to get into another shouting match.

"Right," she said, stepping toward the door. She turned the knob and opened it. "I'd forgotten what

day it was. I will be out tomorrow evening. You're welcome to come over and spend the evening with Laura. As far as I know, she has no plans."

"It's an away game," Dave said smoothly, maybe too smoothly. "We'll probably get a pizza or something. Maybe have one of her friends over. I'll stay with them until you get home."

"Laura doesn't need a babysitter."

"No, she doesn't. But she does need a father and I'll be here. Interview candidates for full-time husband all you like, Maggie, but none of them are going to replace me as a full-time father."

Maggie's temper snapped. "You'll never be a full-time anything! It's not in you to make that kind of commitment."

"Well just see about that," he roared back as he stepped through the door. Over his shoulder, he called, "Have a nice time, tomorrow evening, but pencil me in for the next available Interview. I want my chance to stack up points."

The door slammed behind him.

Slamming doors ran in the St. Clair family. Dave slammed the car door and nearly shattered the frame around his apartment door.

Stupid! He was worse than stupid.

He'd started making friends with her and then thrown it all away. They were back to being enemies and he had no one to blame but himself. He'd certainly spoken the truth when he told Maggie his thinking went haywire around her. He short-circuited!

Eleven

Late Friday afternoon, the disembodied voice of Dave's secretary sounded through the intercom, "Call on line one, Mr. St. Clair."

Punching the buttons, Dave answered, "St.Clair, here."

"Dad?"

"Hi, honey, what's up?"

"I want to have a party tonight. Mom says I have to ask you if it's okay since you'll be the one chaperoning."

Dave gripped the receiver a bit more tightly. So it hadn't been a bluff. Maggie really was going out this evening. "Chaperoning? What kind of party are you having? How many kids are you expecting?"

"Oh, I don't know. The usual gang. We'll just mess around, listen to music, maybe watch a video. Is it okay, Dad?"

Visions of a half dozen fourteen-year-old girls giggling together over some movie magazine and teaching each other the latest dance steps flashed in Dave's mind. "Sure, honey. Need me to pick up anything for this little get-together?"

Laura's squeal of delight nearly broke his eardrum. "You're the best. Dad. A case of soda and some bags of chips is all we'll need. Joe and Mike are bringing the videos. Bye, Dad. See ya."

Dave stared at the receiver for a long moment before he returned it to its cradle. Joe and Mike? Those were male names . . . or were they? Probably short for Joann and Michelle. Laura was too young to be throwing boy-girl parties.

He scribbled a note to pick up soda and chips on his way home. A case? Just how many were in "the gang"?

Instinct whispered that he'd just walked into a very neatly laid trap and that Maggie had helped lay it. She knew exactly what he was getting into. Dave would have bet every penny he owned on it. He was being paid back for his remarks of the evening before—in spades. Well, he'd show her he could handle anything and stack up a few more points in his column while he was at it.

Hours later, when Dave arrived laden down with the supplies for Laura's party, Maggie met him at the door. "Just put everything on the kitchen table," she directed breezily, while Dave stared spellbound at the emerald-clad beauty before him. "Laura. You're father's here."

Feeling his blood beginning to boil, Dave placed his burdens on the kitchen counter. Maggie was wearing that dress! The very same backless silk job she'd worn for him. How could she!

Through gritted teeth, he inquired, "Wouldn't you be more comfortable tonight in a dress with a back in it?"

Her back to him, Maggie looked innocently over her shoulder. "Backless is very fashionable right now. Most men like the look. Don't you?"

He liked it. Any man with eyes would! The night they'd gone out, that little wisp of a dress had done a thorough job on his libido. The dress was modest enough in the front—if you didn't count the way the fabric draped and accented every one of her curves. But the back . . . The damned thing exposed it all!

Gathering up her purse and wrap, Maggie headed for the back door. "Y'all have a real good time tonight. I don't know how late I'll be. Don't feel you have to wait around after all the kids leave."

She was gone, leaving behind a cloud of perfume and a scowling ex-husband.

Dave didn't have long to speculate over what effect Maggie's dress would have on her date. The aberration that appeared in the kitchen seconds after her exit was something that belonged either in a line waiting for the *Rocky Horror Picture Show* or the opening of a Salvation Army soup kitchen.

"Hi, Dad," it said, then introduced him to more of its kind lurking in the hallway. "This is Twink, Joe, and Mike. They're here early to help set up. The rest of the gang will be here in about an hour."

Dave swallowed his astonishment and managed a nod of greeting. The mystery of Joe and Mike was settled. Mike was definitely male, and the most normal-looking if that was any consolation. Flattop, faded jeans, and a holey sweatshirt. The kid was a little raggedy, but pretty okay, except that he towered over Dave by several inches and had an earring.

Joe had decidedly unfeminine shoulders and a shadow over his upper lip that might someday be worth shaving. Twink was possibly a female, if the fact that he/she was wearing earrings in both ears was any indication. Clothing, definitely one-size-fits-all and with plenty of allowance for the very large, didn't indicate sex, nor did the length or styles of

the hair. All but Mike wore their hair approximately shoulder length, sprayed with rainbow colors, and spiking toward the heavens.

Finding his voice at last, he addressed the one who was claiming him as a parent. "Laura, is this a Halloween party?"

She rolled her charcoal shadowed eyes and responded, "Oh, Dad . . . You're not like Mom. You've been around."

"Right, I've been around," Dave agreed—to what he wasn't sure. He'd not been around anything like the group before him. What had Maggie done to him?

Dave asked himself that several times as the evening progressed. The front door turned into a revolving door with kids coming and going until Dave had no idea how many were involved in Laura's party. The first floor of the house seemed to be wall-to-wall teenagers swaying to the music blasting from the living room—and then there was the spillover into the porch and front yard.

Fearing the worst, he resorted to tying a rope across the stairway leading to the second floor with a sign clearly stating **OFF LIMITS**. At nine o'clock when Jerry Rule ambled in the back door, Dave had never been so glad to see another adult in his life.

"Heard all the commotion and thought you might need a little help. I went through a couple of these a few years ago. You had to frisk anybody for beer?" Jerry asked as calmly as if he'd just asked about the weather.

"Beer!"

Jerry nodded and smiled. "I'll make my way through the gang in the yard. You take the house. You see anybody staggering, smell any beer, or see any suspicious lumps under the jackets, just give 'em a

good glare and hold out your hand. They're good kids. They'll hand it over. Then, just pat 'em on the back and tell 'em you're glad they could come."

The party broke up promptly at eleven. The hordes vanished as if someone had waved a magic wand. The faithful trio who'd helped engineer the affair stayed awhile longer to help Laura clean up.

Dave stared in shock at the collection of six-packs and single cans on the kitchen counter. "They're all underage. How did they get this stuff?"

"Ingenuity and guts," Jerry told him and cracked open two cans. He handed one to Dave. "Here, you could use this."

Dave took the beer and quaffed half of it in one long swallow. He grinned in gratitude at the man he'd been resenting for several weeks. "You're a good neighbor, Jerry. Thanks."

The big man shrugged it off. "Where's Maggie?"

"Out for the evening," Dave told him, realizing why Maggie hadn't had her date pick her up. The candidate would have turned tail and run if he'd encountered this mob scene. Dave had the satisfaction of knowing that he hadn't and that he'd survived the initiation.

Jerry chuckled. "Smart woman."

"Yeah," Dave returned. Vindictive was more like it. Maggie had thrown him to the lions. "Surprised you're not out with Jenna. According to Laura, you two have been seeing a lot of each other."

Jerry leaned his elbows on the table and studied the can of beer in his hand. "We have, but she said she had something she had to do tonight. She didn't say what and I don't really have any right to demand an explanation."

"Need another trash bag," Laura announced as she breezed into the kitchen. Rising on tiptoe, she

placed a loud kiss on Dave's cheek. "Thanks, Dad. It was a great party."

"Glad you thought so, sweetheart. It may be your last," Dave announced sardonically. He fixed her with a stern, very paternal, glare. "Before you have another little get-together of the 'gang,' we're going to set down a few rules."

"Rules?" Laura stared at him as if he'd suddenly sprouted two heads.

"Rules," Dave repeated firmly. "Tonight got a bit out of hand, don't you think?"

"You sound just like Mom," she announced disdainfully and stomped out of the room, leaving her father gaping, not for the first time that night.

"It'll get worse before it gets better, you know," Jerry offered sagely. He motioned toward the kitchen table. "Sit down, my friend. You've got a lot to learn."

Dave shared two more beers with Jerry while the man offered him the benefit of his years of parenting teenage girls. He had not just one in college as Dave had understood, but two—twins no less. He'd survived these years and so had they. Dave's respect for Jerry Rule leaped by quantum leaps.

"Laura's a good kid," Jerry assured Dave as he left. "And so were the majority of the mob that was here. All things considered, she's right. It was a pretty good party. We kept it under control."

"We is the operative word. Thanks," Dave said sincerely.

He locked up after Jerry and went to seek out his daughter. As he walked through the house, he was amazed to discover how normal it looked. Nothing was broken and all the debris had been carefully picked up or swept up. If it weren't for the stack of beer in the kitchen, the army of filled trashbags that clogged the garage and his own shaky nerves, he'd believe he'd dreamed the evening.

Dave shuddered at what the evening might have been if Jeriy hadn't come over and assisted. Determined to set down rules for future parties, beginning with establishing a better line of communication with his daughter, Dave mounted the steps still searching for Laura. He found her emerging from the bathroom, showered, shampooed, and wrapped in a fluffy pink robe with her feet stuck in huge slippers that looked like a pair of stuffed elephants. She was his little girl again, flashing a little girl smile.

She yawned. "Rules time?"

In light of her obvious fatigue, Dave softened. "It'll wait until tomorrow," he told her and kissed her forehead. "Good night, sweetheart."

"Good night, Dad," she offered sleepily and headed for her bedroom. In the doorway she turned and sent him a guilty look. "I really didn't expect my party to be such a big success. Sorry, Dad."

"It's okay. We'll talk about it tomorrow."

She flashed the smile that had always melted his heart. "You'll be here tomorrow? You promise?"

"I promise," he repeated, uncomfortable with the growing realization that Laura frequently needed assurances that he'd be around. Maggie wasn't the only one skeptical about his staying at an eight-to-five desk job. He had some proving to do to both the women in his life.

"Looks pretty quiet," Jenna remarked as she peered through the windshield. "You ready to go home now? If I circle the block many more times, somebody's going to get suspicious and call the cops."

"Go around again. I want to see if Dave's car is still there," Maggie directed, settling back on the car

seat. "Thank goodness you borrowed Daddy's car for tonight. It's so nondescript, it's practically invisible. Now if we were in the flashy thing you own, we'd probably have an audience by now. How did you get that Jag, anyway?"

Jenna's laugh was low and throaty. "I can just imagine what everybody's thinking about that."

"Dave thinks you sold your memoirs," Maggie teased.

Jenna laughed again. "They wouldn't make for very interesting reading, I'm afraid. I'll tell you a secret if you promise to keep it."

In the solemn ritual they'd used as kids, Maggie crossed her heart and spit in her hand.

Jenna eyed Maggie's proffered hand with distaste. "I'll forgo that part, thank you. Remember our little inheritances from Aunt Celia? You used yours to pay the difference between going to school here at home and going to California. I invested mine in some stock and got lucky. So, I reinvested, and so on and so forth."

Stunned, Maggie looked across the darkened car to her sister with new eyes. "So that's how you've supported the jetsetter life you've been leading?" She giggled. "Aunt Celia would have loved it. Am I the only one in the family who didn't know you wheel and deal on the stock market?"

"Nobody but Mama and Daddy knows. It's been too much fun keeping it a secret, especially from Thomas. Don't you dare tell him."

Chuckling as she pictured their staid older brother trying to deal with his own idea of how he believed his madcap sister supported her lifestyle, Maggie promised.

"You really are a wretch to throw Laura's party in Dave's lap," Jenna remarked as she made another turn onto Kingshaven Drive.

"He deserved it," Maggie maintained, sobering. "Dave wants to be a full-time daddy, so I decided to give him a chance to learn the way every other parent does—by experience."

"A baptism by fire's what he got tonight."

"He had some help. You said you saw Jerry in the crowd in the yard."

"That big hunk's pretty hard to miss. I could've been out with that gorgeous man tonight instead of holding your hand, you know."

"Sorry," Maggie apologized. "I won't ask you next time."

"Oh, forget it. What are sisters for?"

Jenna slowed the car to a crawl as they approached the house. "You ready to go home, now? Dave's car's still there but the party's over and the mess is probably all cleaned up."

"What time is it?"

Jenna held her watch up to catch the light from the street lamp. "About twelve-thirty."

"Too early. Let's go someplace for a cup of coffee."

Jenna let out a disgusted sigh, but placed her foot back on the gas pedal. "What's the point of this whole dating charade? The man is in love with you. You're in love with him. He wants to marry you again. He's given up the work he loves and taken a nice safe desk job. What more can you ask?"

Maggie lit a cigarette. "Guarantees."

"That he'll stick to the desk job or that he'll live forever?"

"Maybe both," Maggie admitted sheepishly.

"Nobody lives forever, Maggie. Did you ever think about the odds we all live with every day? When your number's up, your number's up."

"Okay, so I've been acting like Chicken Little, but you have to admit that the odds of something happening to Dave were higher than most."

Jenna waved at the smoke filling the car and opened her window a bit more. "That's at least your tenth cigarette. I thought you quit smoking."

"I did," Maggie snapped defensively.

"So Dave was in a high-risk job and you couldn't handle it. And finally something did happen to him and it scared the pants off you. That's behind you now. How long does he have to prove that he's going to stick with the desk job? A year? Three years? When he retires and the magazine gives him a gold watch, are you going to finally hand him a gold ring and ask him to toddle off with you to the church?"

She pulled the car into the parking lot of a fast-food restaurant. "This okay?"

"Fine!" Maggie got out, slamming the door behind her.

Once they'd settled into a booth with their coffee, Jenna started up the interrogation again. "I'm not buying the guarantee business. What's really keeping you from marrying Dave again?"

Maggie frowned. "Why didn't you go into law? You're worse than Thomas."

"Witness is evading the question," Jenna quipped.

Maggie studied the lighted menu behind the counter and then the butcher block design of the Formica table top. "I'm afraid of losing my self," she said finally, her voice small and low. "I just recently found out who I am and I want to keep being me."

Thoroughly disgusted, Jenna shook her head slowly. "My dear sister," she began. "Dave St. Clair is the owner of a couple of Pulitzers, not Male Chauvinist of the Year awards. The man is not a keep-'em-barefoot-and-pregnant type. Maybe you felt you couldn't find the real Maggie while you were married, but now you have and I would bet my entire stock portfolio that you'll never lose her. The

only one who doesn't believe you're a very strong person is you. Give, Maggie. What else?"

Maggie shifted, uncomfortable under Jenna's green-eyed stare. "You're a lot like Mama, you know?"

"Sometimes you're as close-mouthed as Daddy," Jenna accused. "What else, Maggie?"

Maggie blinked away the tears that were forming and swallowed the lump in her throat. "I want to make absolutely sure this time. I never really dated all that much before I met Dave. He was so sure that we were right for each other and I went along with it.

"All of my life, there's been somebody doing all the experimenting and research, then telling me how I should profit from their mistakes and triumphs. Everybody making sure little Maggie never made any mistakes of her own. The family meant well and I love them for their motives, but still ..." Maggie stopped to wipe some of the tears dripping off her chin.

Digging around in her purse, Jenna found a crumpled tissue and handed it to her sister. "You've proved you can make your own mistakes, kiddo. Divorcing Dave was a biggy."

"Don't rub it in." Maggie sniffled into the tissue.

Jenna reached across the table and squeezed her hand. "I'm not, sis. I understand, really. I got the same lectures that's probably why I do things nobody else in the family has done or even thought of doing."

Maggie finished mopping her face and gave a watery smile. "You succeeded. Nobody else has even considered living on some remote Greek island with nothing but goats for company."

"It wasn't that remote," Jenna defended, her green eyes full of feline mystery. "I'll tell you sometime

about the . . . uh . . . goatherd." She waggled her eyebrows, then sobered. "So all this interviewing candidates business is to make a bunch of mistakes and thereby prove to yourself that Dave is the right one?"

"Sounds really silly when it's put that way." Maggie sipped at her coffee, pulling a face at the bitter taste. "Yuck, must be the bottom of the pot."

Maggie slumped against the back of the booth. "I felt backed into a corner when Dave accused me of going on a campaign to find another husband. I just couldn't back down."

"So you came out fighting." Jenna rolled her eyes. "Well, my girl, you've been hoist with your own petard."

"I know," Maggie wailed dismally then laughed. "Jenna, just what is a petard?"

"A box of explosives," Jenna explained with a grin. "Basically it means you've blown yourself up, or as Grandma used to say, 'You've cooked your own goose.' And since you have, we'd better think of a good way to get you out of the soup."

"Are you really going to go through with this, or am I going to have to spend all my weekends squirreling you around town? I'm warning you, Maggie, I refuse to plaster on a false mustache and dress in drag."

"You don't have to if you can come up with some prospects. Don't you have a little black book?"

"It's brown, actually, and you're welcome to 'interview' any of them yourself." Reluctantly, she pulled out a small leather address book. "Of course, you could save yourself a lot of time and benefit from my experiences with each of them," she offered tongue in cheek. "I've got them coded, already."

"Oh, please," Maggie begged. "Not you, too." She

flipped through the address book, her eyes widening when she saw the notations by each man's name. "Good Lord, it looks like the Dewey Decimal System."

"Well, I figured I should put my librarian education to some use."

"Have a good time?" Dave asked over the top of the newspaper as Maggie stepped into the foyer. His eyes went pointedly to the clock, whose hands clearly indicated well past two in the morning.

Leaning against the living room doorway while she slipped her shoes off, Maggie kept her face averted while she deliberately stalled for time. The last thing she wanted was to confront Dave at the end of her "date," but there he was and Jenna had refused to drive around the block even one more time.

Yawning, she prayed her brief and long-ago theatrical career would come to her aid. "Wonderful time. How about you?"

"Wonderful. Great kids," he claimed as he folded his newspaper. He picked up a pad of paper and a pen from the end table and started writing. "*Successfully chaperoned a teenage party with over one hundred guests.* Ought to be worth at least a point a guest, wouldn't you say?"

"What are you doing?" Maggie demanded as she walked into the room.

"Tallying up the scores," he returned, continuing his scribbling and commenting. "*Steady, safe job.* Worth at least another hundred, given that it's such a high priority to you."

After sending her a leering smirk, he wrote down a number then drew a line through it. "No, that's worth at least five hundred." He wrote down the correction, grinned again, and silently added another notation with its accompanying score. Then

he tallied his scores. "Seven-fifty for me. Give me the candidate's scores and well see how well he did."

Determined to wipe the smug smirk of his face, she began listing the attributes of tonight's candidate. "*Brilliant investor, practically independently wealthy*, a hundred points," she began, using Jenna's profile as a model.

"*Good company*. Another hundred. *Very attractive*. Twenty-five. Looks aren't real high on my list," she added, pausing to judge his reaction. He merely lifted one brow in an overt show of skepticism and she considered throwing an ashtray at him.

"Sh . . . he's great with kids. In fact, he already loves Laura and I believe the feeling is mutual."

"Really?" Dave's left brow rose just a bit higher.

"Yes, really. So much so I'd say the feeling's worth several hundred points." Fixing him with a killing glare, she all but snarled, "Are you satisfied?"

"Were you?" was his silky return.

"What?" she snapped before the meaning of his query dawned on her. Fury coated her like an icy shroud. "I think you'd better leave."

Dave tossed his score sheet aside and rose. Walking slowly toward her, his eyes glimmering with molten intensity, he repeated his question. "Were you satisfied, Maggie?" His voice was low and husky.

Stopping inches from her, he reached up and trailed the tip of his finger down her throat. Maggie stiffened, wanting to escape, but Dave curled an arm around her waist before she could make a move. "Did tonight's candidate make you purr? You were out with him a long time. Did he prolong your pleasure until you were begging for—"

"Stop it!" She turned her face away from his descending lips but was unable to escape them completely. His mouth forged a warm, moist trail along

her jaw and down her throat. "Whatever happened tonight on my date is none of your business."

"Oh, but it is, my love," he whispered against the sensitive spot behind her ear. "How will I know how best to compete if I don't know how the competition is scoring?"

Maggie squirmed, inadvertently bringing her pelvis against his. The feel of his heated arousal pressing against her had its usual effect on her. "That . . . ummm . . . would give you . . . ahhh . . . unfair advantage," she managed as his lips and fingertips worked their magic against her skin.

"I already have it," he admitted unabashedly as he sipped at the corner of her mouth. "I know what the stakes are. That other guy doesn't." Lifting his head he looked deeply into her eyes. "Does he, Maggie?"

Maggie met his gaze unblinkingly, evidently giving him the answer he was seeking for he nodded in satisfaction.

"Thought not. I'll pick you up around seven tomorrow night and I promise to double my already sizable score."

Dave was already at the front door before Maggie was able to speak. The man was way too sure of himself. Determined to knock him down a peg or two, she called out, "Sorry, you don't have an appointment tomorrow night."

"Then pencil me in."

"The slot's already filled," she claimed with sweetly delivered sarcasm. "Try again in a few weeks."

Dave came back to stand in front of her, his eyes storming. "Maggie . . ." he warned.

"Sorry, but there are a lot of candidates and I feel each should get their chance."

"You're wasting your time, sweetheart. I already know who has the best credentials."

Twelve

The smell of bacon frying and the clatter of metal trash can lids brought Maggie awake. She opened one eye and groaned. It was Saturday and too early for decent people to be awake. She buried her head into the pillow and tried to ignore the world for a bit longer.

It didn't work. The sun was pouring through the skylights. The world was insisting on attention.

She stumbled out of bed and reached for her robe. Her head felt as if it was filled with cotton. "You'll never survive many more late nights, Maggie. You're just not a night person. Find out a way to end this nonsense without admitting you've been an idiot and do it soon."

Ever since the night of her first "date" when Dave had implied that the search for the man with the best credentials was a waste of time, Maggie had continued dating. Or, so she'd led Dave to believe. In reality, her heart wasn't in it.

In an effort to at least satisfy her own curiosity about dating some other men, Maggie had resorted

to Jenna's little brown book. A couple of the men would no doubt make good fathers, and dependable husbands, but lovers? Maggie hadn't been able to bear a good-night kiss. Dave was her first and only lover and she didn't need to do any experimenting to determine that he was the best a woman could want.

Following a couple of fiascoes, Maggie had elected to follow Jenna's coding system and turned up with zip. But the lack of an escort hadn't kept her home. After telling Dave she was booked solid weeks in advance, she couldn't afford to spend a night home and lose face. Hence, she'd dragged Jenna to three movies and a night at a singles bar.

The evening at the singles bar had been enlightening and short. In the hour she and Jenna had lasted, Maggie had sat there cringing at the thought of any of those hungry wolves laying a hand on her. Later, as she and Jenna whiled away the rest of the evening at what had become their favorite fast-food restaurant, all she'd been able to think about was a quote from some movie star when asked about his wife: "When you've got steak at home, why go out for hamburger?"

Her thoughts returning to the present, she shoved her feet into a pair of slippers. "Spend a nice quiet evening at home tonight, Maggie," she ordered herself. "Nobody's out there anyway. They're all dull and have clammy hands."

Her eyes barely open, her navigation system faulty, she staggered across the room. One of her shuffling feet crashed into the base of her easel. She grabbed the teetering canvas before it fell to the floor.

Righting the painting, she glared at it. "You. I've definitely got to finish you soon."

Still gripping the edges of the canvas, Maggie opened her eyes a little wider and stared more criti-

cally at the figures she'd created. "Sir Richard, your armor's the wrong color," she told the male character. "It's supposed to be silver, not gold. And your hair's all wrong, too. It should be longer and not quite so wavy. Brianna, you aren't right either. Your hair ought to have a touch of red in it."

Securing the painting on the easel, she gave it a pat and promised, "I'll get back to you guys later. I'm going after coffee, now."

Yawning, Maggie made it down the stairs and into the kitchen. There she came completely awake. "Dave! What are you doing here so early?"

From his place in front of the stove, he sent her a smile over his shoulder. "Fixing breakfast. Isn't that what full-time dads and full-time husbands with working wives do on weekends?"

Maggie slithered onto the closest chair. "So what's your excuse," she muttered, not caring whether she was heard by the man in jeans that fit too well and a sweatshirt that emphasized the breadth of his shoulders and the narrowness of his hips.

That was one prime specimen across the room and Maggie was ready to capitulate, but not right that minute. Not when she felt so fuzzy and he was so sparkly. She wanted all her wits about her, the right setting, herself looking wonderful. A bright Saturday morning in the kitchen with her sans makeup, hair straggling, wearing her old chenille bathrobe wasn't the right time. Maybe tonight? A nice quiet evening at home, soft lights, quiet music, a fire in the fireplace.

Ignoring her remark, Dave scooped the bacon onto a plate draped with paper towel and gathered it and a platter heaped with fluffy pancakes. Carrying them to the table, he called, "Breakfast's ready, Laura. Mom's already here."

"Must you shout?" Maggie demanded.

"Sorry, I forgot how late you were out *again* last night," Dave returned.

"You were out even later because *again* you waited until I got home before you left," she reminded.

Dave poured her a cup of coffee and placed it near her right hand. "But I had a little nap while I waited for you. How are the interviews coming?"

Maggie grabbed the coffee and savored the aromatic liquid before answering. "Making progress." She slanted a sidelong glance at the man so cheerfully heaping pancakes on his plate. He hadn't so much as blinked an eye in reaction.

How could he be so chipper? His indifference toward her "dating" was even worse. He waited for her every evening, but unlike after the first "time," he made no comment other than to hope she'd had a good time and to say that he was glad she was home safely.

Why the sudden paternal attitude? How could he be taking her quest to replace him so calmly? Was he that sure of himself?

At the beginning of this farce, he'd requested his name be penciled into her social calendar. Yet, after she'd thwarted his commandeering of an evening, he hadn't even asked for another. It didn't make sense . . . unless he had taken himself out of the running.

Maggie's cup clattered to its saucer.

"Coffee too strong?" Dave asked.

"No . . . no. It's just fine," Maggie said. Had she carried her charade on too long? Talk about wanting to make her own mistakes. She was making up for lost time.

With shaking hands she grabbed a napkin and mopped up the drops of coffee she'd splattered onto the table. "I'll take some of those pancakes now."

Dave was in the process of serving Maggie when Laura bounced in. "None for me, Dad. I'm meeting Twink and some other kids at the mall. See y'all," she tossed over her shoulder as she headed for the back door.

"Young lady, come back here," Dave commanded.

Laura's expression was a mixture of belligerence and disgust as she turned to face her father. "Dad she whined. "I'm already late."

"Then you'll have to be later," Dave informed her. "I don't recall being apprised of these plans you have this morning. Were you, Maggie?"

"Nope. First I've heard." Maggie dug into the pancakes. *Let's see how you handle this, buster. I'm out of it*, she thought. He could use the practice. After all, he was going to have to get used to this sort of thing and a lot more.

Maggie went on calmly eating her breakfast while the battle ensued between father and daughter. In the end a sullen Laura dropped to her place at the table and wolfed down a respectable number of pancakes and strips of bacon. Maggie silently gave Dave several points for winning the issue of a decent breakfast and extracting a promise from Laura that she'd be back home by three o'clock. With a certain amount of glee she kept her mouth shut while Dave coughed up a twenty-dollar bill in response to Laura's request for a little money.

As soon as Laura was gone, Dave turned to Maggie. "You weren't much help." His glower grew blacker as he took in the twinkling light in Maggie's eyes and the telltale twitching at the corners of her mouth. "What's so funny?"

"Nothing, really," Maggie returned, having to push her tongue into the side of her mouth to keep from laughing. "You did just fine, Dad. Earned a few points, even."

Dave didn't look too appeased by that. Totally disgruntled he asked, "Have I been seeing the real Laura the last couple of weeks or is she putting on a show to test me like you are?"

The piece of bacon Maggie had just popped in her mouth lodged in her throat. She reached for her orange juice to wash it down.

He knew! No wonder he was taking it all so calmly. Damnation, she cursed inwardly. She'd endured all those miserable evenings for nothing!

Dave whacked her on the back and waited for her coughing to subside. "Well, Maggie?" He lifted one brow. "Is that weird petulant person the real Laura?"

"Yes and no," Maggie managed before coughing again. Maybe his inclusion of her in the testing question had been a slip of the tongue. "I think the real Laura is the one you met when you first got home. This one's the one who's been testing me for several months, and now she's found a new target. Mostly she's testing herself, I think. Trying to discover who she is, what she really wants, and what her limits are. She'll grow out of it."

Maggie crossed her fingers. Hopefully, Laura's mother had made her own discoveries before it was too late.

"You're a good mother, Maggie, and a very wise woman." Dave squeezed her hand and then left his fingers lingering over hers. His fingers played lightly on the top of her hand and he gazed deeply into her eyes.

His voice was husky and low when he said, "Have I ever really thanked you for Laura? Not just having her, but for rearing her the way you have."

Caught up in the intensity of his gaze, Maggie could barely find her voice. His hand was warm and strong over hers and Maggie was drawn as always to the warmth and strength of the man. Not since the

second night he'd thrown down the gauntlet about the hunt for a new husband had he touched her.

She turned her hand over and wound her fingers into his, needing to touch him, hold him. It was the vitality, the excitement, the very essence of all that made him who he was that drew her to him and bound her irrevocably to him. Jenna was so right. What did she need Dave to guarantee? Nothing that he already hadn't. If he went back to field reporting, she'd manage. Loving him and being loved by him were all that were really important.

"I haven't brought her up all by myself. You're responsible for much of the person she is," she began, needing to reassure him that he had been and would always be a vital factor in her life and Laura's. The actual amount of time he'd spent with them was irrelevant.

He scoffed in self-deprecation. "I haven't been here enough to have much impact, Maggie."

Jerking his hand away, he gestured around the room, "You've made this house a home, raised Laura, and built a very successful business. And you've done it all on your own. You're a very strong woman who knows what she wants and goes after it."

"But I'm not," Maggie started to protest, feeling the pain in Dave's eyes as strongly as if she'd been struck.

His chair scraped loudly as he shoved himself away from the table and the sound cut off her speech. The sunshine that had brightened the morning was gone, both outside and inside. It was overcast outside, now, with a threat of rain. Inside, Dave's mood had swung as dramatically as the weather.

He paced the room as if fighting some inner battle. She longed to go to him, wrap him in her arms and hold him close. Instinct warned her that he wouldn't welcome her comforting.

Coming to a stop before the sink, he ran his hand through his hair. Then he placed his hands on each side of the sink, staring out the window. The sinews in his arms stood out taut and hard. Every line of his body was the same.

"Hell, Maggie. You've got it all," he said very quietly. You don't need anybody. I've been wasting time, too. Just playing games while I tried to fool myself into thinking you'd discover you needed me."

"But I do—" Maggie began, but too late. Dave was already out the door.

Feeling more desolate than she'd ever felt in her life, Maggie sat very still, fearing that if she moved even one muscle she'd break down completely. Dave was gone, definitely gone. He'd cut himself out of her life. Not even the divorce decree had been so effective.

You don't need anybody. Dave's statement rang over and over in her ears. Each time they played through her mind they cut more deeply.

"But I do need somebody. I need you," she whispered to the empty room as the tears began to fall down her cheeks. She wrapped her arms around herself and rocked back and forth on the chair. "I need you. I need you," she chanted. Then she froze. Despair turned to anger.

"How dare you think you know what's best for me! You don't know, but you're going to find out."

Maggie made short order of the breakfast dishes, then sped up the stairs. In the shower, she tried to formulate some plan to convince Dave that she needed him. She rejected them all as too obvious.

She tried to work on the painting, to make the changes that were necessary to depict the characters in the book. But every time she looked at the golden-armored knight she'd created, her eyes misted

over. She couldn't bear to change him. He was perfect the way he was—just like the golden-haired man who'd inspired him.

She spent the better part of the day pacing around the house formulating plans and rejecting them. Outside, the weather worsened and Maggie's pacing took on another purpose. It was a little past three and Laura wasn't back yet. She'd give her some more time.

Pushing back the sheer window curtain in the living room, Maggie gauged the weather. The temperature had dropped rapidly. The rain had turned to sleet. The streets were too slick for a moped. Why hadn't Laura called?

Maggie checked the phone to make sure it was in working order. It wasn't. The kids had probably gone to one of the other houses closer to the mall. Laura would be home soon.

She wasn't.

At four-thirty, Maggie went next door to Jerry's and used his phone. First she called Twink's mother and discovered that Laura's friend had been home since shortly after lunch. Twink had thought Laura was planning to leave shortly thereafter and was surprised she wasn't home yet.

Three more calls to Laura's friends proved fruitless. Jerry phoned the telephone company and reported Maggie's phone, then fixed her a cup of tea and offered what assurances he could that Laura would be all right.

At five o'clock, Maggie called Dave.

"Go back home, Maggie," he ordered gently as soon as she'd apprised him of the situation. "I'll go to the mall and look for her. Chances are you'll hear from her or she'll be home soon."

Jerry echoed Dave's orders, but reached for his

coat and car keys. "I'll swing through the mall, too," he said. "Between the two of us, we'll find her."

By six-thirty her telephone was in working order and Maggie sat next to it with her hand resting on the receiver. It didn't ring.

At seven o'clock, there was a noise at the front door and Maggie raced to open it. Dave was there—alone. She crumpled into his arms.

Dave wrapped both arms around her shaking body and held her close, sharing her fear. "Jerry sent me home to stay with you," he said, his voice graveled from the tears he was struggling against. It wouldn't do for both of them to fall apart.

"Jenna's helping Jerry search. She's sent out an alert to all the cousins, too." Dave held her tightly, swallowing hard before he spoke again. "Can you think of anyplace else where Laura might have gone?"

Maggie shook her head against him, her tears mingling with the water droplets on Dave's trench coat. "I've called all of her friends. Oh, Dave, something's happened, I just know it. This isn't like her."

Her sobbing started anew and Dave rocked her gently. "She'll be okay, sweetheart," he crooned to her. "She'll be okay."

Maggie clutched at his lapels. "She has to be. She just has to be. I couldn't take it if anything happened to her. Oh, God, I hate the not knowing. This is worse than when I didn't know what had happened to you," she said between sobs, not realizing half of what she was saying.

"I know, sweetheart. I know."

Dave set her away from him long enough to slip out of his coat. Then, holding each other, they sat next to the phone. Jenna called at eight and again at eight-thirty. Dave called the police at nine. Ellen and Robert Sheldon arrived a few minutes later, followed quickly by a sprinkling of the cousins.

The family offered Maggie what comfort they could, but it was Dave she clung to, never letting go of his hand, always being pressed close to his side. It was Dave she needed most. Laura was as much a part of him as she was of her. Only Dave could feel what she was feeling.

At ten the phone rang and Dave grabbed it up. His expression remained serious for the first few minutes, his body rigid, and then he relaxed. He squeezed Maggie, smiled, and said, "She's okay."

Into the receiver, he said, "Tell Mr. Sheldon to keep her there tonight. We'll be out for her tomorrow. Thanks, Officer. You don't know how much we appreciate all you've done."

He hung up the phone and hugged Maggie. "She's okay. She's really okay. She's with your brother, Thomas."

"Thomas!" Maggie and several members of the assembled clan chorused.

"What in the world is she doing in Winchester?" Maggie demanded. "Thomas's farm is over sixty miles away."

As quickly as possible Dave explained that Laura had decided to ride all the way to her uncle's farm on her moped. She'd tried to call along the way, but couldn't get through. When the weather turned bad, she was more than halfway and decided against turning back. She tried to call Thomas to come get her, but ice had broken his phone lines. Cold, wet, and thoroughly bedraggled, she'd arrived on her uncle's doorstep a short while ago. He used his short-wave radio to call the local police, who in turn called Dave.

Maggie stared in disbelief at Dave. "I cannot believe that child would do something so stupid. She could have been killed. Kidnapped. Lord only knows what."

"But she wasn't, honey. She's okay," Dave assured again.

"I'm going to kill her when we get her back home," Maggie declared.

"You'll have to stand in line," Jenna announced then grabbed up her coat. "Come on, everybody, let's go. We're not needed here any longer."

"I'm going to wring her neck and then paddle her little fanny so hard she won't sit down for a week," Maggie threatened some time later.

Everyone was gone and she and Dave were making a dent in the mountain of sandwiches Ellen had prepared and nobody had touched during the crisis. Maggie bit viciously into her sandwich and washed it down with tea laced with brandy. "I'm going to wrap that moped around her neck. That child is grounded for life."

Dave chuckled then broke into a full-fledged bout of hearty laughter. Maggie glared at him. "This is no laughing matter!"

"If you could only hear yourself. An hour ago you were crying your heart out and promising God the world if Laura were found in one piece. Now that she's safe, you're threatening to chop her up and throw her in the Potomac."

"She deserves it for worrying us like this!"

Dave grinned and pulled Maggie into his arms. "Settle down, Mama. I think our little girl learned a lesson all by herself. I doubt there's anything we could do to her that's worse than what she's put herself through."

Maggie thought for a moment, then smiled. There were no lessons better learned than the ones from one's own mistakes. "I think you're right. When did you get so wise?"

"Very recently, my love," he told her, pressing a

kiss to her forehead. "I got a taste of what you've gone through because of me. And, having been through a hell myself, I think I know what Laura's been thinking for several hours. We St. Clairs aren't completely without brains. We realize when we've made a mistake and then try to learn something from it."

Maggie lifted one brow. "You made a big mistake this morning, you know."

Dave exhaled deeply. "I sure did. I'm never giving Laura permission to do anything again. All decisions about her comings and goings are yours. She never would have gone off like that today if I hadn't have provided her with plenty of gas money. She—"

Maggie pressed her fingers over Dave's lips. "Shh. What happened today isn't your fault. You've been stacking up all the points you'll ever need in the good-father column. They were already there anyway. The mistake I'm talking about is the one you made about me."

Dave's expression indicated he was clearly baffled.

"And you say you St. Clairs have brains," Maggie teased, snuggling into his arms.

"You're so smart you think this woman doesn't need you. Did you notice that this woman fell completely apart when her baby was missing and that this same woman whom you say needs no one has been clinging to you like a second skin?"

He'd claimed St. Clairs had brains, but this particular St. Clair was having some trouble functioning. As always, Maggie's nearness was affecting his thinking. Functioning by instinct, Dave tightened his hold on her.

Turning in his arms so that she was facing him, Maggie pressed her body against his and started kissing along his jawline and neck. "Did you happen to notice that painting up in my studio?"

"Uh-huh . . . ," Dave managed, instinct telling him all he needed to know. Following Maggie's lead, his lips had found their way to her throat where they were eagerly forging a path toward her lips. "The one with the knight and lady."

"I've been . . . ahhh . . ." She squirmed and sighed when Dave's lips touched the spot beneath her ear that set off skyrockets through her body. "I've been having trouble with that painting."

"Looked good to me," he stated absently as he scooped Maggie onto his lap.

"The hero and heroine don't quite fit the author's description," Maggie stated as she curled her arms around Dave's neck. "I'm going to have to paint another one."

Dave nuzzled her ear, making her squirm again. "God, I love it when you do that," he muttered. "Why don't you just alter the characters to fit the description?"

"But they're already perfect," she maintained. Pushing out of his arms, she slid off his lap.

"But you said—"

"Come with me." Maggie pulled Dave up from the couch and led him up the stairs. Standing before the easel she instructed Dave to take a very good look at the painting. "The title of the book is *Love Is Forever*," she announced. She beamed in triumph when she saw the dawn of realization on Dave's face.

Dave studied the painting very closely, then looked around the studio until he spied what he was looking for. Crossing the room, he draped a scarlet velvet cape around his shoulders and picked up a sword. Returning to Maggie, he dropped to one knee and placed the sword in her hands.

"Lady Marguerite, will you do me the great honor

of becoming my wife again? Will you share my life, the rearing of our daughter, and my bed?"

"I love you, you wonderful fool. Get up and carry me to yon bower."

Dave needed no further encouragement. Flinging the cape and sword aside, he scooped Maggie up and was across the room in two long strides. He tossed her on the bed and ordered, "Get out of those clothes, wench."

The order was unnecessary, as Maggie was already flinging her clothing in every direction. Dave followed suit then joined her on the high canopied bed. Pulling her into his arms, he remarked, "Sure glad you let down the drawbridge, princess."

Maggie started to ask what he meant, but Dave's lips covered hers and words were no longer possible or necessary. Their bodies communicated perfectly. Soft curves accommodated harder planes while their hands and lips rediscovered the wonderment of each other.

They joined together in passion and tenderness, sharing their bodies and their hearts with the love they both knew was forever. Each claimed and was claimed, cherished and was cherished. With Dave deep within her, Maggie's last thought before the zenith spun her into mindless ecstasy was that her golden knight was truly home and she would always be his lady.

A long time later, Maggie raised herself on one elbow and looked down at the golden-haired man who'd gone to paradise and back with her. "You don't have to give up crusades, Sir David."

Dave curled his hand behind her neck and pulled her down for his kiss. "I've had enough of crusades, my lady. If today and—" He paused and gave her a leer before kissing each of the pert nipples so

tantalizingly close to his face. "—And tonight was any example, there's more than enough excitement around here."

"Dave, don't sacrifice what you love for me."

"You are my love, Maggie." Rolling over until he had her pinned beneath him again, he kissed her long and deeply. "You never gave me an answer to my proposal, darling. Will you marry me?"

"Is tomorrow soon enough?" she asked, wrapping her arms around his middle.

"Too soon," he told her, burying his face between her breasts. "I'm not going to rush you this time. We've got the rest of our lives." He kissed her navel. "Plan a church wedding with all your relatives as witnesses. I've turned into a really conventional kind of guy, remember?"

"A wedding will take months to plan," Maggie protested. "How conventional do you want to be?"

"Very conventional," he said against her stomach. "I'll send you flowers, take you out, all the things a guy's supposed to do when he's courting his fiancée. We had only four dates last time. I'm taking it slowly this time."

Maggie sighed and let her arms slither from around him. "Then I guess you'll have to go back to your apartment and you'd better go before you do any more damage."

Dave reared over her. "What are you talking about?"

"Sir, if you spend the night, you'll compromise my honor." She rolled out from under him and pulled the sheet up to cover her. "I insist you vacate this boudoir until after this union has been sanctified."

Dave gaped at her. "Are you serious?"

"Must keep up your image of a conventional man, mustn't we?"

"To hell with that much convention. I'm not spending another night without you next to me."

Maggie giggled. "Thought you'd see it my way. There's a red-eye to Las Vegas and we can still make it. Get dressed. As you said earlier, we St. Clairs know how to learn from our mistakes."

A westbound jet roared out of the Washington National airport one hour later and Maggie and Dave St. Clair were on it. Dave raised a glass of champagne to Maggie and declared, "I'm one very lucky man. I'm marrying the woman of my dreams."

"Again," she replied wryly.

"For us once was not enough. Let's do it again—and I promise we'll get it right this time!"