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BARBARA BOSWELL

Whatever It Takes



WHATEVER IT TAKES

Barbara Boswell

It was an impossible match, Kelly Malloy fumed when ordered to team up with Brandt Madison. If the man was such a good journalist, why was he working for one of the sleaziest rags at the checkout counter? But once she met the devastatingly handsome man who stood between her and a great story, Kelly felt her resistance melt. Brandt sensed that their piece on illegal baby selling held a kind of power over Kelly--or that some secret in her past left her vulnerable. Somehow he had to show Kelly how it felt to be cherished, how much he yearned to protect her from hurt. But could his fierce embrace keep his beloved safe from the demons of her past?

One

"You're not serious! You can't be! You *couldn't* expect me to collaborate on a story with someone from— from *The National Cesspool!*" Kelly Malloy, green eyes flashing fire, paced the narrow office of her editor, Art Wittner. "Witt, you know how long I've wanted to do this adoption story! I've laid the groundwork, done all the research ..."

"I know, Kelly. I know." Witt ran his hand through his thinning gray hair and sank back into his chair. "But when the publisher calls to say that he thinks it's ridiculous for his magazine and his—uh—newspaper to carry stories on the same topic, and that they should combine forces ..." He shrugged. "No one says no to Tucker Norwalk. At least no one whose salary he's paying. And keep in mind that he's paying my salary, Kelly. And yours."

"How can I forget? Every time I see the words *Norwalk Publications* on my paycheck, I feel like gagging!" Kelly let loose an angry sigh. "Why did Norwalk have to buy *In the Know*? We were beginning to do so well, expanding our circulation, winning awards ..."

"You just answered your own question, Kel." Witt began to doodle on a tattered envelope. "*In the Know* was one of the few new magazines to turn a profit last year. We're targeted to the Yuppie market that all the advertisers want to reach—we actually had to turn down advertisements for lack of space—and we've gained a reputation for first-class journalism. Since Norwalk claims that he wants to upgrade his publishing image, we were a natural for him."

Kelly gave a disdainful sniff. "Norwalk could buy *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, and *Punch* and it wouldn't upgrade his image. Norwalk Publications is synonymous with slime throughout the country!"

"And despite all our high ideals and class," Witt said with a wry smile, "not one of us on the staff resigned when Norwalk bought the magazine. And we faithfully cash our Norwalk Publications paychecks every other week."

"That's because we're devoted to the magazine! We created *In the Know*. It's our baby, and we're not about to abandon it to the likes of the publisher of *The National Cesspool*.'

"And because good jobs in publishing here in Chicago are hard to find," Witt added dryly.

Kelly wound a lock of her shoulder-length auburn hair around her index finger and tugged on it absently. "It'll no longer be a good job if Norwalk insists on us collaborating with"—she heaved a shudder of disgust—"those sleazeballs from the *Cesspool*."

"The guy you'll be doing the story with isn't a sleazeball, Kelly. He's Brandt Madison. You must've heard of him; he's written four nonfiction best sellers based on real-life crimes. He won a Pulitzer for the one about the seventy-eight-year-old matriarch who directed three generations of her family on a robbery- and-murder spree."

"Ah, yes, the infamous Osgood clan." Kelly grimaced. "A gruesome group who could've sprung directly from the pages of the *Cesspool*. How appropriate that Madison and Norwalk found each other. They both share the same bad taste!"

"It was a hell of an interesting book, Kelly. The psychological insights and motivations Madison provided were—"

"I'm sure that most of Brandt Madison's readers were uninterested in the psychological aspects, Witt. They bought the book strictly for the blood and gore and violence—and the sex, of course. There was plenty of that in it, I expect?"

Witt nodded rather sheepishly, and Kelly scowled. "Why on earth is Madison interested in adoption? It's hardly a topic that fits into his category: sensational sex-and-violence. And what's a best-selling author doing on the staff of *The National Cesspool* anyway?"

"Madison isn't on the staff of the *Cesspool*— dammit, Kel, now you've got me calling it that too. Just my luck I'll slip and say *Cesspool* to Norwalk himself!" Witt stopped himself and started over again. "Madison isn't on the staff of *The National Informant*, our—uh—sister publication. But the latest book he's working on is about the adoption racket. And he's a personal friend of Norwalk's. The *Informant* plans to serialize his book in the paper before it's released for general publication. Norwalk said Madison's research is impeccable," he added encouragingly.

"Research!" Kelly repeated scornfully. "What would Tucker Norwalk know about research? His people on the *Informant* don't do research; they make things up. You've seen their headlines, Witt. *Siamese Twin Has Extra-Terrestrial's Baby. Murder Victim Returns from Grave to Win Lottery. Sensationalism, Nonsense.*"

Witt shifted uncomfortably. "They have run some legitimate exposes, Kelly. And they've carried serializations of books from time to time. It looks like Brandt Madison's book will fit into both those categories."

"Madison's book will fall into the category of yellow journalism, if the *Informant* is involved in any way. Witt, I have plans for my article. The so-called gray market of private adoptions—"

"Look, Kelly, it's pointless to discuss it with me. Norwalk doesn't want *In the Know* to do any kind of adoption article unless it's done in collaboration with Madison. He doesn't want a similar story on adoption published before the *Informant* runs Madison's serialization." Witt was tired of debating. He well knew how

tenacious Kelly Malloy could be. "If you don't want to work with Brandt Madison, you don't have to, Kelly. You can always find some other subject. But if you want to write on adoption ..." His voice trailed off, leaving the obvious unsaid.

"If I want to write on adoption, I collaborate with Madison," Kelly finished for him. One look at Wittner's face told her that the argument was over. She suppressed an exasperated sigh. Witt wouldn't care if she refused to work with Brandt Madison and the loathsome *Informant*. But if she refused, she would lose the chance to write about a topic that had obsessed her for years. No one knew about her secret obsession and no one knew the reasons that fueled it. Kelly meant to keep it that way, just as she meant to write her article, no matter what—or who—it entailed.

"Oh," all right," she grumbled crossly. "At least I'll meet the man. Maybe I can persuade him to drop the subject of adoption and focus on something more his style—warring tribes of cannibals, human head-hunters, serial ax-murderers—topics along those lines."

Wittner laughed. "You do that, Kelly."

Kelly smoothed her black wool skirt, then adjusted the matching jacket. It was the most distancing, prim, absolutely no-nonsense outfit that she owned. This suit clearly belonged to the Nazi commandant school of design, she thought, and smiled in satisfaction. She'd bought it on sale a few years ago, thinking that such a forbidding garment might be useful. Until now she'd never found that use.

Her high-necked snow-white blouse added a pristine note of untouchability and her thick-heeled black pumps were incredibly sensible. What a pity that her hair wasn't long enough to pull into a

severe bun; instead she'd had to make do with securing it tightly away from her face with two metal barrettes.

Black harlequin-style glasses, complete with rhinestones, were an inspired touch. The lenses were clear glass. Simply because she'd been blessed with good eyesight didn't mean she had to forgo the effect of these perfectly dreadful frames. Naturally she wore no makeup—not even a trace of lipstick. Her room- i mate, Susan Lippert, winced at the sight of her.

"Oh, Kelly, you've done it! You've actually made yourself look ..."
Susan paused, searching for a suit- I able adjective.

"Homely?" Kelly supplied hopefully.

Susan bit her lower lip. "Well, plain, at the very least."

"I was striving for ugly." Kelly surveyed herself in the mirror.

"You couldn't look ugly if you tried, Kel," Susan ; said dryly. "I guess you just proved it."

"I want to turn off a vain, shallow, womanizing idiot dripping with phony machismo. I'll do whatever it takes."

"Kelly, I think the interview Brandt Madison did with the *Trib* was strictly tongue-in-cheek." Susan picked up a newspaper clipping and studied it thoughtfully. "Especially the part where he says that after he was named Bachelor of the Month by *Cosmopolitan* last year, he received letters from two thousand women, half of which contained things like nude photos and black lace panties with telephone numbers embroidered on them."

"Tongue-in-cheek, ha!" Kelly snatched the clipping and glowered at it. "It was bad enough when I thought Brandt Madison was a ghoulish

blood-and- guts writer. But finding out that he fancies himself God's gift to women really caps it!"

Susan grinned. "Insisting that he meet you in the library will certainly put a crimp in his style. Libraries are definitely not the natural habitat for studs on the prowl."

Kelly thought back to her brief telephone conversation with Brandt Madison earlier that afternoon. His voice was deep and masculinely resonant. She might have been tempted to respond pleasantly to him, had she not been forearmed with the newspaper clipping of an interview Susan had unearthed from the files of the *Chicago Tribune*.

The article said it all. *Cosmopolitans* Bachelor of the Month. Letters from two thousand admiring women. Black panties in the mail! A sensationalistic blood-and-gore crime writer with ties to the repellent *National Cesspool*! Ugh! The man was a living, breathing affront to every serious woman journalist!

She'd insisted that their initial meeting take place in the Central Library. And she'd costumed herself in the most stereotypical and most off-putting garb of a librarian. Brandt Madison would skip the obligatory pass he undoubtedly made at every woman he met, she thought smugly. And if the gods were really smiling on her, she might be able to persuade him that working on the adoption story with her would be unbearable and he would bow out of the project.

"Well, how do I look?" Brandt Madison walked to the middle of his apartment's spacious living room and struck a pose. His sister, Corinne, and her two children glanced up from the television set and gaped at him.

"Uncle Brandt, you've got to be kidding!" protested fourteen-year-old Todd. "You're not going out looking like *that!* A shiny black shirt unbuttoned to the waist? You look like a relic from the—the disco era!"

"And all those cheap gold chains are the worst!" lamented thirteen-year-old Debbie. "Don't go through with it, Uncle Brandt. Someone I know might see you and know you're related to me and I'll just die!"

"Your pants are so tight, you'd better spend the evening standing up," Corinne added, laughing. "Where on earth did you find those clothes, Brandt?"

Brandt grinned. "At a secondhand shop. I think Todd's right—the whole getup *is* a relic from the disco era. "

"Did you have to slick your hair back like that, Uncle Brandt?" complained Debbie. "It looks gross! You can't even tell what color it is."

Brandt chuckled. "I used a whole can of your mother's mousse to achieve this effect, which, I hope, will help to make Ms. Kelly Malloy take one look at me and run screaming from the library. And then call her editor and back out of this absurd collaboration idea of Tucker's."

"Why is Uncle Tuck so insistent that you work with this woman anyway, Brandt?" Corinne asked curiously. "And since when do you agree to do anything that you don't want to do?"

"Tucker is impressed with Malloy's writing— apparently she's won some awards for her journalism, and he's interested in promoting that magazine she writes for." Brandt heaved a sigh. "And you know that Tuck is too good a friend to simply say no to, Corinne. After everything he's done for our family over the years. . . That's why I

agreed at least to meet with this Malloy woman. If she refuses to go along with the project, I'm off the hook."

"What if she's a real dish, Uncle Brandt? You'll be sorry if she thinks you're a jerk," Todd pointed out.

"I have no worries on that score, Todd. A real dish wouldn't write for *In the Know*, which is a pretentious, grimly trendy magazine dedicated to the materialistic, the smug, and the self-centered. And a real dish wouldn't sound like the commander of a Russian gulag over the phone. Talking to Ms. Malloy today confirmed my image of her: uptight, repressed, frigid, and humorless." Brandt grimaced. "Why a woman like her would be interested in a human subject like adoption is beyond me. Intellectual snobbery is more her style, with some radical fem-lib hostility thrown in."

"So you're going to scare her away with your impression of a stereotypical stud on the prowl?" Corinne laughed.

"She no doubt expects me to make a pass at anything remotely female. And so I'm going to live up—or down—to her expectations and come on so strong that she'll decide that working with me will be unbearable."

"And bow out of the project," concluded Corinne. "After all, what serious, self-respecting woman could stand to work with *Cosmo's* Bachelor of the Month?"

Brandt groaned at the mention of the title, and all four of them burst into laughter.

Kelly spotted him the moment he walked into the library. He was carrying his top coat over one arm, and was dressed in a satiny black

shirt with full blouson sleeves and an obscenely tight pair of shiny black pants. His shirt was opened to his waist and an atrocious assortment of gold chains and medallions nestled in his thick patch of dark blond chest hair.

"Oh, no," Kelly moaned to herself. He was as bad—no, worse!—than she'd expected. This man looked like an overdone parody of a self-imagined playboy. And his hair! She couldn't even guess what color it was. He'd carried the wet look to new dimensions by slicking it back from his forehead and anchoring it with what had to have been a case of styling mousse.

She took a deep breath and resisted the urge to slip quietly from the library. She would meet this oversexed creature and convince him that working together was an impossibility. *He* was Norwalk's friend: if he backed out, she would be off the hook and could continue her adoption article.

It gave her great pleasure to know that Brandt Madison was going to be as dismayed by her as she was by him. For in this repressed spinster getup, she was undoubtedly far from the preening peacock's usual choice of woman. He probably preferred his female companions to have platinum hair, Spandex jeans two sizes too small, and a bosom spilling out of a gold lame tank top, Kelly mused.

Brandt saw the woman in black walking toward him and stifled a groan. She had to be Kelly Malloy. In that dehumanizing black suit and glasses that looked as though they should have a fake nose and mustache attached, her appearance matched her telephone voice. Sour, dour, a self-righteous prune. His eyes dropped to her thick black stockings— orthopedic pantyhose? Brandt wondered—and depressingly sensible shoes. He was surprised she wasn't wearing oxfords, although those clunky, never-fashionable pumps ran a close second.

He drew in a deep breath. The book was worth it, after all. There were thousands of childless couples out there, desperate for a baby, who were defenseless against the greedy and unscrupulous "baby brokers" who operated in the loopholes of the private adoption laws. And there were thousands more who couldn't afford to pay those prices and were denied the joys of parenthood. He and Michele had been such a couple.

Brandt felt the familiar wave of pain and frustration sweep through him. The severity had lessened over the years, but he knew traces would always remain, like scar tissue over a wound. He remembered Michele's disappointment, which had escalated into heartbreak as the years passed without a child.

He was going to dedicate this book to her. But first he had to get rid of his unwelcome would-be collaborator, Ms. Kelly Malloy.

Kelly approached him. "Mr. Madison?" she asked resignedly. She had no doubts—it had to be him. Who else but a vain, shallow, womanizing idiot dripping with phony machismo would show up at the library looking like a—a throwback to the disco era? "I'm Kelly Malloy." She wished for a more unapproachable name, something along the lines of Hepzibah or Temperance or Chastity.

Brandt tilted his head, flashed a practiced predatory smile, and slipped an arm around her waist, his fingers splaying over her hipbone. "Brandt Madison, at your service, sweet thing. And I am"—he managed a very credible leer—"ready, willing, and able to service you, pussycat."

Pussycat! Kelly quickly disengaged his hand from her waist. "Mr. Madison, let's get a few things * straight from minute one. I object to being pawed and I will not answer to—to pussycat or anything remotely similar."

He'd offended her, all right. Victory was close at hand. Brandt's grin widened, and he proceeded to clasp his hands over her small shoulders.

"Don't fight it, baby. I felt the vibes between us the moment our eyes met across the crowded room. Uh, library." His hands moved up and down over her upper arms in caressing strokes. "What's your sign, sweetie? Can't you feel it? It was written in the stars for us to meet. We're destined to make beautiful music together. Let's get out of here and go someplace where we can be alone. Preferably my bedroom."

Kelly jerked away from him, incredulous. "Where do you get your dialogue? From *Mad* magazine's look at singles bars?"

She'd hit dangerously close to his source. Todd and Debbie were *Mad* devotees, and he'd actually read the magazine's parody on singles bars. Brandt suppressed a real grin and substituted a phony, smarmy one. "So you want to go to a bar, baby? Your wish is my command." He grabbed her hand and attempted to slip it into the pocket of his skintight pants. "Let's go get you drunk, doll. And then I'll get you naked."

"Oh!" Kelly was incensed. The man was offensive beyond belief! She pulled her hand away, which was brushing the hard muscles of his thigh sheathed in those too tight black pants as he tried to pocket it. "What nerve! What—what gall!" Her voice rose as her indignation mounted. "I've never encountered such a blatantly crude, chauvinistic—"

"Shh, keep it down, babe. We're in a library, remember. Let's go to my place. You can scream and moan and gasp as loudly as you want there, my little passion flower."

She had to get away from him before she murdered him. Not that she wouldn't get away with justifiable homicide, should any woman be

on the jury. "Mr. Madison," she began in a tone which would surely freeze fire.

"C'mon, baby, I can tell you're hot for me. Let's get outta here."

"I am not going anywhere with you, Mr. Madison."

"No? Why not, cupcake? Don't you like me?"

Kelly shuddered. "That, Mr. Madison, is probably the understatement of the decade!"

Triumph shone in Brandt's golden-brown eyes. This was a piece of cake! "So I guess you don't want to work with me, huh, Sugar-puss?"

"Put it this way, I'd rather break rocks on a chain gang than work with you, Mr. Madison."

"All right! Call your editor first thing in the morning and tell him you're off the project." Brandt snatched her hand and brought it to his mouth, kissing her fingertips with what he thought was just the right touch of phony continental charm. "The pleasure's been all mine, honey bunch. *'Au revoir! Ciao! Sayonara!'*"

He started for the door, feeling jubilant.

"Just a minute, Mr. Madison."

Brandt halted and turned around. It was Dragon Lady calling him, all right. He pasted on an unctuous smile. "Change your mind, pussycat? Decided that you can't resist my body, after all?"

Kelly walked up to him, her arms folded in front of her chest, the glasses resting on the tip of her nose. She was the image of the old-time schoolmarm about to put the class clown firmly in his place. "Oh, I can resist your body, Mr. Madison. In fact, I find you

frighteningly resistible. And while I certainly don't *want* to work with you, I didn't say that I *wouldn't* work with you."

"You mean, you're not backing out?" Brandt's face reflected his severe disappointment.

"No," Kelly said sternly. "And you can drop the smooth operator act. You're not going to scare me off, Mr. Madison."

Brandt sighed. "I overplayed my hand, huh?"

"Dreadfully."

"Just for future reference, how did I give myself away?"

"By acting like something out of a comic book!" Kelly glared at him. "Once I recovered from the initial shock of you, I realized that while you might well be a vain, shallow, womanizing idiot, no one could possibly be as repellent as you were playing it. The clothes, the murderously offensive cliches you were spouting, had to be a put-on. And when you so eagerly assumed that I'd quit ..." She shrugged. "That cinched it. Nice try, Mr. Madison, but I'm not going to be the one who backs out of this enforced collaboration. "

Brandt stared at her for a long moment. Then he reached over and plucked the glasses from her nose. And for the first time noticed her eyes—huge and wide-set and a deep jade-green in color. Her lashes were long and thick and dark. He noticed her skin for the first time, too. It was smooth and peach-toned and looked incredibly soft. Her nose was small and elegant, her mouth sweetly curved and generous. Brandt swallowed.

"Give me those!" Kelly lunged for the glasses.

Brandt held them out of reach. And then peered through them. "Interesting, Ms. Malloy. Nonprescription lenses, hmm? Spectacles for someone with twenty-twenty vision. And the rest of your getup? Any particular reason why you decided to dress up like a forbidding spinster straight from Central Casting?"

He handed her back the glasses and Kelly stuffed them into her oversize shoulder bag.

"I don't want to work with you any more than you want to work with me, Mr. Madison," she said defensively.

"Mmm-hmm. So you decided to scare me away by playing the Dragon Lady?"

"I thought she would be an effective foil to you, Mr. Macho."

"Most effective. The character I was playing would've headed for the hills after just one glance." He gave her a tentative smile. "So what do we do now?"

Kelly did not smile back, not even tentatively.

"Tucker Norwalk is your friend. Why don't you tell him that our working together is an impossibility?"

"Let your editor tell him that. Or tell him yourself."

"I can't. If I refuse to work with you, I'll have to shelve my adoption article. Why can't you say no to Norwalk, Mr. Madison? Does he own you? What is the King of Flash-and-Trash holding over you that makes you so compliant to his wishes?"

She'd irritated him; she could tell by the sudden flames that sparked in his eyes. Kelly enjoyed a moment's satisfaction at her small victory.

"You don't know anything about Tucker Norwalk or my reasons for choosing—I repeat, *choosing*, Ms. Malloy—to consider his request."

Brandt glowered at her. He was fully aware that people who knew about Tucker Norwalk only in his role as the publisher of a chain of daily "flash-and- trash" newspapers would have difficulty reconciling him with the doting avuncular figure that he and Corinne had grown up knowing. The brash, self- made millionaire had few friends, but those he did have, he cherished. David Madison, Brandt's father, had been one of them. Kelly Malloy had no conception of Norwalk's steadfast loyalty, which he had observed firsthand all his life, Brandt reminded himself. But he resented her condemnations and insinuations anyway.

"You might keep in mind that Tucker Norwalk makes it possible for you to write your trendy little pieces for the self-styled 'in crowd' about what's in and what's out, who's hot and who's not, what's the latest color of pasta to make in the latest model pasta machine. ..."

He was insulting the magazine! Kelly's cheeks flamed. It was tantamount to a personal insult. "In *the Know* is not at all trivial or pretentious, Mr. Madison. We've run short, humorous articles on the subjects you've mentioned, but on the whole we—"

"Humorous? I doubt if there's a spark of humor in even one piece written by your relentlessly trendy staff members, Ms. Malloy." Score one for him, Brandt noted as Kelly's face flushed with rage. He owed her for that attack on Tucker.

They glared balefully at each other, their faces reflecting their mutual frustration and irritation. And neither backed down.

"Look, all you're working on is an article for a magazine with a small and limited circulation," Brandt said, breaking the silent stalemate. "I'm working on a book that will hit the *Times* Best Seller List. That'll

be reviewed in all the major magazines and will have international sales. My book will have an impact, maybe effect some changes in the adoption arena. Your article won't even cause a ripple. Find some other topic to play around with, Ms. Malloy."

"Play around with?" Kelly echoed. "I don't play around when it comes to my writing, Mr. Madison. And I happen to feel that my article will be a worthy contribution, even though an arrogant, self-important pig like you might not think so!"

Brandt's tawny-gold eyes gleamed. "Dare I say it? You're cute when you're all fired up." He couldn't resist it. Despite her old-maid costume and his antipathy to the idea of working with her, she was very appealing as she spluttered with sincerity and fury.

Kelly did not respond well to the compliment. "If this is more of your supposed charm, kindly spare me."

"No more charm, supposed or otherwise. Maybe I did sound like an arrogant, self-important pig. Can I start all over again?"

He smiled at her, and for the first time Kelly saw him, really saw him, beyond the outrageous clothes and overblown demeanor. He was tall, at least an inch or two over six feet, and his solid build suggested physical strength and power. His features were strong and well-defined. The straight nose. The firm jaw. The well-shaped mouth. He had a curiously endearing dimple in his left cheek. Kelly focused on , it, momentarily disconcerted by his unexpected physical impact on her. Despite his atrocious, slicked-back hair of some nondescript color, he was a strikingly attractive man, she thought.

Her eyes lifted to his. He was staring down at her. He had the lightest-brown eyes she'd ever seen, Kelly mused idly. With golden flecks in them. And as she stared into his eyes, they seemed to change from the light brown shade to pure gold.

"This book is very important to me, for personal reasons," Brandt said quietly, his eyes still holding hers. "If Tucker had suggested collaborating with you on anything else, my answer might very well have been yes."

"If Norwalk had insisted on collaborating with you on anything else, my answer would've been an unqualified no." Kelly was the first to break their gaze and was irritated with herself for doing so. She could hold her own against Brandt Madison any day of the week, she assured herself. It was just that when she was looking into those golden eyes of his . . .

She dared another glance. He was still staring at her, his gaze unwavering. For a horrifying moment her mind seemed to go blank. She quickly looked away, determined to get her mind back on the track.

"You said your book was important to you for personal reasons, Mr. Madison. I feel the same way about my article. It's important to me for my own personal reasons."

He'd become accustomed to getting his own way these past few years, Brandt realized with a slight shock as he stared down at Kelly Malloy. The books on the best seller list. The TV talk shows. The Pulitzer. People tended to cater to him; any stumbling blotks in his path were easily smoothed away. But Kelly Malloy hadn't gotten the message. She was a stumbling block in the celebrity author's path, and she refused to budge.

Brandt's lips twisted into a wry smile. The writer in him stood aloof and observed his own frustration clashing head-on with Kelly Malloy's stubbornness. When was the last time anyone had directly challenged him? Opposed him? Even the critics who reviewed his books were inevitably admiring.

Was he perhaps becoming just a bit of an arrogant, self-important pig, as Kelly Malloy had accused? It was an unsettling thought.

Kelly set her firm little chin and met his golden-eyed stare. "I'm not backing out, Mr. Madison," she announced. "If working with you is the only way I can get my article published, then I'll suffer through it."

"Suppose I tell Tucker that we've met and found that our goals for our respective works are irreconcilable and incompatible?" Brandt began slowly. "That although the topic is the same, the contents are mutually exclusive? Do you suppose we'd both be off the hook?" He was *not* an arrogant, self-important pig! he assured himself.

"I should think that ought to do it, Mr. Madison." Kelly smiled for the first time that night.

Brandt gazed at her, startled by the transformation. She had a very appealing smile. A heart-shaped face. And her hair was a dark auburn color; he hadn't noticed that before. Even with that unflattering hairstyle she was ... He studied her. Pretty. Very pretty. In fact, in the immortal words of his nephew, she was "a real dish." Who thought he was a jerk. Brandt frowned.

"I'm glad we came to an agreement tonight, Mr. Madison," Kelly was saying with polite dismissal. She held out her hand for him to shake. "It was—uh— interesting to meet you."

Brandt was still studying her. Beneath that frumpish suit some intriguingly feminine curves were subtly concealed, he noted. Pretty face. Good figure. Did her red hair and dark green eyes indicate a passionate temperament? He smiled. It would be interesting to find out.

"Since we're no longer going to be colleagues, perhaps you'd like to celebrate with a nightcap?" Brandt asked, clasping her hand in his for a rather less-than-professional handshake.

Kelly gave him a dazzling smile. "Not on your life." She carefully withdrew her hand from his.

"Why not?" Brandt stared at her, nonplussed. He'd expected—counted on—her to reject the absurd buffoon he'd been playing, but he wasn't playing that role now. He was being himself. And he couldn't remember the last time a woman had turned down a date with Brandt Madison.

"Any man who is *Cosmopolitans* Bachelor of the Month deserves no less than a *Playboy* Playmate of the Month for company," Kelly replied cheerfully. "That lets me out. Good night, Mr. Madison."

"Wait a minute." He grasped her arm, restraining her.

Kelly glanced pointedly at his hand, his fingers curled around her upper arm. Brandt did not release her, and she threw him a mutinous glare. "I told you that I object to being pawed, Mr. Madison."

"I'm not pawing you. And call me Brandt. That Mr. Madison stuff is getting on my nerves."

"*You're* getting on my nerves. Are you going to revert to type, after all?"

His eyes glittered. "Meaning what?"

"You admitted to deliberately overplaying the role of the avid rake, but that's not to say that you aren't one. Right now you're treating me to a more modified version of the role. No thanks, Mr. Madison. I don't care to be seduced by you."

"Seduced? I asked you to have a drink with me! That's hardly a seduction!"

"You had a definitely wolfish gleam in your eye when you invited me."

"Wolfish gleam?" yelped Brandt. "I think *you're* the one reverting to type, Little Miss Prim."

"I'm not prim simply because I choose not to have a drink with a man who receives black lace panties with phone numbers embroidered on them through the mail! How many of those numbers did you call, Mr. Madison?"

His eyes flashed golden fire. "All of them!" he snapped. "All seven hundred eighty-eight of them."

She looked at him as if he were a walking communicable disease. A highly contagious one. "I hope you've registered with the Public Health Department," she said with distaste.

She'd believed him! Brandt told himself. She actually believed that seven hundred eighty-eight women had sent him panties embroidered with their telephone numbers—and that he'd called them all! Actually the number was closer to two, and he hadn't called either of them. Brandt gritted his teeth. "You're a prudish little idiot."

"And you're something to be inoculated against!"

Kelly whirled away from him and headed back to' the voluminous stacks. Thank heavens she didn't have to work with the man, she consoled herself as her temper slowly cooled. The writing team of Malloy and Madison would have been nothing less than an unqualified disaster.

Brandt went in the opposite direction, straight out the front door. He was struck by a blast of frigid January wind. This was the first time in his life that he'd been compared to a germ! He would call Tucker Norwalk first thing in the morning to tell him that the writing team of Madison and Malloy was a colossal mistake.

Two

Kelly watched the flakes of snow swirl in the wind outside the living-room window. "It's a good night to be inside. Butter," she murmured to the fat yellow- striped cat who lay on the sofa complacently licking his paws. "Poor Susan has to trek all the way to Evanston for that political rally tonight."

Butter glanced up at her, then resumed his bath, clearly uninterested in the conversation. Nevertheless, Kelly continued it. "At least there are only flurries now. The snowstorm that's predicted isn't supposed to hit until sometime after midnight. Susan will be back long before then."

Kelly joined Butter on the couch and picked up her cup of tea and her book, a paperback edition of last year's best-selling spy thriller set in the Middle East. She felt cozy and secure in the softly lighted room as she listened to the sounds of the gathering wind whipping against the windowpanes. She sipped her tea, opened the book, and began to read.

Twenty minutes later, just as a group of crazed terrorists were about to abduct the hero from his hotel room, Kelly was startled back to reality by a sharp knock on the door. She jumped, and Butter glared at her and meowed testily.

"Sorry, old fellow." She felt obliged to offer an apology to the affronted cat. She and Susan always apologized to Butter when he was disturbed in any way. His feline dignity seemed to demand it.

Kelly set *down* her book and hurried to the door. Longtime habit caused her to peer through the peephole before opening. The apartment was in a big, old house which had been converted into three separate apartments, and there was no security provided for the building.

The sight of Brandt Madison in the hallway, caused her to draw back in shock. He had a leather briefcase tucked under one arm. She watched as he pressed the doorbell again.

With oddly unsteady fingers Kelly opened the door. Brandt Madison loomed before her. A Brandt Madison far different from the man she'd met last night at the library. Gone were the exaggerated clothes, gold chains, and glopped hair. He was casually dressed in jeans, a plaid shirt, and an ecru cable-knit sweater. A navy ski jacket dangled between his fingers. The color of his hair was evident today. It was a dark blond, lighted by sun streaks. A few tousled strands tumbled across his forehead.

The sight of him impacted on her senses with the force of a physical blow. Kelly fought her sudden breathlessness. Brandt Madison was a strikingly masculine man. A very attractive one. And she was involuntarily but incredibly aware of him sexually.

He smiled at her, a genuine smile, not one of those lecherous, practiced grins he'd been flashing last night. Kelly's heart gave an odd little thump.

She resisted the urge to demand why he was here. It was just the sort of response that Brandt Madison sought from her, one that would give him the upper edge. If he were here to play some more games, she would not be forced into the role of a straight man, supplying him his lines!

"Aren't you going to demand what I'm doing on your doorstep?" Brandt asked as he surveyed her toast-colored robe that was wrapped and belted over her pink, yellow, and blue flannel nightgown. She was wearing wool crew socks on her feet in lieu of slippers.

Held by his intent gaze, Kelly was momentarily grateful that she was so thoroughly and thickly garbed. There could be nothing remotely

suggestive about her functional robe, modest gown, and sexless socks.

"I'm sure you're going to tell me." Her cheeks were pink. Although she was thankful for her utilitarian sleepwear, it was still rather embarrassing to be caught in it at eight o'clock on a Friday evening. She resisted the urge to offer an excuse as to why she wasn't getting ready for a night on the town.

"May I come in?" Brandt asked, clearly amused.

He knew his appearance had unsettled her. Kelly frowned. Shrugging with what she hoped was an air of insouciance, she stepped aside in silent invitation.

Brandt entered the apartment and glanced around the small living room at the plush peach-colored sofa and peach-and-green chintz-covered chairs. Plants hung from macrame hangers and various knick-knacks and photographs in pretty little frames were displayed on the assortment of end tables.

"Nice place," he remarked. "Do you live alone?"

"No." Kelly replied unexpansively.

Brandt smiled. "Is the person with whom you share this apartment male or female?"

She could tell by the expression on his face that he knew she didn't live with a man. It would be lovely to stun him with the revelation that she shared this apartment with a brawny defensive lineman for the Chicago Bears. Susan, however, did not fit that description.

"I live with Susan Lippert, who's a reporter for the *Trib*," Kelly answered crisply.

She watched as Brandt spied Butter on the sofa, watched as he leaned down to stroke the cat's big head. Butter accepted the attention as his due.

"Is the cat jointly owned?" he asked.

"No, Butter is mine, although he tolerates Susan's living with him." Kelly smiled at the cat. "He graciously allows her to put food in his dish and empty his cat box upon occasion, although he'd much prefer that I perform these services."

Brandt grinned. "Cats are so wonderfully arrogant. I'd have a couple of my own if pets weren't strictly prohibited in my apartment building."

Silence descended over the room. Brandt continued to pet the cat, and Kelly continued to watch him do it. Finally, she could stand it no more. "Why *are* you here tonight?" She demanded the answer to the question she'd been determined not to ask.

Brandt straightened and stared directly into her dark jade eyes. "I'm here because I need a wife."

Kelly eyed him coolly. She wasn't about to provide him with his next line. "That certainly has nothing to do with me."

Brandt tried again, grinning. "Guess who's going to be my wife?"

"I have no idea, but whoever she is, she has my deepest sympathy."

His smile widened. "I can't shake you up tonight, can I?"

"You've lost the element of surprise. After that apparition I met yesterday, nothing you do or say can unnerve me."

Brandt sat down on the sofa and snapped open his briefcase, suddenly all business. "Kelly, I'll come straight to the point. I need you to play the part of my wife for a few days."

"Is this another stunt to scare me off?" Kelly demanded sternly. "I'm completely on the level, Kelly. This involves our working together."

"Working together?" Kelly echoed in horror. "But you said last night that you would—" She broke off to glower at him. "So you lost your nerve, did you? You're afraid to stand up to Tucker Norwalk! You're going to let him bully you into—"

"Tucker isn't bullying me into anything," Brandt cut in. "I fully intended to call him this morning, just as I said I would. But I had a phone call last night that changed my plans. And makes it imperative for us to work together."

Kelly gave a sniff of disbelief. "There is absolutely nothing that would ever make it *imperative* for us to work together, Brandt Madison."

Brandt ignored her disdainful little sniff and leaned forward, alert and intent. "Does the name Manuel Carista mean anything to you, Kelly?"

Kelly thought for a moment, then shook her head. "No, it doesn't." She sank into one of the peach-and-green armchairs. "Should it?"

"He's the reason why I'm here tonight. The reason why we're going to be working together, despite our initial—uh—reservations." Brandt stood up and flexed his arms. Kelly watched the hard muscles move beneath his sweater. She shifted in her chair, suddenly aware of her instinctive feminine awareness of the man. She swallowed and shifted again, striving to school her features into an expression of aloof indifference.

"*Reservation* is too weak a word. Last night we both admitted to a distinct aversion to the idea of working together," she reminded him.

"That was last night. Things have changed since then." Brandt crossed the room to stand directly before her chair.

He towered above her, and Kelly immediately stood up, seeking to dispel their unequal positions. It was a tactical mistake, she realized as her body brushed his. She hadn't realized that Brandt was so close to her chair, that her standing would bring them into direct bodily contact.

She moved away—quickly, clumsily, as if seared by the feel of him. Brandt's big hands closed over her shoulders, steadying her. "Relax, Kelly." His voice held a note of amusement that grated on her nerves like nails on a chalkboard. "Contrary to my behavior of last night, I'm not about to make a heavy pass."

"You wouldn't get very far if you did," she retorted swiftly. She tried to shrug off his hands. He didn't release her.

"Still see me as the chain-wearing, posturing idiot spouting singles-bar patter, hmm?"

"Yes!" Kelly replied succinctly. Liar, she thought, mocking herself. She knew she no longer thought of him that way.

"Well, you may be relieved to know that I no longer view you as an uptight, repressive prune."

"Oh, I'm *so* relieved! I spent the last twenty-four hours worrying that I'd be forever categorized in your mind as an uptight, repressive prune." Her laugh was supposed to be sardonic. Instead, it was unexpectedly husky. Due to his disturbing nearness? Kelly tried to step away, to put some distance between them.

Brandt merely increased the pressure on her shoulders, ever so lightly, drawing her toward him instead. Their thighs touched. The feel of his powerful muscles against her own slender limbs, even through the triple barrier of jeans, flannel, and quilted cotton seemed to scorch her. It was suddenly hard to breathe.

Play it cool, Kelly, she cautioned herself. She refused to appear the uptight, repressive prune she'd masqueraded as last night. She and Brandt were merely indulging in a little sexually tinged banter. It was nothing more than that. She was determined to appear as unaffected as he by their proximity. "I suppose my choice of attire tonight could probably fit into the repressed-spinster category." Kelly was striving for a bit of sophisticated self-mockery, but her voice sounded oddly breathless to her own ears. She felt alternately tense and exhilarated. Her stomach and her heart were both jumping, as if trying to meet somewhere in her midsection.

"I like what you're wearing tonight," Brandt said softly, and the husky note in his voice made her knees grow weak. So he wasn't as unaffected as he'd appeared? The notion warmed Kelly. When his hand slid along her collarbone to gently caress the sensitive curve of her neck, her pulses drummed wildly.

His thumb skimmed the telltale pulse in her throat. His eyes were locked with hers, and she felt herself being drawn inexorably into his warm golden gaze. "You look young and soft and"—his voice lowered, deepened—"contrary to last night, sweetly accessible."

He smiled, and Kelly followed the curve of his lips with her eyes. He had the most beautiful mouth, she thought dizzily. Well-shaped, sensitive, sensual . . . She wondered what it would be like to have that mouth pressed against hers ... to part her lips and allow him to penetrate her mouth with his tongue and . . .

"As much as I'd like to kiss you, I think I'd better not, Kelly. Not at this particular point in time."

Brandt's amused tone penetrated the peculiar momentary fog that seemed to have shrouded her brain. Kelly was aware that she was gazing up at him with half-lidded eyes, that her thoughts had taken an alarming direction. And that Brandt Madison had read those wayward thoughts in her eyes!

"Ill never be accessible to—to a smug, vain *wolf* like you, Brandt Madison!" Kelly jerked away from him in a horror of embarrassment. What had come over her? She wasn't given to fantasizing sexually about men that she didn't even like! And she *didn't* like Brandt Madison, she reminded herself fiercely. He was a smug, vain wolf! No, she didn't like him at all.

"I'm a smug, vain wolf because I *didn't* kiss you?" Brandt smiled wryly. "And to think that the only reason I didn't give in to my own desires and taste that tempting mouth of yours was because I thought you'd accuse me of being a compulsive, womanizing rake and throw me out of here without even listening to what I came to say. I can't win!"

"You're all of those things!" Kelly's face burned. She felt like a fool, and she didn't care for the feeling at all. "I want you to leave. Now!"

"Damn, she's throwing me out anyway." Brandt sounded singularly undisturbed. She strongly suspected he was laughing at her! "I should've followed my wicked instincts and kissed her in the first place. Well, better late than never. Come here, pussycat."

Kelly whirled around at the change in his tone. She well remembered that particular speech pattern, that irritating cadence, from last night at the library.

Brandt flashed an exaggerated leer and reached for her. "C'mere, baby, you know you're hot for it."

He was once again overplaying the role of macho stud to the point of absurdity. His tawny gold eyes were gleaming, inviting her to share the joke.

Kelly tried to scowl, she really tried, but her lips curved into a reluctant smile instead, seemingly of their own volition. "Will you knock it off?" She tried, and failed, to sound severe.

"Playing hard to get, eh?" He swaggered toward her.

Kelly rolled her eyes heavenward and flopped down on the couch, beside the sleeping Butter. It was a relief to sit. Her legs were incredibly shaky.

Brandt sat down on the other side of the cat. "Do you really believe that I called seven hundred eighty-eight phone numbers that had been embroidered on that many pairs of black lace panties?"

She didn't look at him. "Didn't you?"

"I bet you faithfully send in those sweepstakes forms and expect to win the ten-million-dollar prize too."

Kelly arched her brows. "Are you hinting—ever so subtly—that you think I'm gullible?"

"I'm not subtly hinting at all. You *are* gullible if you believe everything you read, Kelly Malloy."

"So you didn't dial the panties?"

"Would you call a number embroidered on a pair of Jockey shorts?"

Kelly laughed. "*Touche*, I think."

Her dark green eyes met his light brown ones. For a long moment they sat in silence, their gazes locked.

"I was less than thrilled when I was selected for the dubious honor of *Cosmopolitans* Bachelor of the Month," Brandt said at last. "It certainly wasn't anything I'd initiated. The whole thing was the result of my sister's and my agent's collusion. They both got a terrific kick out of the idea. I got the two thousand letters"—he leaned across the cat to catch Kelly's chin between his thumb and forefinger—"two of which contained panties with embroidered phone numbers on them."

"Only two?"

"Don't look so disappointed. Would it cheer you up if I told you about the nude photos?"

Kelly drew back. "Were there seven hundred eighty- eight of *those*? With phone numbers on them?" For reasons she didn't care to examine, the prospect annoyed her.

"Haven't you ever heard of creative license? There were not seven hundred eighty-eight of anything. I simply thought that number had a funny, over- exaggerated ring to it. How was I to know you'd take it literally?"

"How many nude photos were there?" Kelly persisted, wondering at her own tenacious curiosity. But she couldn't seem to resist asking the question.

Brandt shrugged. "Close to seventy-five."

"A much more manageable figure. You did call all the nude models, I presume?"

"You presume wrong. I wasn't even tempted. May I quote you a typical letter? Most of the two thousand went something like this: 'Dear Brandt, I've always wanted to meet a rich, Pulitzer prize-winning author who drives a midnight-blue Maserati and likes Italian food.' End quote."

Kelly laughed. She couldn't help herself. "Let me guess. The paragraph in the magazine described you as a rich, Pulitzer prize-winning author who owns a midnight-blue Maserati and likes Italian food."

"Those were the exact words."

"You should consider yourself lucky that you didn't receive any pizzas in those letters. After all, the way to a man's heart, et cetera, et cetera."

"The way to a man's heart is not writing to him as if you were placing an order from a catalog. Or sending nude photos or panties or any other allegedly alluring device."

"Thanks for the advice. I'll keep it in mind."

Brandt leaned back against the sofa cushions and studied her carefully. "I don't think you need any advice on how to find your way into a man's heart, Miss Malloy."

Kelly shrugged. "You'd be surprised. I'm sitting home on a Friday night, aren't I?"

"You're not seriously involved with anyone?"

"I'm not even casually involved with anyone. Nor do I want to be. I don't have the time. I'm totally dedicated to my career," she added.

"Are you?" He was watching her, his tawny eyes intent.

Kelly lifted her chin. "Yes."

"Glad to hear it." His voice was casual. Deceptively so? Kelly wondered. "Then you won't think of turning down the request I'm about to make of you because it concerns your career," Brandt continued smoothly. "I want you to pretend to be my wife for a few days, Kelly."

"Forget it," she told him succinctly. "No," she added to drive her point home.

"Kelly, at least hear me out." He leaned toward her, his leonine eyes suddenly intense. "That name I mentioned to you a little while ago—Manuel Carista. You said you'd never heard it. Well, neither did I until a few days ago. It was given to me by—uh"—he paused to give a slight cough—"an investigative reporter of sorts and—"

"Someone from *The National Cesspool*," Kelly guessed, grimacing. "No doubt Norwalk has put all their facilities at your disposal. Disposal is an appropriate choice of terms." She congratulated herself for using it. "Because all of the garbage their so-called reporters find ought to be stuffed into a disposal along with—"

"Let's leave your personal feelings about Tucker Norwalk and his newspapers out of it, Kelly," Brandt interrupted coolly. "As it happens, I would've never run across Carista on my own. I'm grateful for the tip from the *Informant* reporter."

"Grateful? For the *Cesspool*? Ugh! You can definitely count me out of anything to do with that slimy rag!"

"There happen to be thousands of people who find Norwalk's papers—*The National Informant* included—interesting and entertaining."

"People used to find public hangings interesting and entertaining too. That didn't mean they weren't vulgar, boorish, and barbarous."

"Kelly, don't push me into making a remark about your obsessively tasteful, pedantic, and self-congratulatory little magazine."

"I wtfn't have to, you've already made it!" Kelly jumped to her feet, her eyes flashing emerald fire. "I've been with *In the Know* for three years—since its very first issue! And I consider an attack on the magazine a personal attack on me! Forget about us working together, Brandt Madison. And especially forget about me playing the part of your wife. I'm not an actress, and I'd have to be of Academy Award-winning caliber to ever hope to be credible in *that* role!"

Brandt stood up, too, and began to walk toward her. Kelly was infuriated with herself for instinctively backing away from him. He was deliberately lording his superior height over her own five feet three in wool crew socks, she decided indignantly. Nevertheless, she couldn't seem to make herself stop backing up, and he didn't stop coming toward her.

Not until her back was against the wall, and he was standing two inches in front of her.

"You don't have a choice, Kelly. I need a temporary wife, and you need to collaborate with me if you hope to write your adoption article for your magazine. I'm afraid we're stuck with each other."

It was infuriatingly true. Kelly glared up at him.

Brandt stared down at her mutinous expression—the flaring green eyes, the stubborn set of her chin—and resisted the urge to grin. As he'd said yesterday, she was cute when she was all fired up. He decided against telling her so, however. She would probably not take it as a compliment.

Right now she reminded him of a small, green-eyed kitten, backed into a corner by a much larger enemy, but determined to spit and snarl in her own defense, regardless of the circumstances.

He liked her, Brandt admitted to himself. She was prickly and quick to anger, but she amused him, aroused him too. He remembered the feel of her when he'd held her those few moments earlier tonight. She'd felt small and soft, so femininely delicate. The clean soap-and-bath-powder scent of her had filled his nostrils, and he'd found his senses swimming in a way that he hadn't experienced for years. He'd wanted badly to kiss her, so badly that he'd made a joke of it, compelling her to pull away from him.

For he was not about to lose his head over a hot-tempered little termagant whose ambivalence toward him bordered on dislike. He had a book to write. And a part to play: that of a desperate husband seeking a child. Brandt's lips curved downward into a sudden frown. It was a role he was extremely familiar with. He'd lived it for nearly five years.

An image of Michele flashed before his mind's eye, and he drew in a deep breath. No, he couldn't think of Michele now. He focused his eyes and met Kelly Malloy's clear gaze. It was back to business at hand.

Kelly stared at him. She'd seen a flash of pain shadow his face, she was sure of it. It had passed so quickly that if her gaze hadn't been affixed to him, she would've never noticed it. But she had. "Are—are you all right?" she felt compelled to ask.

"Of course," he replied coolly, and she knew that if she were to ask him about the brief flicker of anguish she'd seen in his face, he would totally deny it.

Brandt stepped away from her. "Are you ready to stop flinging insults and listen to my plan?"

"If you keep lauding the *Cesspool*, I'll keep flinging," she warned.

"Do you always have to have the last word?"

"Do you?"

"Yeah," he admitted with a slow smile. "I guess I do."

"I guess I do too." They smiled at each other in a flash of mutual recognition. Their eyes met and held, and Kelly felt her pulses begin to rev up again. "Would you like some coffee?" she offered, needing to redirect her sudden charge of energy elsewhere. "Tea? A soft drink?" Good grief, she sounded like a flight attendant. Kelly clamped her jaws together.

"No thanks. I'd like to tell you about Manuel Carista before we get sidetracked again."

"We do seem to get sidetracked with remarkable frequency," Kelly agreed thoughtfully.

"Dare I remark that you're a lovely distraction?"

"Dare I remark that you're an incorrigible tease?" Kelly countered sternly. She motioned him toward the sofa. "No more sidetracks. Sit down and tell me about this Manuel Carista. ..."

Three

"Carista represents the dark side of adoption, what is commonly known as the black market," Brandt began as they once again took their seats on the sofa. "He sells children." He paused and looked at her.

Had he expected to shock her? He hadn't succeeded. "Are you sure you haven't stumbled into yet another shade of the so-called gray market of private adoption? Money changes hands in private adoptions," Kelly pointed out. "The natural mother can receive money from the potential adoptive parents to cover her medical bills—and in some cases, her living expenses during pregnancy—with the court's approval. And a sum is paid to the attorney who acts as a go-between for the birth mother and adoptive parents. To some the entire arrangement smacks of child-selling."

"But there isn't even a pretense of the money going to pay medical bills or living expenses or legal fees in Carista's adoptions. He operates a clandestine and very lucrative business selling children from an orphanage in the South American city of Avida."

Kelly stared. "He sells children outright?"

"Absolutely. The prospective adoptive parents fly to Avida, are put up in Carista's hotel, and are escorted to Carista's orphanage—which is more like a baby supermarket, from what I've been told—where they choose a child. A sum of money is paid in cash right there on the spot, and the parents take the child back to their hotel room. Within a few days the necessary adoption papers are signed, sealed, and delivered. Apparently Carista has a fix in with the legal and judicial machinery. Then the couple is escorted back to the airport with the child. The usual wait for a visa for a child is miraculously short. Carista manages to cut through all the red tape with incredible—or is it illegal?—efficiency."

"It sounds too bizarre to be real," Kelly said slowly. "Buying a child like one would shop for a—a puppy or a kitten!"

"There are no home-study checks by reputable agencies, no questions as to the adoptive parents' character, background, mental stability, or reasons for wanting to adopt. If the cash is available, the child is sold, no questions asked."

"And if some unsavory characters want children for"—Kelly swallowed—"unsavory reasons, there is no protection at all for the children being sold."

"Absolutely none. I would guess that Carista doesn't even mind a touch of the unsavory. After all, anyone intending to use a child for illegal or immoral purposes certainly isn't going to blow the whistle on his operations." Brandt grimaced. "And then there are the desperate couples who have been bounced from agency to agency, who've maybe been burned by unethical baby brokers while attempting private adoptions. Carista offers them a chance to finally get a child. If they can come up with the cash, they can have a baby with no waiting, no hassles."

"Carista's operation must seem like a dream come true to them," Kelly said softly. "They certainly wouldn't blow the whistle on him either."

"Because they're grateful to him and because they've done something illegal themselves: They bought a human being." Brandt leaned toward her. "My contact on the *Informant* said that Carista's potential adoptive parents must be a married couple, although no documentation of the marriage is required. It's also required that the couple fly to South America to pick up the child—and make the payment. In cash, of course."

"So you need a bogus wife to be considered eligible for the bogus adoption in order to get the story," Kelly concluded thoughtfully. "But why me? There must be at least two thousand eager women who'd jump at the chance to play the role of your wife."

"Yeah, yeah, two thousand women who've always wanted to meet a Pulitzer prize-winning author who drives a midnight-blue Maserati and likes Italian food." Brandt groaned. "Kelly, can we get past that Bachelor of the Month nonsense? This trip to Avida isn't a pleasure jaunt; it's serious business. I'm doing research for a chapter in my book. I don't want to be distracted by someone who's come along for—uh— nonprofessional reasons."

"I can see where that might prove inconvenient for you," Kelly observed dryly. "Having to fend off enthusiastic advances while you're trying to gather facts."

"I don't want or need any complications. This endeavor is complicated enough."

"It's complicated, all right. How do you intend to leave Avida without the child you allegedly came to adopt?"

"I've thought of that, and I've come up with an idea that I think will work. You and I will tell Carista that we can't settle on any particular child there. We'll decide that we absolutely must have a fair-skinned, blue-eyed blond infant. Nothing else will do. The children at the orphanage are undoubtedly of Indian or Spanish or mixed parentage, so it's safe to assume there won't be a blue-eyed blond among them. It sounds disgustingly racist, I know, but it'll serve as our excuse. Meanwhile I intend secretly to tape every conversation we have there for recorded proof of baby-selling."

"You can play the Great White Hunter," Kelly said with a frown. "I won't even pretend to reject an entire orphanage of children because one isn't blond."

"Kelly, it isn't for real. It's a ruse. Like our marriage. The entire story is a ruse to *get* a story. But you've made an interesting point. It'll be even more convincing if I'm the one to back out of the adoption, while you want to proceed with it." Brandt's eyes shone with enthusiasm. "We can have furious fights in front of Carista, you can threaten to divorce me. It'll make a great cover. He won't suspect a thing."

"Are you sure you aren't a frustrated soap opera writer? Because the whole plot is beginning to sound like something out of *All My Children* or *Guiding Light*."

"Kelly, we can get documented evidence of Carista's flourishing child-selling business," Brandt continued eagerly. "I don't know if there'll be any indictments from our joint effort, but there's always that possibility. And indictments bring attention. And attention brings Pulitzer prize possibilities. For both of us, Kelly."

"I think you're bordering on the hypermanic, Madison."

"I always get excited when a new story begins to unfold. And you have to admit, if we can pull it off, it'll be a helluva story. Will you do it, Kelly? Will you fly to South America with me? As my wife?"

Kelly considered it. "This is as close as I've ever come to a marriage proposal," she said at last, her eyes gleaming with sudden humor. "Perhaps I ought to accept."

The more she considered the unorthodox proposition, the more intriguing it became. Fly to South America with Brandt, posing as a couple desperate and willing to buy a child in order to expose a baby-

selling operation? How could she refuse? It was, as he'd said, "a helluva story."

"Will you do it, Kelly?" pressed Brandt, his eyes never leaving her face.

"You've made me an offer I can't refuse, Mr. Madison." She grinned at him. "The possibilities of this story outweigh the dubious prospect of pretending to be your wife."

"We'll probably approach the story in different ways." Brandt was smiling, obviously pleased with her assent. "I intend to present the facts with no editorializing, but to build suspense by telling the story step-by-step. I'll begin the chapter on Carista's child-selling business with your agreeing to pose as my wife for the trip to Avida."

Kelly saw him already mapping out the outline in his mind and began to plot her article. "And I'll treat the buying of a child from a shady Avidan baby-seller as an answer to one of the two questions I plan to base my article on: As the demand for adoptable babies far exceeds the supply, to what lengths will desperate prospective adoptive parents go in order to obtain a child?"

"Sounds good." Brandt nodded his approval. "What's your other premise?"

"What motivates a woman to complete a pregnancy and give her child to someone else to raise?" Kelly replied at once.

Her eyes clouded as another question suddenly careened through her brain. What motivated a woman to give birth to a child, keep it for two years, and then abandon it in the streets like some unwanted parcel of trash?

Kelly quickly shook off the thought. This was no time to become mired in the past. No time to allow ghosts to haunt her. She was a twenty-five-year-old woman, a writer, a successful adult with friends and an interesting job and a home of her own. The helpless and bewildered two-year-old girl who'd been found abandoned in a rainy alley was merely a specter of a long-ago past. She'd come to terms with that little girl years ago, Kelly reminded herself. If only she could come to terms with the woman who'd left her child in the deserted alley in the rain that dark night.

"Kelly?" Brandt called her name, and Kelly quickly thrust her thoughts away.

"I'm sorry, Brandt, my mind was wandering. Would you repeat what you just said?" She treated him to a dazzling smile. Which did not reach her still-haunted eyes.

"I said that my piece will focus more on facts while yours will deal with the emotional aspects of adoption." He studied her, wondering at the sudden sorrow that had darkened her jade-green eyes. She was young and pretty and successful at a job she obviously loved. What had caused that unmistakable flash of pain to cross her face? A broken love affair? Or . . . ?

His investigative instincts perked. She'd been speaking of women giving up their babies to others to raise when she'd suddenly been tuned into her own inner pain. Was it possible that. . . ?

"Kelly, you mentioned that you had your own personal reasons for wanting to write on adoption. Do you mind sharing them?"

She saw the alert intent in his eyes, and recognized a fellow writer's instincts to ferret out hidden impulses and motivations. "The topic has always fascinated me," she replied with a shrug.

No one ferreted out Kelly's impulses and motivations; she was an intensely private person whose secrets were her own. Not even Susan, to whom she was closest, knew about the two-year-old girl left in the alley by her mystery mother twenty-three years ago.

"What are *your* personal reasons for writing on adoption?" Kelly asked him quickly.

Too quickly, Brandt thought, thus irrevocably confirming his suspicions. There was a child in Kelly Malloy's life, one she would never forget. A child who had been given away. *Her* child? Her reason, her need to write on adoption?

"I was one of the desperate prospective adoptive parents you mentioned." If she couldn't yet trust him with her reason, he had no difficulty imparting his own. He'd had eight years to come to terms with it. "My wife and I were unable to have children of our own, so we tried to adopt."

Kelly gaped at him. "You were married?"

"You find it difficult to believe that anyone would marry me?" he asked dryly.

"It's just that I never thought that Bachelors of the Month were the marrying kind."

"I've never considered myself a bachelor, Kelly. I'm a widower. My wife, Michele, died eight years ago when we were both twenty-seven."

"So young!" Kelly could hardly take it all in. "I'm—I'm sorry," she murmured, feeling gauche and inadequate.

Brandt nodded acknowledgment of her shakily expressed sympathy. "We'd been married for five years. We were college sweethearts who were married the week after our graduation." He wanted to tell her the story, he realized to his own surprise. He'd never discussed Michele with other women; to do so seemed almost a violation of sorts.

But not now. It seemed perfectly natural to share that part of his life with Kelly Malloy.

"Three months after we were married, Michele came down with endocarditis, an infection of the lining of the heart. She was very sick for a long time, and her heart was seriously, permanently damaged. The doctors warned her against getting pregnant. They said pregnancy would be too great a strain on her weak heart." Brandt gave his head a slight shake. "It was a terrible blow to Michele—she desperately wanted to have children. She'd hoped to get pregnant on our wedding night."

Kelly shifted awkwardly in her seat. Why should the mention of Brandt Madison's wedding night make her uncomfortable? She could picture him, an ardent young bridegroom passionately adoring his bride. Swiftly she pushed the image from her mind.

"Michele wanted to risk pregnancy anyway, but I refused." Brandt stared into space. "I didn't want to take any chances with her life."

"So you tried to adopt," Kelly filled in quietly.

"Yes. We tried. And were turned down by every single agency. Because of long waiting lists, because of Michele's health." Brandt grimaced at the memory. "We tried private adoption, but we never had the kind of cash that the attorneys acting as baby brokers demanded. It was frustrating, maddening. Michele was devastated. She begged me to let her take her chances with the pregnancy."

Kelly felt her blood chill. If Brandt had to carry the burden of his wife's dying while she was pregnant. . . "How did she die?" she forced herself to ask. "Was she pregnant?"

"She caught a strep infection that aggravated another bout of endocarditis," Brandt said flatly. "And her heart was so weak that she died within a few days. No, she wasn't pregnant. I simply couldn't bring myself to put her at risk. Later I wondered if I shouldn't have. Michele died anyway. She could have at least had a few happy months."

"Oh, Brandt!" Kelly exclaimed softly. The urge to put her arms around him and offer comfort was almost overpowering. "I'm so sorry!" Her sympathy was heartfelt. She no longer felt gauche expressing it. Instinctively she moved closer to him.

"It was a rough time," he said simply. "I had a lot of changes to make in my life, a lot of anger to overcome. I moved to Chicago and worked as a reporter for the *Trib*. And in my spare time I started researching a kill-for-thrill gang who'd been convicted and sentenced to death in Pennsylvania. It became my first book. When I was finished with the manuscript, Tucker Norwalk badgered a publisher into taking a look at it. I think Tuck was as surprised as I was when the publisher wanted to buy it."

"And it became a best seller," Kelly added for him.

"And launched a new life for me. After my second book hit it big, I quit the paper and started writing full-time. Digging into people's psyches for the motives behind their behavior fascinated me. All four of my books are mainly character studies of the people involved. With this book on adoption, though, I've planned a more straightforward documentary approach."

"Because it's a subject that's too close and too personal?" Kelly asked softly.

"No." He touched the ends of her fiery auburn hair with his fingertips. "Don't project your own reasons onto me, Kelly. I've accepted Michele's death. I don't have to put up walls to cope with what we went through. It's behind me now."

Kelly felt his warm breath fan her cheek. His fingers were lightly stroking her hair. A casual yet intimate gesture. How had they come to be sitting so close? she wondered dazedly. Butter was no longer between them, and Kelly couldn't even remember the cat's departure.

"But you—" It seemed imperative to keep the conversation going. For the life of her she wasn't sure why. "You haven't remarried. And it's been eight years since—"

"I've been very involved with my writing. You know how consuming work can be, Kelly. You said yourself that you're totally dedicated to your career."

"Yes," Kelly said, sighing. He was so close that she could feel the heat emanating from his hard, masculine frame. She inhaled, and her nostrils were filled with his scent—a heady male aroma that seemed to fill her senses. Her thoughts became clouded.

His fingertips lightly touched the soft curve of her cheek. "You don't have the time to get involved," he murmured as he skimmed his knuckles along her jawline.

"No," she whispered. Something swift and liquid and hot was flowing through her. It was melting her, draining her, making her feel so lethargic, so languid. . . .

"Not even casually." One big hand dropped lightly to her waist. He made large, slow concentric circles across her stomach. "Nor do you want to. Isn't that what you told me, Kelly?"

She gave a shaky nod, unable to find her voice. He continued the rhythmic, circular caresses. On one wide circle, the tips of his fingers briefly brushed the undersides of her breasts. On another, they skimmed the tops of her thighs. Kelly sat stock-still, mesmerized by his touch. A glowing ember throbbed deep inside the core of her, sending flames of liquid fire through her whole body.

"Kelly. . . ."He spoke her name softly, tentatively, as if experimenting with it, trying it out. His other hand curled round her nape and exerted a slow, inexorable pressure, drawing her mouth closer, closer, until her lips were less than an inch away from his.

Her hands crept slowly, hesitantly to his shoulders, and she felt his muscled strength beneath her fingers. His hand was still now, resting just beneath her left breast. Kelly's breath caught in her throat as Brandt touched his lips to hers. His mouth brushed her lips lightly, moving gently back and forth, over and over until a hungry little moan escaped from her throat. Kelly's lids closed heavily over her desire- clouded eyes.

"You're so sweet," he said against her lips. "So soft."

His husky voice, his words, heightened her arousal. She felt swamped by a sea of sensations, each wave more alluring and seductive than the last. She was swept away by the touch and the feel of him, by his scent and sound. She needed only his taste to complete her sensual knowledge of him. The feather- light caresses of his lips were not enough. She had to have more. Kelly's arms crept round his neck and she moved fluidly into his embrace.

Strong arms encircled her. Her head was tilted back as his mouth opened over hers. Kelly's mind, always so ordered, so disciplined and controlled, seemed to splinter and spin away.

His tongue parted her lips and plunged boldly into the moist softness of her mouth. She clung to him, feeling weak, as she gave in to the demands of his lips, his tongue. The kiss grew deeper, hotter. And melted into a second and a third. Kelly felt lightheaded, almost helpless. She'd never experienced these exquisite feelings vibrating through her.

Her weakness was abruptly translated into a fierce urgency. Moaning, she moved against him, exerting sensual demands all her own. They fell back into the sofa cushions, his hips pressing deeply against hers, making her breathtakingly aware of the hard impact of his masculinity.

Her body arched against him in insistent invitation. Her breasts were turgid and aching. She wanted him to touch her there, she was aching for it. But his hands were moving with maddeningly slow precision, one sliding over her waist to her hip and across her stomach and back; the other following the length of her collarbone to her shoulder, down her arm and then retracing its path.

Kelly made a strangled little sound of frustration and afousal as she writhed against him. But Brandt ignored her movements, her sounds of impatience, and continued methodically to caress her. He kissed her as if he were drinking from her mouth; their tongues, their breath mingling until the fiery urgency was burning her every nerve.

She was throbbing with a sensual heat that was foreign to her, that was awakening all kinds of deeply suppressed needs, making her long to do all kinds of forbidden things. Like taking his hands and putting them on her breasts.

Her thoughts shocked her. She'd never felt so out of control. Her eyes flew open. "Brandt," she cried his name when his mouth left hers to burn a trail of fiery kisses along the curve of her neck.

Brandt's hand inched slowly to the base of her spine and he began to knead the muscles there. She felt loose and languid, even as a knot of tension tightened and grew deep within her. The contradictory sensations only heightened her arousal, drawing her deeper and deeper into a tantalizing cocoon of pleasure.

Brandt opened her robe and slipped it from her shoulders, then began to undo the five buttons of her nightgown, his movements as unhurried and thorough as his caresses.

Kelly looked into his eyes and felt as if she were drowning in honey-gold pools. "I want you, Kelly," Brandt said huskily, as he eased the nightgown down. "I want to make love to you." He wanted it with an urgency that astonished him, with a passionate intensity he hadn't experienced in years. He felt dazed by the force of it. I want to see and touch and taste every tantalizing inch of you."

She gasped as his hard fingers fondled the softness of her skin. "And you want it, too, don't you, Kelly? Tell me that you do."

"Yes," she whispered breathlessly. She was trembling all over, aching for his mouth, his hands. She knew she should pull away; she was headed on a dangerous course, alone in her apartment, letting him touch her this way. But it felt so good; it overwhelmed her. And made her want more. She didn't know how wonderful touching and stroking could be. She'd had very little physical affection in her life. There had been no one to pet a reserved and withdrawn child in the overcrowded foster homes she'd grown up in. And as a woman, she maintained an aloofness that tended to keep men at a distance.

But Brandt Madison had crashed through her defensive barriers to draw forth needs she hadn't known she possessed, to arouse her senses and her passions and her emotions. It was confusing, both scary and exhilarating. She longed to give into the swirling vortex of feeling and to run from it, all at the same time.

"You're beautiful, Kelly." Brandt's tone was raspy from desire. She watched as his eyes feasted on her naked breasts. "So soft and white here." His hands palmed the rounded smoothness of her breasts and she stared, fascinated by the erotic sight. His thumbs moved over her nipples, caressing the taut tips. "And so pink and hard and tight here."

She held her breath as his mouth replaced his fingers. She felt the moist warmth surround the sensitive skin and whimpered with pleasure. "Please," she whispered. "Brandt, please ..."

"Are you pleading with me to stop?" Brandt lifted his head, searching her flushed face. "Or for more?"

"I—I don't know." Her face felt hot, her whole body burned with the fiery needs he'd aroused.

"Shall I decide for you, sweetheart?"

She knew very well what his decision would be. And part of her, the newly awakened sensual woman within, wanted to experience the physical pleasures she knew Brandt would give her. She'd decided years ago that she was far too old to be a virgin, but she hadn't been able to bring herself to take the necessary steps to alter that status. Now Brandt Madison was offering her an opportunity to do so.

Brandt stood up and picked her up in his arms.

"Direct me to your bedroom, sweet," he said softly, before taking her mouth in another long, deep kiss.

Kelly wound her arms around his neck. He was carrying her! She couldn't ever remember being carried by anyone—ever. For a few moments, she put all else from her mind and allowed herself to enjoy the novel experience. His arms were so strong, his chest so wide and hard. He took swift, long strides, transporting her effortlessly from the living room to the threshold of Susan's bedroom.

"Is this your room, honey?" Brandt murmured.

Kelly shook her head. Susan had pictures of her family arranged in collages all over the walls of her room. If Brandt Madison had known her at all, he'd have realized at once that this couldn't be Kelly Malloy's room, for Kelly had no family pictures to arrange in collages. She had no family. Not a single known relative in the world. But Brandt didn't know this, of course. Because Brandt didn't know *her*. They were strangers.

"This is Susan's room," Kelly said slowly. The sensual spell was broken. She'd been plunged irrevocably back into the world of reality. Where a man took a woman to bed without caring for her, without loving her. Kelly's heart contracted. But not her, dammit. No one had ever loved her, but no one had ever used her either. "Mine is the next one down the hall."

In the few seconds it took to reach her room, Kelly knew she couldn't go through with it. She supposed she had an idealized concept of sex, for to her the sexual act was one of awesome intimacy. An intimacy made possible by love.

Brandt Madison didn't love her; Kelly wasn't about to kid herself that he did. She doubted that anyone would ever love her, for a child who was thrown away by her mother must have some inherent unlovability about her. Kelly had reached that decision years ago and accepted it. Learned to live with it. She'd survived nicely by being cooperative and pleasant, yet asserting her will to preserve her

solitary independence. Whenever she was thwarted or threatened, the pleasantness and cooperativeness was swiftly replaced by a tenacity that met any challenge.

And as Brandt laid her down on the bed, Kelly definitely felt threatened. He didn't know her; she was merely a female body to him, interchangeable with any other woman! He would've laid her down on Susan's bed and made love to her there, believing that all those pictures on the walls were her relatives, believing that she had a family who loved her. Well, she'd never had family to protect her and take care of her; she'd learned early to protect and take care of herself. And all her fiercely developed instincts of self-preservation rose to the fore.

Brandt lay down beside her and reached for her.

Kelly abruptly sat up. "No."

Brandt stared at her with passion-glazed eyes. "No?" he echoed dazedly.

"You've got it, mister." Kelly rebuttoned her nightgown with trembling fingers, then stood to pull her robe tightly around her. "When I agreed to play the role of your wife, I didn't mean I would"—she swallowed—"play it in the bedroom too."

Brandt rolled onto his back and ran his hand through his hair, tousling it. "Kelly." He heaved a groan. "This is what's known as not playing fair."

"I want you to leave now, Madison." She glared at him through slitted eyes.

Brandt rose slowly to his feet. "Do you do this often, Kelly? Come on like a house afire, then turn into an iceberg?" His own anger was

building; fueled, he knew, by his frustrated passion. It had been a rapid, hard fall from the sweet promise of desire fulfilled to this cold, harsh denial of need.

Kelly strode from the bedroom and he followed her, his eyes riveted to the cloud of fiery auburn hair bouncing over her shoulders. She went straight to the front door and opened it. "Get out," she ordered.

Brandt stared at her, taking in her softly flushed face, her lips which were moist and swollen from his kisses. "Kelly," he began. He was torn between a desire to shake her furiously till her teeth rattled and to pull her into his arms and kiss her until she was weak and clingy. As she'd been a few minutes before.

She dumped his coat and his briefcase into his arms and stood pointedly beside the open door. "Good-bye, Mr. Madison."

Butter, the cat, appeared from nowhere and made a wild dash out the door. "Butter!" Kelly ran into the hall after him. "Butter, get back in here!"

The cat ran down the stairs to the small vestibule of the building's main entrance, Kelly hot on his trail, and Brandt at her heels. The big wooden door swung open just as they reached it, and a gust of icy wind blew a whirling blast of snow inside. Butter meowed in horror and ran back up the stairs.

Donna and Dave Everingham, the couple who lived in the first-floor apartment, trooped in. Kelly introduced Brandt to them, then peered out the door. Thick, fast-falling snow had reduced visibility to only a few feet. The wind was whipping through the bare branches of the trees that lined the sidewalk.

"It's turned into a real blizzard out there," Dave remarked, stamping the snow from his feet and looking curiously at Brandt.

Brandt stared out at his car, which was already covered by a blanket of snow. "What're the roads like?"

"Terrible." Donna pulled off her hat and scarf and shook the snow from them. "We tried to drive three blocks and decided to turn back. It's so icy that cars are skidding all over the street and the snow is coming down so hard, you can barely see two feet in front of you. Most definitely not a night for driving anywhere."

"Susan is in Evanston," Kelly said worriedly. "Do you think shell have much trouble getting home?" "She won't make it back tonight," Dave said with conviction. "It's impossible to get anywhere in that storm. She'll have to stay in Evanston."

"What do you think my chances are of making it over to Lake Shore Drive?" Brandt asked, his gaze fixed on the blizzard raging outside.

Dave and Donna both laughed at the question. "You're not going to get anywhere tonight," Dave assured him. He and Donna disappeared inside their apartment, leaving Kelly and Brandt alone in the vestibule.

They stood in silence as Brandt put on his coat. He pushed open the door as Kelly mounted the first step. The ferocious blast of wind and snow caused them both to stagger backward. "Kelly, I can't even see my car, let alone attempt to drive it across town." Brandt pulled the door closed and turned to her. "I'm afraid I'm stuck here tonight."

Kelly's eyes widened. "You can't stay in my apartment!" Not after what had happened between them! The prospect was mortifying.

"I'm going to have to," Brandt said grimly. He scowled at her horrified expression. "Believe me, I want to stay just about as much as you want me to, but there isn't any choice. I'm not venturing out

into a blizzard and risk getting stranded. I'm not spending the night freezing in my car."

She knew he was right, of course. But that didn't make the prospect of having him spend the night in her apartment any easier to handle. Kelly turned without word and proceeded to march back up the stairs. Brandt followed her, undeterred by her lack of invitation.

Butter sat on the mat in front of the apartment door, looking annoyed. Kelly scooped him up in her arms. The telephone began to ring as she carried the cat inside, and she hurried to answer it.

"Guess who's trapped in Evanston tonight, Kel?" Susan asked cheerfully over the phone.

"Oh, Susan, where are you?" exclaimed Kelly.

"Don't worry about me. A photographer and a TV camera crew are stranded with me. We all got rooms in a Holiday Inn a block or so away from the meeting hall. Right now we're heading down to the bar to toast the blizzard."

Susan was clearly taking the blizzard in stride. Kelly hung up the phone, wishing she could be equally blasé. She cast a furtive glance at Brandt, who was petting the rather disgruntled cat. Brandt looked up at that moment and caught her eye. "Is Susan spending the night in Evanston?" he asked.

Kelly nodded. "You can have her room tonight. I'll get you some fresh sheets."

"Thank you." Brandt removed his coat and sat down on the sofa. "But I'm not ready to turn in just yet. It's not even ten o'clock."

"I'll put the sheets on Susan's bed." Kelly walked stiffly across the room and picked up her book. "Then I think I'll go to my room and read in bed awhile. Feel free to turn on the TV and help yourself to anything in the kitchen."

"Your gracious hospitality is most appreciated."

She shot him a baleful glance. If he was being sarcastic, she would not be baited to respond in kind. "Well, good night."

"Kelly."

The sound of his voice, low and deep and unexpectedly husky, brought her to an abrupt halt. She gulped. "What is it?"

"I don't like taking another man's punishment."

She whirled around to stare at him. "What?"

Brandt was watching her. "Tonight. The way you froze up. How withdrawn and angry you suddenly became. I don't believe for a minute that I caused such an extreme response."

"Oh, don't you?" Kelly drew herself up to her full height and folded her arms in front of her chest. "You don't believe that it's possible for me simply to decide that jumping into bed with you is wrong? You think that there has to be some deep, hidden psychological reason why I don't want to go to bed with a man I hardly know, a man bent on using me for a—a quick physical release?"

"I wasn't bent on using you, Kelly. I wanted you, and you wanted me."

"You wanted a woman," Kelly corrected. "Any one would have done."

"Kindly credit me with being a little more discriminating than that, Kelly," growled Brandt. "And what about you? You were more than willing until—"

"Until I came to my senses," Kelly interjected quickly. "Your technique is masterful, as you well know. It packs a potent wallop. Before I realized what was happening, I was on that bed with you."

"There's no need to play the inexperienced virgin, swept away by her first passionate encounter. We both experienced the desire and the passion between us, Kelly. It's nothing to deny and nothing to be ashamed of."

Kelly tilted her head slightly and gazed up at him. "So you don't think I'm an inexperienced virgin, swept away by my first passionate encounter?"

Brandt gave a slight, disbelieving laugh. "You're what—twenty-four? twenty-five?" She nodded at the correct figure. "A woman as lovely and as passionate as you are couldn't reach the age of twenty-five with her virginity intact."

Kelly hid a smile. If he only knew. "How very perceptive you are," she said lightly.

"Yes, I am." Brandt stood up and walked toward her. This time Kelly stood her ground and did not back away from him. Not even when he took both her hands *in* his. "I consider myself a perceptive and intuitive writer, Kelly. As well as a nonjudgmental and broad-minded one. We're going to be spending a lot of time together, we'll be working closely. There's no need for secrets and pretense between us."

Kelly felt her heart stop, then start again. "Exactly what are you driving at, Brandt?"

"You just tensed," he observed. "Kelly, there's no need to keep the truth from me. I've already guessed."

Her lips felt very dry. Kelly nervously moistened them with the tip of her tongue. "The truth?" she whispered.

"About your baby."

"My baby?" she echoed blankly.

"I told you I was perceptive. When we were talking about mothers giving up their babies for adoption, I read the truth in your eyes, Kelly. I saw the pain, the sadness. It happened to you, didn't it? And writing this article is one of the ways you're helping yourself come to terms with the situation."

"You think I had a baby and gave it up for adoption," Kelly said, marveling at Brandt's observation. Brandt Madison *was* intuitive; he had correctly recognized and identified the brief flash of pain she'd been feeling when she thought of her mother's abandonment of her all those years ago. But his interpretations needed a lot of work.

"Kelly, I don't condemn you in any way. In fact, I admire the fact that you went through with the pregnancy and unselfishly gave the baby to a couple who wanted a child."

Kelly was half tempted to correct his misapprehensions. And half tempted to let them stand. After all, he'd already scoffed at the notion that she was a virgin. If he so keenly wanted to believe that she'd had a baby out of wedlock that she'd given up for adoption, then . . . The half that wanted to play along with his theory won out. Brandt Madison could keep his delusions. And she would foster them. Oh, would she foster them!

Four

A plan sprang instantly to mind. "So that's why you tried to rush me into bed tonight?" Kelly laid a hand to her forehead and tried to sound distraught. She thought she succeeded rather admirably. It seemed she did have some acting ability, after all.

"You thought I was an easy lay," she continued, whirling away from him with a flourish. "You thought that because I'd had a baby, I'd be willing to jump into bed with you even though I hardly know you." She hid her face in her hands and sneaked a peek at him through her splayed fingers. "You probably think I do things like that all the time."

"Kelly, that's not true!" Brandt seemed genuinely distressed. He paced the floor, uncertain of what to do, of what to say to her.

A mischievous streak she thought she'd long ago suppressed rose swiftly to the fore. "You think I'm cheap. And weak-willed. A creature governed by my—um—my sensual appetites."

"Kelly, of course I don't!" Brandt caught her by her arms and drew her against him. "Don't you see? It's your own lack of self-respect that's led you to that conclusion." He wrapped his arms protectively around her. "And I think that the father of the baby is responsible for shattering your self-esteem." He spoke slowly, choosing his words carefully.

"Yes, yes, he's the one," Kelly agreed. Her voice was muffled against his thick sweater.

Brandt stroked her hair gently with one hand while his other hand pressed her closer to him. He felt protective of her in a way he hadn't felt toward any woman since Michele. "What happened when he found out about the baby, Kelly?" he asked softly. His imagination

was already conjuring up the scene of a vulnerable and frightened Kelly approaching her insensitive and immature lover. He frowned. The image of Kelly with another man was strangely jarring. And far more troublesome to deal with than the notion of a helpless, innocent baby.

Kelly's imagination was working on the scene too. Being a writer, she'd better make it good. Now, who had fathered this fantasy child? "I thought it was the love affair of the century," she began grandly. "And then he told me he was in love with another man."

"Another man?" Brandt sounded truly aghast. "You poor kid!"

"Yes." Kelly nodded, her face still pressed into his sweater. She felt a lot like giggling. "I was Richard's first woman. He told me he'd been experimenting with being bisexual, but it was no use. He could never love me the way he loved his—uh—male lover."

"He had no right to use you that way!" Brandt exclaimed angrily. "It was selfish and reprehensible of him!"

"When I told him I was pregnant, he said it was all my fault and that he wanted nothing to do with either of us," Kelly continued, relishing the dramatic scene. "He and Rupert moved to San Francisco and opened a—a bodybuilding spa." That was original. She gave herself full marks for creativity.

"Rupert?" Brandt echoed. "A bodybuilding spa?"

Perhaps she'd been a little too creative. She should've named the lover Tom and had them open an insurance agency. "I went through the pregnancy all alone," she interjected hastily, determined to get this tragedy back on track. "And I gave my baby to a wonderful couple who'd been married twelve years and desperately wanted a child. They adore my baby."

Kelly closed her eyes and pictured the couple, the adoring parents she'd always wanted to have. She was glad she'd given them a baby to love. She smiled. She liked this part of the fantasy better than Richard and Rupert's bodybuilding spa.

"You're the first man I've—uh—kissed since Richard left me," Kelly added what she considered an inspired touch.

Richard and Rupert? A bodybuilding spa? Brandt felt a niggling of doubt that he immediately repudiated. It was a bizarre story, but hadn't he built his career writing about the quirks, oddities, and seemingly inexplicable range of human nature?

Besides, he enjoyed comforting Kelly, he admitted to himself. She felt small and soft and sweet in his arms. "I understand, Kelly." He hugged her close. "Your anger and your fears. Why you withdrew so abruptly. Why you were afraid I was using you." He continued to stroke her hair. "I'm not a user, Kelly. Yes, I've had sexual relationships with other women, but they've always been mutual and caring."

Kelly closed her eyes and leaned into the hard, warm strength of him. It was wonderful, being held like this, she thought dreamily. No sexual demands. Just tenderness. Just comfort. She snuggled deeper in his arms, wrapping her arms around his waist and savoring their closeness. She wanted to stay like this forever.

She felt his lips brush her hair, felt his body begin to harden in response to her wriggling. "Kelly," his voice was hoarse. "You don't have to be afraid of me. I won't hurt you."

She felt the change in his caresses. He was no longer soothing her with his hands, he was trying to arouse her. Kelly felt her own body tighten with sensual need. It was as if the flames of passion they'd

aroused earlier had merely been banked into burning embers and were now being fanned back to full strength.

"No!" Kelly drew back and pushed him away with both hands. Because she wanted so much to give into him. Because they were alone in the apartment, and if he were to carry her into her bedroom . . .

"Nothing's changed between us," she accused herself as much as him. "We still don't know each other and—and—"

"But we're beginning to know each other, Kelly," Brandt said quietly. "And we're beginning to understand each other too."

"That doesn't mean I'm going to jump into the sack with you!"

He grinned. "I know. Much as I'd like it."

He wasn't angry or challenging. Kelly stared at him, a little uncertain as to what to say next. "Why don't we watch some television, and then go to bed? Separate beds," he added. "In separate rooms."

He flicked on the television set, then took her hand and led her to the sofa. They sat down beside each other, close, but not touching. Butter jumped up and settled himself in Kelly's lap. Brandt smiled over at her, and she managed a shaky smile in return.

"Tomorrow I'll start making arrangements for our trip to Avida," Brandt said conversationally. "I'll contact the number given to me over the phone last night. If all goes well, we might be able to leave as early as next weekend." He reached over to pet the cat in her lap. And his hand moved to her thigh.

"Brandt!" she warned dampeningly as she firmly removed it. "Kelly," he repeated, mimicking her tones.

"I thought you were going to leave me alone. " Kelly shot him a glance. "After all I've been through. The baby and Richard and Rupert and the spa and all." Uh-oh. A bubble of laughter welled up within her. Kelly immediately concentrated on stroking Butter's silky thick fur, keeping her eyes carefully downcast.

Brandt stared at her for a few long moments. Her face was averted, but her shoulders were shaking. Was she *laughing*? No, that was hardly likely; she must be crying. "Kelly." He reached over to turn her head toward him.

Kelly jumped to her feet and walked to the window. Unless she wanted to preside over the instant demise of Richard and Rupert, she'd better get a hold of herself.

At that moment the television program was interrupted by a weather bulletin, announcing the severe blizzard conditions and reminding Brandt that he would not be driving home that night. "May I use your phone?" He stood up. "I have to make a call."

"It's in the kitchen," Kelly told him. He left the room and she stared after him. Who was he going to call at this hour? And why? Kelly walked quietly to the small hallway that led into the kitchen and listened, unseen, as Brandt placed his call. More than her relentless curiosity had been piqued, she admitted to herself. Her self-protective instinct was also operating on full alert.

"Corinne?" Brandt's voice was warm. "I thought I'd better let you know that I'm stranded, honey. I won't be home tonight."

Kelly froze. Corinne? Brandt was calling a woman to tell her he wouldn't be home tonight? The full implication hit her with resounding force: *Brandt Madison lived with a woman.*

"There's nothing to worry about, Corinne. I'm at a friend's apartment. Yes, a colleague of mine."

Kelly listened to him soothe the woman's fears as to his safety and felt a rage of volcanic proportions begin to build inside her. A colleague of his, eh? She noticed that he didn't tell Corinne that this colleague of his was a woman. A woman whom he'd done his best to seduce! How dare he lie to Corinne? How dare he lie to her? For he had lied by omission, by failing to tell her that he lived with another woman while making her want him . . . while making her feel things. . . .

Kelly's hands clenched into fists. It took every ounce of willpower she possessed not to storm into the kitchen and snatch the phone away from him. To tell the hapless Corinne exactly who his colleague was, and the unprofessional way he'd tried to—to—

No, she didn't dare. Kelly stalked past the kitchen into her bedroom and locked the door. The urge for a physical confrontation with Brandt Madison was almost overpowering, and Kelly's instincts, always superb, told her that she would be the loser. She might have the initial satisfaction of slapping his face, but he would quickly turn his strength against her. Not in violence. She didn't fear a battering from him.

No, his methods were much more insidious. He could physically subdue her in a far more devastating manner. By seduction. They both were fully aware of her volatile response to him. Her mind might be unwilling, but her body had proved to be a traitor. She saw herself in her mind's eye, clinging to Brandt, their mouths locked, his tongue deep within, while his hands moved over her. As she writhed and moaned her pleasure. And wanted more.

Kelly suddenly felt freezing cold. She climbed into bed and pulled the covers around her, but she still couldn't get warm. For a few minutes she'd let Brandt Madison come dangerously close to the part of her

that she had long ago enclosed in a protective shell. And for the first time in a long, long while, she felt threatened, endangered, and terribly, frighteningly alone.

"It's stopped snowing, and the snow plows have been clearing the roads since dawn. You shouldn't have any trouble driving home." Kelly splashed milk over her Corn Flakes without glancing up at Brandt, who was standing beside her. "I have a lot to do today, so—"

"You want me to get lost." Brandt heaved a sigh. "I get the picture, Kelly."

"Do you? Then why are you still here?" Kelly sat down on a stool at the small breakfast bar and began to eat, taking care not to glance in Brandt Madison's direction.

"Kelly, why won't you tell me what's wrong? Why are you acting like this? Why did you barricade yourself in your room last night and not answer when I knocked?"

"I went to bed while you were on the phone. If you knocked at my door last night, I didn't hear it. I was asleep."

"Kelly, I was on the phone for all of three minutes. You didn't have time to lock your door, go to bed, and fall asleep in that short a time."

"I always fall asleep the minute my head hits the pillow," Kelly lied. "And it's a darn good thing I locked my door if you came skulking by, trying to get in."

"I don't skulk," Brandt informed her testily. "And I came to your door when I didn't find you in the living room. I wanted to say good night and—"

"Then why didn't you just say it instead of pounding on my door for the next twenty minutes yelling."

"Aha!" Brandt's eyes glittered. "So you admit that you did hear me? You said earlier that you were sleeping and didn't hear me knocking."

"I would have had to be dead not to hear the racket you were making," Kelly retorted.

"Then why didn't you at least answer me? If you're afraid of me, I suppose I can understand you locking your door and not opening it, but—"

"I'm not afraid of you!" Kelly denied hotly. "I'm tired of you! And that's why I didn't open my door last night. Because I was tired of fighting off your—your unwanted advances. And that's why I didn't answer you either. Because I was sick and tired of talking to you!"

Brandt gave her a long, hard stare. "My advances, as you choose to call them, were far from unwanted, Kelly."

"I'm sure a self-centered, egomaniacal, insatiable, omnivorous insect like you would like to believe that!"

"Dammit, you have more adjectives than a thesaurus! If your writing style is remotely similar to the way you speak, your poor editor must go through a box of blue pencils a week!"

"My editor is quite satisfied with my writing style." Kelly methodically spooned her Corn Flakes into her mouth, her gaze fixed to the bowl.

Brandt watched her, his lips tightening into a grimace. He couldn't reach her. She'd shut him out as effectively as she had last night with the locked bedroom door. But why?

He resisted the urge to smooth back the loose strand of auburn hair that had fallen over her shoulder. He remembered gripping those soft, silky locks last night as he'd held her head and kissed her. An unwelcome surge of heat accompanied the memory. He'd wanted her badly last night.

He continued to stare at her. Her head was slightly bent, and her hair fell forward in a smooth curtain, exposing the slender nape of her neck. His body began to throb, and he fought the urge to kiss that soft, vulnerable spot. Her breasts were softly outlined beneath her green and blue sweatshirt, which she wore with blue sweatpants. A rush of sensual memories sent him reeling. He thought of the way he'd looked at her pink and white breasts, how he'd kissed and caressed then}. And the sweet way she had moaned in his arms.

Brandt muttered an oath under his breath. He wanted her today just as much as he'd wanted her last night. And for reasons that he couldn't begin to comprehend, she had decided that he was as appealing as a flu virus and was treating him accordingly.

"Kelly," he began, but Kelly was already on her feet, dumping the rest of her cereal into the sink.

"I have to go." Kelly glanced pointedly at her watch. "I have an important appointment at ten o'clock sharp."

Brandt followed her out of the kitchen and into the living room. Why was she so hostile toward him? Last night, she'd confided in him. He'd felt close to her and knew that she had felt close to him too.

Then the light dawned. Last night, he'd gotten *too* close for her emotional comfort, and now she felt driven to push him away. He could let her; perhaps he should. She was a complex woman who was guaranteed to complicate his easy, undemanding life-style. And who had already engaged his attention, imagination, and interest as no

woman had since Michele. He should let her walk out that door, Brandt told himself, even as he caught her by her arm and pulled her back to him. "At the risk of sounding insufferably domineering, Kelly, you're not leaving here until we've straightened out this misunderstanding."

"There is no misunderstanding!" She must stay cool, Kelly cautioned herself. She mustn't give in to the wild rage surging through her. That would show him that she cared. And she didn't! *She didn't!* Her lips tightened into a hard, straight line. "I know about Corinne, Brandt."

He glanced at her in surprise. "What about Corinne?"

"What about her? You live with her, for heaven's sake!"

"Sure. She and the kids moved in a year ago when Ross was sent to Beirut as bureau chief for one of the wire services. He'll be back next month, and then the whole family will move to D.C. for his next assignment."

Kelly stared at him. She was clearly missing something here. "Who's Ross?"

"Ross Collins. My brother-in-law," Brandt said with a touch of impatience. "Corinne's husband."

Kelly gulped. "Corinne is your sister?"

"Of course. You said you knew her."

"No." Kelly shook her head. "I said I knew *about* her." The relief coursing through her was as unnerving as her fury had been. Because both underscored what Kelly didn't want to have to admit to herself: That she'd been sick with jealousy at the thought of Brandt and

another woman. "I—I thought she was your lover. Your . . . live-in lover."

There was a full minute of silence. Kelly's head whirled. She'd never been a jealous person; there had been no reason to be. For jealousy included an element of possession, and Kelly had never belonged to anyone or had anyone belong to her. She'd never felt she had the right to claim anyone as her own. But with Brandt. . .

She was gripped with an icy fear. How could she believe that no other woman but herself belonged in his life? She'd known him for such a short while. There was absolutely no reason for her to feel that he was . . . hers.

"You thought Corinne was my live-in lover?" Brandt was watching her. "Where did you get a stupid idea like that?"

Kelly grimaced. She wasn't about to reveal that she'd eavesdropped on his telephone conversation.

"It seems that I—uh—drew the wrong conclusion, that's all."

"It seems that you did," Brandt said caustically. "You thought I was living with a woman and making a heavy play for you at the same time."

Kelly stared at him, her heart careening wildly in her chest. Facing the fact that he was not safely ineligible, that she was free to act upon her emotions, put everything into a totally different perspective. She could no longer feel self-righteous and safe as she pushed him away with insults and withdrawal.

Brandt was putting it all together in his own mind. "So that's the reason for all the name calling? Why you've been acting as if I'm something that ought to be scraped off the bottom of your shoe!"

Kelly's teeth worried her lower lip, and she gave a hesitant nod.

"I should be furious that you think I'm capable of that kind of deceit. I *am* furious." Brandt shook his head. He'd *been* furious, but he wasn't any longer. Simply talking to her had defused his anger. "Kelly, I've never done anything to warrant such a lack of faith and trust." He took a step toward her.

Kelly took a step backward. "It's all a result of my traumatic experience with Rupert," she said quickly. She could divert him with tales of her imaginary trauma till he lost interest in her motives for keeping him at bay. "I've had trouble with faith and trust ever since."

Brandt frowned. "Rupert? I thought you said his name was Richard."

"Oh yes, of course. Richard." Kelly ran a nervous hand through her hair. Lord, he was sharp. Richard, Rupert, who cared? Brandt did, apparently. He was staring at her in the oddest way. "It's just that I always considered Rupert the—uh—main villain of the piece."

Brandt gazed at her thoughtfully. "Things are moving very quickly between us, Kelly. Maybe you needed this misunderstanding, hmm? To put a little distance between us?" The compassion and understanding in his tone was reflected in his gaze.

Encouraged by it, warmed by it, Kelly nodded her head. "Part of me wants to cook up something else to—to keep me away from you," she found herself confessing.

"Because you're afraid?" Brandt asked quietly. "Of me?"

"Of the way you make me feel."

He moved closer, until he was standing directly in front of her, so close that their bodies were almost touching. "How do I make you

feel, Kelly?" he asked in a low, deep voice that seemed to caress her. "Tell me."

The apartment door swung open, and Kelly sprang away from him as if she'd been scalded. Brandt uttered an expletive under his breath, frustrated by the incredibly poor timing of the pretty, petite brunette who rushed into the room followed by a bearded young man carrying a camera.

"Susan!" Kelly exclaimed shakily. "Did you have any trouble getting back from Evans ton?"

"The main highways are pretty good," Susan replied. "Kelly, this is Peter Maddox, a photographer with the *Trib*. Peter was trapped in Evanston with me last night," she added, giving him a slow, sexy smile.

"Hi, Peter," Kelly greeted him. "I'm glad you're back safely, Susan. Sorry I can't stay and talk, but I'm on my way to meet Cindy." Her heart pounding, Kelly snatched her bright green parka from the closet by the door and rushed from the apartment without even glancing at Brandt.

"Bye, Kel," Susan called. And then she turned and spotted Brandt for the first time. Her reaction was straight out of a television sitcom. Her dark eyes widened and her jaw was agape.

"Brandt Madison." Brandt offered his hand to Peter and Susan to shake. Only Peter took him up on it. Susan was still frozen to the spot, gaping at him. "I was stranded here for the night," Brandt added conversationally. "Trust Kelly to rush off and not introduce us."

"Susan Lippert. Did you—spend the night here?" Susan's voice rose to a squeak. "With Kelly?"

Brandt was rather enjoying her incredulity. "Mmm-hmm."

"Whew!" Susan sank onto the sofa. "*Cosmo's* Bachelor of the Month strikes again. And with Kelly! If I hadn't seen you here with my own eyes, I'd never have believed it."

"Why not?" asked Brandt curiously. He should be on his way, he reminded himself, even as he sat down beside Susan. But the impulse to probe into the mystery that was Kelly Malloy proved too strong to resist. "You were—uh—stranded with someone last night."

Susan's eyes flicked to Peter. "Yes, but for *Kelly* to spend the night with a man ..." She shrugged uncomfortably. "Peter and I are going to have some breakfast. Have you already eaten or would you care to join us?"

"No, I haven't, and yes, I would like to join you." Brandt stood up, grinning. "Kelly—uh—forgot to offer me breakfast." He needn't mention it had been a deliberate oversight in her effort to get rid of him.

Susan shook her head. "Well, be patient with her. She's not used to having overnight guests. In fact, you're the first one she's ever had since I moved in with her nearly three years ago."

"She doesn't—date often?" Brandt remarked casually.

"Kelly has her share of dates, but she's always careful to leave them at the door." Susan flashed a sharp smile. "Should she have left you at the door, Brandt Madison? Kelly's a dear friend and I'd hate to see her hurt."

"Hey, Susan, who took all these pictures?" asked Peter, who was studying a collection of whimsically framed photographs, interjected himself into the conversation.

"I did," Susan admitted with a touch of pride. "I told you last night I was interested in photography. Didn't you believe me?"

Peter grinned. "I thought it was a line. To hook me, y'know?"

"If Kelly were here, she'd accuse you of being a vain, smug wolf." Brandt laughed. "Or perhaps a self-centered, egomaniacal, insatiable, omnivorous insect. Among other things."

"Uh—oh, sounds like the sparks were flying." Susan gave Brandt a speculative glance. "Did you spend the night in Kelly's room or in mine?"

"One guess," Brandt said wryly.

"Mine, of course. I should've known."

"Who are all these people in these photographs, Susan?" demanded Peter, clearly making a bid for her attention.

"My family. I have a big one," replied Susan. "All except the little black girl in the blue flowered ceramic frame. That's Cindy, Kelly's Little Sister."

"Her little sister's black?" Brandt picked up the photograph and stared at it. A little girl of about nine smiled up at him.

"Little Sister. Capital letters," corrected Susan. "Kelly is a Big Sister in the Big-and-Little-Sister program. She spends every Saturday from ten to three with Cindy." She smiled. "They've been together for over two years and have a wonderful relationship."

He admired her for giving her time, herself, to an underprivileged child. Kelly Malloy was a woman of depth, of substance. The feelings she managed to stir within him went beyond his hormone level, although she certainly elevated that too.

"Where are Kelly's family pictures?" he asked Susan. He wanted to know more; he wanted to know everything about her.

Susan glanced at him strangely. "Didn't Kelly tell you? She doesn't have a family. She grew up in a series of foster homes."

Brandt was taken aback. "She has no one?"

Susan bristled. "You make her sound like some pathetic character out of a Charles Dickens novel. Kelly would hate that. She's not all alone in the world. She has Cindy and Butter and me and her job at the magazine and lots of friends."

"But no blood relatives?" Brandt persisted. And yet she'd give her baby up for adoption. Or had she? Once again he was assailed with that inexplicable twinge of doubt.

"No, not one. May I give you some advice?" Susan gave Brandt a long, hard stare. "Don't ask Kelly a lot of questions about her past. She seldom mentions it. I suppose it must be too painful for her to talk about. Anyway, she's made a happy life for herself, so why dwell on the past, hmm?"

"Are you going to fix my breakfast or stand around gabbing all day?" Peter grabbed Susan's hands and pulled her toward him for a hard, possessive kiss.

Brandt got the nonverbal message the other man was sending him. Susan was already spoken for. Brandt glanced at the couple, locked in each other's arms. "I think I'll head on home," he remarked aloud to no one in particular. "I'll stop for something to eat along the way. It's been a pleasure meeting you, Susan, Peter."

Neither bothered to respond. Brandt picked up his coat and his briefcase and quietly left the apartment.

"Do you have a passport?"

He hadn't even bothered to say hello. Or to identify himself. Kelly frowned at the phone, not caring for Brandt Madison's assumption that she would instantly recognize his voice over the line. Of course, she *had* recognized it. But he shouldn't have assumed that she would.

And she was reaching new heights of absurdity, Kelly scolded herself. She'd always been the image of rationality—until Brandt Madison had come charging into her life. He made her say things, do things, feel things . . . that she was afraid to say, do, and feel. He held a power over her that she didn't understand; she felt both threatened and drawn to him at the same time.

"Kelly, are you there?" Brandt demanded.

"Yes, I'm here and yes, I have a passport," she replied coolly. She could handle it, Kelly assured herself. She could handle him. By being aloof, indifferent. Distant.

"Good. Kelly, this afternoon I called the Friends of Children Adoption Agency. They were extremely vague until I told them that I'd talked to Carista personally and that he'd approved my trip to Avida. Then they suddenly became just as helpful as they had been vague. I drove over there—it's just a small hole- in-the-wall office on the South Side, and they gave me a handful of papers."

"What kind of papers?" As much as she wanted to snub him, he'd caught her interest. After all, his information was necessary background material for her article.

"All kinds of forms. Requirements of the State of Illinois, an 1-600 form for the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service. We have to get fingerprinted, two sets. One for the state and one for the feds."

"I hadn't realized we'd be dealing with state and federal agency requirements," she said slowly. "Will we be defrauding the government or something?"

"Getting cold feet?" Brandt laughed. "It's too late to back out now, Kelly. Carista's people are very helpful. Our papers are already being processed."

Kelly gasped. "What?"

"Carista has left no stone unturned in this business of his. It seems he has friends in high places in every bureaucracy involved in expediting adoptions. For a fee they're willing to rush everything through."

"A fee?" Kelly echoed. "Don't you mean a bribe?"

"I paid five thousand dollars in cash to the sweet, grandmotherly receptionist behind the desk. What happens to the money—or who gets any of it—was never mentioned. No names are mentioned either. All I have on tape is a kindly old woman promising me that some very efficient and good-hearted souls will make sure that my papers are processed in a hurry so my wife and I can fly down to Avida to pick up our child."

"Sounds like bribery to me." Kelly frowned.

"Kelly, we're not defrauding the government or bribing officials or doing anything of a criminal nature. We're checking out a story, investigating Carista to see if his activities are criminally liable."

"Those papers say we're married, don't they? That's a bold-faced lie—thank God."

"Careful. Even we compulsive, womanizing, vain, smug, wolfish rakes have feelings, you know."

He made her smile. How could she stay aloof and distant to him if he did things like poke fun at himself and make her smile?

"Kelly, why don't we get together tonight and discuss our trip?" Brandt's voice deepened. "I can be over at your place within twenty minutes."

"I can't!" Kelly said quickly. She wasn't ready to see him again; she needed more time to brace herself against the potent effect he had upon her. She glanced over at Butter, who was sitting on the counter licking his paws. "I—uh—I've already made other plans. I'm spending the evening with a friend." No need to mention that the friend happened to be feline, Kelly told herself.

"You can postpone our discussion temporarily, Kelly, but I'm not going to let it drop. I intend to get the answer to the question I asked you this morning."

Kelly heard his question reverberate through her head, as if he'd just spoken it aloud. "How do I make you feel, Kelly?" A tremor went through her. She'd almost told him! If they hadn't been interrupted by Susan's unexpected arrival, she would've given him the words to use as weapons against her.

"I really can't recall what we talked about this morning." She hoped she sounded convincingly vague.

It helped to know another's psychological motivations, Brandt reminded himself. If he didn't know that Kelly was trying to protect

herself from her own feelings for him, he would be maddened by her evasions. "Think about it, Kelly," he said in a silkily caressing tone. "Maybe you'll remember. If not, you can count on me to refresh your memory later."

Kelly heard the unspoken sensual promise in his voice and shivered. He intended to refresh her memory of other things besides words. And she wanted him to. That was the most disconcerting part. She closed her eyes against the fierce arrow of desire that pierced deeply within her.

"Good night, sweetheart," he said softly.

Kelly carefully replaced the receiver, his voice burning through her. For a few long moments she simply stared into space.

Butter jumped down from the counter and wound himself around her ankles, purring for attention. She picked him up and carried him into the living room. "I turned down a date for you, old friend. And since Susan is out with Peter, there's just the two of us tonight." She sat down on the sofa and settled the cat beside her. Butter meowed conversationally.

"No, I'm not sorry that I told Brandt Madison I was busy." The cat purred contentedly as she stroked his yellow fur. "He thinks I had a baby! He actually believed all that nonsense about Richard and Rupert and the bodybuilding spa. Found it easier to swallow that the fact that I've never—" She broke off with a sigh. "At the rate I'm going I never will either."

The cat gave her a quizzical stare, then rolled over onto his back. Kelly rubbed his fat belly and he purred in response. "We're a pair, aren't we, old boy? A couple of throwaways. I found you in an alley just like Officer Malloy found me in an alley. We both had other names and other lives and seemed to come from nowhere."

The cat caught her hand between his big paws and gave it an affectionate lick. The gesture touched her. "I guess we'll never know who we were originally, will we?" She sighed. "But there's one thing I do know. I'd never abandon anyone—person or animal—who needed me. I'd do whatever had to be done to keep us together."

Butter yawned and uttered a noncommittal meow.

"I would, too, you old cynic!" Laughing at herself and him, Kelly hugged the cat close.

Five

"He gives me the creeps," Kelly whispered to Brandt as her glance flickered to the short, dark man sitting in the seat across the aisle from them in the jumbo 747 jet. "He looks like a weasel, and he just keeps staring at us."

Brandt followed her gaze, met the man's cool, black-eyed stare and nodded slightly. The other man nodded back in acknowledgment. "A weasel's a fair analogy," Brandt agreed in a low-voiced aside to Kelly. "Ferret face is what came to mind the first time I saw our friendly facilitator."

Which had been that morning in the O'Hare Airport terminal as Brandt and Kelly checked their bags for the long flight to Avida. The man had introduced himself as Alfredo Para de Leon from the Friends of Children Adoption Agency and told them he would be accompanying them to Avida to "facilitate the adoption process." And he hadn't let the couple out of his sight since that moment.

"He stuck to us like glue when we changed planes in Miami," Kelly whispered, averting her eyes from the man's unwavering gaze. "I thought he was going to follow me into the restroom."

"He's obviously been sent along for additional reasons besides making things easy for us in Avida," Brandt murmured. ,

"I think he's just a plain old spy for Carista," Kelly observed grimly. "And he certainly isn't subtle about his job."

"Mmm, I agree. The question is: Why? Does Carista know that I'm an investigative journalist and suspect my motives in seeking this adoption? Or is it standard procedure for Carista to employ a watchdog for every couple he deals with?"

"And why would Carista need a watchdog unless it's to prevent anyone from finding out or collecting evidence of something incriminating in his adoption business?"

"Which leads to the obvious conclusion that Carista does have something to hide."

Kelly's green eyes darted over to Para de Leon, who was watching them, his expression ever imperturbable. "There's something about that guy that's—well, kind of menacing. Those beady little eyes of his. That fixed expression. What if he *is* suspicious of us?" She swallowed. "What do you suppose he'll do?"

"I don't know, and we're not going to take any chances by arousing his suspicions. We're going to play the happily married couple to the hilt." Brandt carefully lifted up the armrest between the two seats.

Kelly watched him. "I have a better idea. Let's pretend we[^]e a couple whose marriage is on the rocks and who're adopting a child in a last ditch effort to stay together. But since the marriage isn't saved yet, we can safely keep our distance from each other."

"I told the Friends of Children Agency^jrthat we're a blissfully happy couple, Kelly. That's what Para de Leon is expecting. And if we're not what he expects, then his suspicions *will* be aroused." Brandt slipped his arm around her shoulders and leaned over her, pressing the button that made her seat recline. "You haven't been playing the part of a loving wife very convincingly, Kelly. You won't look at me, you've scarcely talked to me, and you back away from me if I touch you even accidentally."

Because she had to. Even his accidental touch accelerated her heartbeat. After promising herself that she could hold her own with Brandt Madison, it had been a most unnerving discovery. She heartily

resented it. "Take your hands off me," Kelly gritted through clenched teeth.

"See what I mean? That's hardly the response of a devoted wife." Brandt pushed her back in her seat into a half-reclining position and moved even closer, so that he was half lying over her. He spoke softly, quietly, against her ear. "I told Para de Leon in Miami that you were nervous about flying as an explanation for your behavior. But you have to loosen up, Kelly. Let's give him a display of tender marital affection. Put your arms around my neck and—"

"If you don't get off me this minute, I'll treat Para de Leon to a display of marital warfare, Madison." She put her hands on his shoulders to push him away. Her fingers curled into the soft beige wool of his sweater.

Brandt shifted himself against her, letting her feel the full strength of his hard frame. "He's watching us, Kelly. Right now he can't see our faces at all, because I'm shielding you. All he can see is the two of us lying here, seemingly locked in a hot clinch."

"He's about to see you go flying when I throw you off. Move, Madison!" Kelly tried to shove him. Brandt simply settled himself more securely against her and didn't move an inch.

He began to nibble on the sensitive curve of her neck. "Ah, Kelly, you taste so good, you smell so sweet. I've thought of you constantly this past week."

"Get *off me!*" Kelly hissed. She tried once more to push at him, but his weight was resting solidly against her. "Ugh! I can't budge you, you big elephant! Get up! You're crushing me!"

"You like it." Brandt's voice was a teasing rasp. His chest pinned her soft breasts and one big hand strayed lazily over the curve of her hip.

She was acutely aware of his knee wedged between hers. His teeth alternately nipped at her lips, then soothed them with his tongue.

Kelly drew a sharp intake of breath. "I—I don't!" she gasped. A shock of pleasure made her arch involuntarily toward him. Her cheeks burned at her unexpected momentary loss of control.

"Yes, you do." He held her firmly with one arm, while his hand caressed her with long, slow strokes. "Do you know how I can tell?" His lips feathered her eyelids, her cheeks, her jawline, before returning to play with her mouth. "You're trembling."

"I'm shuddering. W-with disgust."

Brandt emitted a husky chuckle. "Stop fighting me, Kelly. Stop fighting yourself. There's no reason why you should deny that you want me." He caught the lobe of her ear between his teeth and tugged lightly, erotically. Kelly felt the effects deep in her feminine heart.

No reason to deny that she wanted him? Kelly fought the alarming weakness surging through her. His weight no longer felt oppressive. Her body seemed to have adjusted to his hard frame in a most arousing manner. Her gaze flew to his face, and met and locked with his.

She'd spent the past week avoiding him, determined to break his sensual hold over her. She'd kept their phone conversations brisk and businesslike. And the moment she'd seen him this morning at the airport, she knew all her efforts had been futile. Her pulses had gone into overdrive when he came near her; if anything, the week apart had heightened her longing for him.

She knew he wanted her; he'd certainly made no effort to conceal it. Kelly guessed that her resistance would seem strange and inexplicable to anyone else. They were both mature, consenting

adults. Why not have the affair that Brandt wanted? Part of her wanted it too!

But her fiercely self-protective core refused to be swayed by physical wants and needs. She knew herself well enough to realize that she would be unable to make love with a man and keep her emotions detached.

Physical need would inevitably be coupled with emotional need. And Kelly had never allowed herself to need anyone. She didn't dare, for she sensed that her own needs, unleashed, would be too much for another person to handle. A man would be driven away by the depths of her need, just as her mother had been driven to abandon her.

Kelly had never had any doubt that it was her own fault that her mother had left her. She'd been a difficult toddler; one of the social workers had told her so when she'd asked. She'd cried a lot, demanded too much attention, taken up too much of her foster parents' time. That was why she'd been moved to different foster homes so often during her early years as a ward of the State of Illinois.

Kelly imagined her mother driven to distraction by the crying, demanding baby she had been. Her mother couldn't cope with her; she'd left her, just as the succession of foster mothers had turned her back over to Child Welfare. By the age of five Kelly had finally learned her lesson. One did not make demands on others; it was a sure path to desertion. Nor did one expect anything from others, for they were either unwilling or unable to deliver. Life was easiest and people most responsive when nothing was asked of them. There were no foolish hopes and expectations to be followed by inevitable pain.

Kelly had learned that lesson well. She'd never again allowed herself to be governed by needs or emotions; she thought she'd conquered such unwise, dangerous behavior. Her mind was ordered, disciplined, and always in control. Until now, until Brandt Madison.

No reason to deny that she wanted him? That she needed him? Her whole way of life depended on it. "I don't want you!" Kelly spat fiercely. "I don't need you, you—you—"

"Vain, smug wolf?" suggested Brandt playfully as he brushed her lips with his.

"Shallow, womanizing idiot dripping with— with—" Kelly's voice faltered as his hand moved confidently, purposefully to her lap. Her black and blue plaid wool skirt had ridden to midthigh. Brandt's palm glided over the nylon-clad smoothness, and Kelly lost her train of thought. The sight of his big hand, his strong fingers moving over her thigh held her momentarily spellbound.

"Don't," she finally managed to whisper.

Brandt smoothed her skirt down to demurely cover her knees. "You see? You don't have to be afraid of me, Kelly. I'm not going to do anything in public to embarrass you, and I'm not going to do anything in private that you don't want me to do." He straightened her blue sweater vest and adjusted the collar of her black jersey as well.

His humor mingled with arousal made her feel soft and weak. When he touched the tip of his tongue to hers, a hot syrupy warmth flowed through her. Seemingly of their own volition, her hands crept around his neck:: The urge to pull his head down and feel the hard pressure of his mouth was almost irresistible. Her eyelids felt so heavy. If she were to give in to the delicious languor seeping through her . . .

Brandt nibbled at her lips. "Kelly," he said softly, his breath mingling with hers. "You feel so good in my arms. I've been fantasizing all week about holding you this way. I even bought the first-class tickets because I wanted to have more privacy, more comfort for the two of us. . . ."

His mouth moved on hers, gently, soft and inviting. A coaxing, persuasive kind of kiss, the kind that eliminated protests before they could be voiced, that reassured and didn't threaten. The kind of kiss that made a woman feel safe and in control until her head was spinning and it was too late. Until her mind was shrouded by a sensual fog, her body was churning with erotic sensation, and she didn't care that she wasn't in control and never had been.

It was the kind of evocative expertise that a novice like Kelly was defenseless against. His lips kept moving over hers until she felt boneless, deliciously pliant.

"Open your mouth for me," Brandt demanded.

Kelly stared at him, her eyes dilated and drowsy. Something had gone wrong here. She'd been insulting him and then he'd started kissing her and she hadn't made a single protest. And now he was demanding that she comply to a bold, sexy command whose very sound made her limbs melt. "Brandt, I-"

She opened her mouth to speak, and his tongue slipped in to probe the warm inner softness with devastating intimacy. All the air seemed to leave her lungs in a rush, and her eyelids drifted shut.

How blissful it was to slip into the sensuous vortex of passion that beckoned so seductively. And wasn't it safe to indulge in a little session of passionate kissing in an airplane? In such a setting the kisses could only entice and arouse and not lead to further, deeper intimacies. She could keep everything on a purely physical level, keep her emotions safely disengaged. Couldn't she?

Hadn't she read that virginal necking was considered to be one of the sweetest, most exciting pleasures? For virgins. Rousing passion, sampling temptation, playing safely with fire without getting burned. She'd never indulged in the rites of adolescent sexuality; she'd been

too reserved, too wary and inhibited. So why not enjoy this belated chance to experience the pleasures akin to what she'd missed?

And she *was* enjoying it. . . the hot, hungry pressure of his mouth on hers ... the seductive way his tongue tangled with hers . . . the tantalizing warmth of his hands as he came close, breathtakingly close, but never actually touching where she was aching to be touched.

She felt desirable, feminine, aroused. Sensual and small in the power of his commanding masculinity. And more than a little bit crazy.

She was safe—*for now*. There could be no further, deeper intimacies—*yet*. A shrewd inner voice filtered through the drugged sensuality engulfing her. Despite her heady arousal, she'd been guarded and self-protective for too long to totally let go and give full rein to her emotions.

You're not going to be on this plane forever, that little voice in her head warned her. What happens when you've landed and Brandt insists on carrying on the charade of "happily married couple"? Will you *go* along with him because of all this sensual conditioning?

Kelly's eyes snapped open. What had he been saying? She heard his voice echo through her brain, but this time the meaning of his words struck with full clarity. *I've been fantasizing all week about holding you this way. I even bought the first-class tickets because I wanted to have more privacy, more comfort for the two of us. . . .* She stiffened.

Brandt noticed immediately. She was surprised that he was so attuned to her slightest nuance.

"Kelly?" He'd felt her tense, felt her sudden withdrawal.—he drew back slightly to stare into the depths of her eyes. And didn't like what he saw there. Wariness. Suspicion. Hostility?

"What is it, sweetheart?" he whispered, and one weak, dizzy part of her wanted to close her eyes and cling to him. But she couldn't, she simply couldn't. He'd been planning to seduce her. And for him, it would merely be a pleasant diversion, similar to many he'd had in the years since his wife's death. But for her . . .

In a flash of insight Kelly saw her future mapped out for her if she gave into an affair with Brandt. She would need him so much that she would frighten him away. He would leave her and she would suffer, alone and unwanted.

A long-ago memory washed over her. A memory of a desolation so bleak and encompassing that it had nearly shattered her soul. Kelly shivered. She'd survived and learned to endure. And she wasn't about to put herself in such jeopardy ever again.

She sat up so abruptly that Brandt had no time to move back, and their heads collided painfully. Kelly saw stars.

Brandt did too. "If you were trying to fracture my skull, I think you succeeded." Grimacing, he laid a hand to his throbbing forehead.

Kelly's head was throbbing, but she refused to allow herself to give into even a semblance of pain. She was tough and strong, both physically and emotionally. Brandt Madison had to be made aware of that fact. She wasn't a whimpering female at the mercy of her emotions, governed by a will of marsh-mallow. She would do whatever was necessary to convince him that she would *not* be seduced.

"You're nothing but a—a single-minded compulsive womanizer!" she accused in a harsh whisper.

Brandt fell back in his own seat with a groan. "Not more adjectives!" The throb in his head was nothing compared to the more persistent

throbbing elsewhere. There he'd been—soaring to the heady heights of pleasure, only to be dropped with a jarring thud. And it felt as if he'd landed on his head.

Kelly's gaze flicked across the aisle to Para de Leon, who sat watching them, an unopened magazine on his lap. Had he witnessed the entire passionate little scene between them? A slow hot blush suffused her from head to toe.

"Don't touch me, Madison!" Kelly directed her attention back to Brandt, acutely aware of Para de Leon's interested scrutiny. It was difficult to deliver her whispered ultimatum while maintaining a forced, fixed smile for her human watchdog's benefit. "I want you to keep your hands off me for the rest of this trip!"

"Oh, you want my hands on you, all right," Brandt drawled laconically. "You're hungry for my touch, Kelly. Starved for it. I can see through all the walls and barriers you put up, all the defenses and stormy protests of yours. You want me as much as I want you, but you're terrified to admit it, even to yourself."

"No!"

"Oh yes, little one. But you can't fight the both of us forever. You'll come to me, Kelly. Eventually. And I'm willing to wait until you're sure because I'm a very patient man."

"You're also a sadly deluded one if you think for one minute that I'll allow myself to fall victim to a—a conceited, slick—"

"Ah, here she goes again," Brandt interrupted drolly. "You have your work cut out for you trying to top 'egomaniacal, insatiable, omnivorous insect.' "

His expression invited her to laugh along with him. How did one insult someone who refused to be insulted? Who deflected her barbs with grins? Kelly seethed with frustration. The man had no conscience. "If you don't stop harassing me, I'll—"

"Change seats?" suggested Brandt pleasantly. "Maybe you'd rather sit next to Para de Leon?"

"Maybe I would!" Kelly jumped to her feet. There was an empty seat next to the other man. She glanced at it, at him. If only Para de Leon didn't resemble a weasel. Or a ferret. If only his dead-eyed stare didn't make her skin crawl.

Her gaze shifted involuntarily to Brandt. Their gazes met and he smiled at her. Kelly's heart seemed to come to a stop, then start up again with a violent thump. He had the most beautiful mouth . . . just looking at it brought back a rush of sensuous memories. Of the feel of his lips on hers, of his tongue moving deeply within her mouth. She touched her fingers to her lips. They were tingling, as if he'd actually touched them.

Never had a man had such a potent effect upon her senses. Brandt Madison was dangerous, Kelly reminded herself. He could affect her physically with merely a look. What she mustn't ever forget was that he was also as conniving as a—a weasel! Too bad he didn't look the part, like old ferret face across the aisle.

"If you'll excuse me." Her voice was shaky, a giveaway to her state of confusion. Brandt flashed her a knowing grin; he was well aware of how easily he could arouse her. Kelly fled up the aisle to the small lavatory in the front of the first-class section. She didn't return to her seat until much later, having dragged out her stay to such a lengthy period that the flight attendant had actually rapped on the door to inquire about her welfare.

Brandt was sipping a drink and munching on a snack of mixed nuts as Kelly reclaimed her seat beside the window. She was thankful that he made no comment about her prolonged absence. "Would you like something to drink?" he asked. "A glass of wine?"

"No thank you. Alcohol makes me sleepy." She reached under her seat for the red canvas bag she'd carried aboard with her. "And I want to stay alert and brush up on my Spanish." She removed a well-thumbed paperback Spanish-English dictionary, a Spanish phrase book, and a travel guide to South America from the bag.

Brandt watched her. "You've been studying Spanish this past week in preparation for the trip?" He was impressed by her thoroughness, he admitted to himself. He hadn't given a thought to learning even the most rudimentary Spanish. Nor had he considered buying a guide book for tips on what sights to see in Avida. It appeared that Kelly Malloy had thrown herself into this trip with unbridled enthusiasm.

"I had two years of Spanish in high school and took some courses in college too." Kelly opened her phrase book, glad to have the opportunity to avoid looking at him. She thought she'd calmed down during her long stay in the lavatory, but Brandt's nearness had started her pulses racing again. The effect he had upon her senses was incredible. Crazy. Magic. Black magic, she corrected herself. Potentially destructive.

"I—uh—used to be able to converse rather well in Spanish," she went on, because she had to say something. He was still staring at her with those eyes of molten gold. They burned through her, making her feel hot and shamefully wanton. "I thought that I might move to Florida or Texas someday, and it seemed like a good idea to know some Spanish."

He picked up the guidebook and leafed through it. "Where did you go to college?" he asked conversationally.

"The University of Chicago. It took me five and a half years to graduate because I was working and I had to fit my courses around my jobs—and sometimes I had to fit my jobs around my courses."

"Jobs?" he prompted.

"I worked as a waitress and I baby-sat and house-sat and typed manuscripts. I even had a paper route. I didn't want to depend on too many student loans for my tuition because I didn't want a pile of debts after graduation."

Her cheeks flushed. She was aware that she was chattering on nonstop to cover her excruciating awareness of him, her nervousness at his nearness.

"You supported yourself and put yourself through college without any family incentive or help. That's very admirable, Kelly."

"No accolades, please," Kelly cut in. "I did what I had to do for myself. I was a dependent of the State of Illinois from the time I was two until I was eighteen and I was tired of it. I decided to give the taxpayers a break and pay my own way."

"Where are your parents, Kelly?" he asked bluntly.

It was not one of her favorite questions. "I don't know." She was unaware of the defensive note that had crept into her voice.

Brandt leaned closer, his interest stirred. "What do you know about them?"

"Look, don't play investigative reporter with me, Madison. Save your questions for Para de Leon and the Friends of Children Home. I don't discuss my parents with anyone. They're part of the past and have no relevance to my life today."

It was easier for her to declare the subject taboo than to admit that she knew absolutely nothing about the man who'd fathered her and disappeared from her life and the woman who'd given birth to her and then abandoned her in a dark, rainy alley. They were not a pair to be proud of and, as always, the thought of them needled her with pain.

Brandt lapsed into silence, pondering her reaction. Perhaps Kelly thought her dismissal of her parents made her sound cool and tough. His lips quirked into a thoughtful frown. She couldn't have been more wrong. He was acutely aware of her rigid posture and the sudden bleakness that had darkened her lovely green eyes. Despite her aggressive assertion she seemed small and vulnerable—and hurt by that very past she refused to discuss. He felt the strongest urge to hold her and comfort her that was wholly unrelated to sexual desire. Having grown up in a strong and supportive family, he found it difficult to fathom a childhood without the structured stability of loving parents and a permanent home. Kelly had spent sixteen years growing up in different homes with different families, yet she'd developed a strong character, set and achieved goals for herself, and become a successful adult.

Not even her traumatic love affair, which had resulted in an out-of-wedlock child, had derailed her from her course. Kelly had picked up the pieces and moved ahead with her life. She was, Brandt decided, the quintessential survivor.

He felt a certain vicarious pride in her strength and wondered why. When he cast a sidelong glance at her an inexplicable wave of possessiveness swept through him. He admired her, he was proud of her. And in that moment he knew he wanted more from her than her unwilling physical desire for him. He wanted her respect; he wanted her to trust him, to need him, to *like* him.

Which she clearly did not. Kelly Malloy had decided that he was shallow and manipulative and all those other insulting adjectives she

was forever flinging at him. Why? he wondered with a surge of impatience mingled with frustration. What had he done to merit such a response from her?

Nothing, Brandt decided, after a brief review of their time together. Kelly wasn't fighting him as much as she was fighting her attraction to him. Her hostility was self-protective, a device to keep him away from her. At first glance Kelly Malloy, the quintessential survivor, had seemingly emerged unscarred from a background of emotional deprivation. But the scars she carried were so deep, they were hidden from view. Until one came too close.

Kelly felt Brandt's eyes upon her and allowed herself to casually glance his way. Wary emerald eyes met thoughtful golden ones. She was gripped by a sexual tension that made every nerve in her body tingle.

Brandt cleared his throat. "Would you like something nonalcoholic to drink?" he asked because he knew she wouldn't respond to anything other than the totally mundane at this point. "I'll call the flight attendant to bring you what you want."

Kelly was surprised by the innocuous remark. She'd expected him to continue to hound her about her unknown parents and had been equally determined to ignore him. But it would be rude not to respond to his polite, simple offer. "Yes, I'd like a ginger ale, please."

He made sure that she had one within minutes. And then he offered to coach her in Spanish. They passed the rest of the flight tossing Spanish phrases back and forth, practicing correct pronunciation and reviewing vocabulary.

Alfredo Para de Leon apparently considered them safe enough for his attention to wander. He stopped staring at the couple and opened his magazine.

Six

Kelly stared at the double bed, aghast. It seemed to dominate the small bedroom whose only other furnishings were a circular braided rug, a nightstand and a tall, narrow chest of drawers. "I'm not sleeping here with you!" she hissed in a whisper, aware despite her horror, of their ever-present watchdog in the room across the hall. "Para de Leon said that we'd have a suite in the hotel. A suite is at least two rooms! One for you and one for me!"

Brandt peered into the tiny room adjoining the bedroom. It was smaller than the average walk-in closet. Two uncomfortable-looking ladder-back chairs were crowded into it. "I guess this is the sitting room of the suite," he remarked wryly. An even smaller bathroom was adjacent to it. "Well, no one promised that the Casa Carista was in competition with the Avida Hilton."

They had landed in Avida two hours earlier and Para de Leon had hustled them into a taxi that brought them to the Casa Carista, the small hotel where the Friends of Children Adoption Agency housed its prospective adoptive parents. The "facilitator" had handled every detail, from checking them in at the desk to showing them to their suite—directly across the hall from his room—to tipping the young bellboy who carried their luggage. Kelly and Brandt hadn't had a moment alone until they'd closed the door of the hotel room behind them. And faced each other across the double bed.

"I won't sleep in the same bed with you!" Kelly reiterated fiercely. Her heart was slamming against her ribs at the very thought. "Tell Para de Leon that we have to have another room."

"And what reason shall I give him? Why would a supposedly happily married couple—here to adopt a child—want separate rooms, Kelly?"

"Tell him that you snore, and it keeps me awake. Tell him that I talk in my sleep, and that keeps you awake. You're a writer, you're supposed to be creative. Come up with *something*, because I'm not staying in this room with you."

Brandt heaved a sigh. He was tired from the long flight and suspected that the city's mountain altitude—more than a mile above sea level—was contributing to his weariness. Kelly seemed to share none of his lethargy, however. Her eyes were flashing, and she was pacing the room with an overcharge of nervous energy.

Then again, he was not at all opposed to sharing this room, this bed, with her, Brandt conceded with a silent smile. Whereas she was violently against the idea. Such strong feelings conferred a mighty vigor.

"Kelly, we have to share the same room," he explained patiently. "There is no believable reason for us not to."

"How about the fact that I—I would rather jump out of an airplane without a parachute than to sleep in the same bed with you?"

Brandt grinned. "How does the old Shakespearean adage go? 'Methinks the lady doth protest too much'?"

Kelly glowered at him. "Oh, you would think that, wouldn't you? You believe you're so irresistible that every woman you meet is dying to hop into bed with you!"

She was well aware that climbing into the same bed with him would be tantamount to sexually surrendering to him. Her imagination, always vivid, conjured up scenes of the two of them lying together naked, their bodies intertwined, their hands and mouths touching, tasting, seeking ... If only those images repelled her! She could wage

a successful campaign against him if disgust and fear joined forces with her anger.

But the images of herself with Brandt did not repulse or disgust or scare her. They tempted and tantalized her. She wanted him. Despite the danger he represented to her controlled, well-ordered life, she wanted him.

Kelly caught a glimpse of herself in the bathroom mirror that reflected out into the suite. Her face was flushed—with outrage and with something else, something harder to define. Sexual tension? Arousal? Whatever it was, it unnerved her. "I won't go to bed with you," she pledged, her voice rising.

"Hush," Brandt warned. "We don't want Para de Leon and the rest of the hotel staff to hear us quarreling, Kelly."

"I don't care if they hear us!" Kelly retorted hotly, but she did lower her voice to a hissed whisper.

Amusement was shining in Brandt's eyes. "Ah, Kelly." He gave a low laugh and caught her hand. "Relax, honey. Nothing is going to happen between us unless you want it to happen. You know it, and that's what has you so disconcerted, hmm? Because you *do* want—"

"Disconcerted?" Kelly wrenched her hand free. "I'm not disconcerted. I'm—I'm enraged! And I'm not going to stay here with you. I'm going down to the desk and demand another room."

Brandt debated whether or not to try and stop her. He was fairly certain that her request would be denied because he suspected that nothing was done here without Carista's or Para de Leon's consent. And he trusted her not to blow their cover, no matter how upset with him she might be.

Kelly snatched her red travel bag, which was doubling as her purse, and headed for the door.

"Good luck," Brandt said blandly. He decided not to stop her. Though she might not be aware of it, he knew that she was fighting her own desires as much as she was fighting him. Let her work the rage out of her system in her own way. "I'll start unpacking, since I plan to stay in this room."

Kelly stormed down the flight of stairs to the tiled lobby, where a bored-looking desk clerk was staring absently into space. Full of angry determination she approached the desk. "*Tiene listed otra alcoba?* Do you have another bedroom?"

It took five full minutes to convince the clerk that she and her husband didn't want their room changed, that the one they had was perfectly adequate, but that *she* wanted another room. One for herself. "I don't want to share a room with that man," she blurted out in a torrent of impassioned Spanish.

The desk clerk's interest immediately perked. "You had a quarrel with your husband?" he surmised in English with a sudden knowing smile.

Kelly nodded. "Yes." *Now* he decided that he understood English! "And I want my own room," she added succinctly.

The clerk shrugged. "Sorry. No can do." He seemed inordinately pleased with the idiom and repeated it. "No can do."

"Why not?" Kelly demanded.

"No can do." He gave her a smile literally dripping with patronizing machismo. "Your quarrel will be over soon. You will be glad to be in the same room with your man."

It was a masculine conspiracy of the most maddening kind! Kelly fumed. She had no doubts that if Brandt had demanded the room, the reply would *not* have been "No can do."

She tossed her head and her bright hair bounced on her shoulders. The clerk gazed at her admiringly. Kelly glowered at him. "I'm going out for a walk," she announced, and marched out the door. There was no way that she was going to creep meekly back upstairs to Brandt and that room they were forced to share. At least, not yet!

His suitcase unpacked, Brandt sat down on the bed and waited for Kelly to return. He'd already decided not to remark upon her certain failure to obtain another room. In fact, he wouldn't refer to their quarrel at all; he would suggest that they go out for dinner and ask her to choose a restaurant from the recommended list in her guidebook. Pleased with his proposed course of action, he leaned back against the pillows and waited for her.

Growing bored a short while later, he decided to check out the list of restaurants himself. Then he remembered that the guidebook was in Kelly's red canvas bag and that she'd taken it with her when she'd stormed from the room. He glanced at his watch. She'd been gone twenty minutes. He decided to go to the lobby and watch Kelly in her schoolbook Spanish, and the clerk in his pidgin English, haggling over the extra room. It ought to be quite a conversation.

Grinning, Brandt made his way to the lobby. He wasn't aware that he was being followed until he saw Para de Leon join him at the desk.

"I heard you leave your room. Is there anything you need?" Para de Leon asked solicitously.

Kelly wasn't in the lobby. Brandt's grin was replaced by a frown. He stifled his irritation at the presence of the Latin gumshoe and turned to the clerk. "My—uh—wife came down here a short while ago..."

"I didn't hear her leave the room," Para de Leon interjected.

Brandt's frown deepened. He did not care for the idea that their every move was monitored. "Well, she did," he snapped. "She came to the lobby."

The clerk grinned. "Oh, yes, she was here. She was mad as hell." The expression obviously pleased him, and he repeated it. "Mad as hell."

"She was?" This from Para de Leon.

The clerk nodded. "She wanted another room. I told her no can do." He beamed at Brandt. "No can do," he added with relish.

Para de Leon's dark brows arched. "She wanted another room?" He stared at Brandt. "Why?"

Brandt suppressed a groan and vowed to wring Kelly's neck for placing them in this position. If there were one sure way to arouse Para de Leon's suspicions of them not being the happily married couple they were purported to be, this was certainly it. "We had a fight—a quarrel," he explained slowly. That was certainly true enough.

"She says she doesn't want to share a room with that man," the clerk supplied helpfully.

Brandt scowled. "Yes, that's what she said. My wife is—uh—very emotional and—impulsive," he added with a shrug.

"She has a bad temper." Para de Leon made his own translation with a definite touch of masculine sympathy.

Brandt sighed. "She's—uh—very strong-willed."

"Women!" Para de Leon grumbled.

The clerk nodded in a display of male solidarity. "She was mad as hell when I told her there was no room for her. Then she went out." "What?" Brandt and Para de Leon chorused.

"She went for a walk."

"A walk? But she doesn't know her way around this city," Brandt exclaimed. "She could get lost, she doesn't even have any pesos. I exchanged some dollars at the airport, but I didn't have a chance to give her any."

Concern overrode the anger surging through him. She'd been gone over twenty minutes. He turned to Para de Leon. "Are there any—unsafe areas in the city?" A foolish question, he mentally chided himself. There were unsafe areas in every large city. He didn't want to think that Kelly had wandered into one.

Para de Leon frowned. "It is not safe to walk south of Bolivar Circle. There are roving gangs of street urchins, pickpockets, and purse-snatchers. One must take care at the funicular railway and cable car station at the foot of Monsambra Peak. And beyond that are the slums." He gave a slight laugh. "I do not think your wife will venture there, Senor Madison. She is probably looking in the shops and will soon tire and return here. We shall be waiting for her." He settled himself in a wide armchair in the lobby. "Bring us coffee," he ordered the young bellboy who was taking in the scene. "And some newspapers. American newspapers," he added with a nod at Brandt.

Brandt sank down onto the other armchair. There seemed to be nothing to do but to wait for Kelly to return. And when she did . . . His

brows lowered as his features drew into a fierce scowl. Oh, when she did!

Kelly walked for blocks, glancing at the shop windows featuring leatherwork and jewelry and hand-woven textiles. Colorful native wool ponchos caught her eye. Perhaps she would purchase one before leaving Avida; it seemed a unique and practical souvenir of her trip.

But today she was too upset to appreciate fully the appeal of window shopping in Avida. She was furious with Brandt for so obviously planning to bed her. And she was furious with herself—both for wanting him and for knowing that she would not be able to handle a brief affair with him. If she gave into her feminine desires, she would be giving him the power to hurt her deeply.

"No way!" She muttered the words aloud, her tone fierce. She'd been hurt before, and she didn't care for the feeling. She'd found a way to live that precluded hurt, and she wasn't about to risk her carefully tended serenity for a few sexual thrills.

Somehow she'd developed a foolish sentimentality that irrevocably linked sex and love, and she was stuck with it, despite modern views to the contrary. And since she already knew that unreciprocated love caused pain, she need only avoid sex to avoid love to avoid pain. It seemed so logical as she walked through the streets of Avida, putting it all together. Why did everything have to get so confused the moment Brandt Madison looked into her eyes?

The shopping district was within easy distance to a number of impressive buildings that were points of interest to the tourist as well as the city native. The National Museum. The Bullring. The National Art Gallery. Kelly's anger and preoccupation began to fade as she stared and listened to the sights and sounds around her. This was her

first time away from Chicago, she reminded herself as a thrill surged through her. She was in another city, in another country, on another continent! She was here, all expenses paid by the magazine, and she might as well take advantage of it.

Kelly continued to roam the city and finally ended up at the station of the Monsambra funicular and cable car, which linked the city with the summit of the mountain. Impulsively she decided to ride the cable car to the top.

She was about to enter the station when she noticed a group of raggedy children watching her. They circled nearer, their dark eyes focused on her red canvas bag. Street urchins. Kelly recalled the guidebook's warnings about the pickpockets and purse-snatchers who victimized unsuspecting tourists.

It hadn't occurred to her to be nervous about her safety on her impromptu walking tour of the city. She'd been getting around Chicago on her own since her early grade school years. But she wasn't naive either. She was alone, outside the station, and the gang was coming nearer.

Why, the youngest child in the group couldn't have been more than five or six years old! Kelly's attention was arrested by the little boy with the huge black eyes and bare feet. None of the children wore shoes, she noted, despite the cool temperature. Although it was officially summer in Avida, its high altitude precluded hot weather and the climate was springlike, in the sixties. Not warm enough to go without shoes.

Kelly's sudden flash of apprehension deserted her as swiftly as it had come. She felt an odd sense of kinship with these children of the streets; after all, she'd been found in an alley herself.

"Hola, "she called to them in Spanish. The children stood stock-still, obviously disconcerted by her greeting them. "I need some help," she continued in careful schoolbook Spanish. "Could you help me?"

The children edged closer. There were seven of them. What gesture could she make to show her goodwill, her desire to be friends? Kelly wondered. And then she knew. She reached inside her bag and pulled out her trusty little Polaroid camera. "I'd like to take a picture of you," she explained. The children stared at her, their expressions a mixture of fascination and suspicion. "I want to get some pictures of Avidans," she continued, smiling at them. "Will you pose for me?"

As a child who'd seldom been photographed, she understood the irresistibility of her offer. Cherished children of doting parents took being photographed for granted; children who were not cherished by anyone, who had no one who cared to preserve their childhood on film, were captivated by the notion of having a photo of themselves.

She hadn't misjudged her audience. Within a few moments the children were hamming it up, grinning and giggling, as she snapped the shutter, then staring in astonishment as the little camera developed the picture within seconds and ejected it.

Kelly took eight pictures, giving each child one and keeping one for herself. By this time the ice was broken between them. Each child told her his name. Six of the children were boys and the seventh was a scrawny nine-year-old girl named Marisol. Kelly told them her cover story, that she was here in Avida to adopt a baby. She treated them to a cable-car ride to the top of Monsambra and enjoyed their reactions. It was the first time any of them had taken the ride, despite the fact that they spent much of their time hanging about the station. Looking for potential pockets to pick and purses to snatch, Kelly knew. At the station on the peak, she bought them fruit drinks and candy with money she had changed earlier in her walk at a bank she'd happened upon.

It was growing dark as the cable car completed its descent and pulled into the station. Kelly glanced at her watch. "I suppose I'd better get back to the hotel." It was a long walk back, and she was beginning to feel oddly light-headed. "Do you know where I can get a taxi?" she asked, suddenly too exhausted to consider the long trek. The burst of adrenaline that earlier had carried her so far was now conspicuously lacking.

Juan, one of the older boys, solicitously led her to a bench and told her to sit down. Then he and another boy raced off, returning a few minutes later, motioning a taxi to follow them. "*Gracias*. Thank you very much." She smiled at them and dug into her bag. "I meant to pay you for posing for me.

The children were goggle-eyed as she pulled out pesos. She handed them to Juan. "You'll divide it up among the group, won't you, Juan?" He nodded, stunned.

"Senorita Kelly, come back tomorrow," the smallest boy, Diego, blurted out.

Kelly hugged him. She loved children and she felt a special camaraderie with these youngsters. She wanted to see them again. "Tomorrow at one," she promised, and departed amid a chorus of assurances to return to the station tomorrow at one o'clock.

The cab driver was surprisingly gracious. Kelly guessed that she had wildly overpaid, but she was too tired to haggle over prices. Her watch read nearly eight o'clock; she was hungry and tired, and her head was beginning to ache. She wanted only to get back to the Casa Carista as quickly as possible. To the room . . . she shared with Brandt. At the moment not even that thought had the power to stir her. She would deal with the problem later; right now she felt terribly light-headed, almost dizzy. From lack of food, she decided. She *had* to eat.

Kelly trudged into the hotel lobby, wondering if room service was a possibility. She was totally unprepared for the hoopla that awaited her.

"There she is!" shouted Para de Leon, jumping to his feet and dumping what seemed to be a ream of newspapers all over the floor.

The desk clerk—the same one who'd denied her request for another room—leaped over the desk, shouting in Spanish.

"Kelly!" While she was staring in astonishment at Para de Leon and the clerk's antics, Brandt appeared seemingly out of nowhere and grabbed her by her shoulders. "Thank God you're all right!" He turned to the clerk. "Notify the embassy and the police that she's safely returned." Sharp tawny-gold eyes assessed her intently. "You are all right, aren't you, Kelly? You weren't hurt in any way?"

She tried to break loose from his steely grip. "Of course I'm all right. I went for a walk and did a little sight-seeing. Why shouldn't I be all right?"

Brandt's fingers tightened. "You've been gone nearly four hours! We had no idea where you were! We just called the American Embassy to inquire if you'd turned up there. We called the police to report you lost."

"Lost? I wasn't lost. I had a lovely time. I rode the Monsambra cable car to the top and I—"

"You went there?" Para de Leon interrupted. "That is a dangerous area for a woman alone. For any tourist. There are bands of criminals who lurk there, waiting to prey on the unsuspecting."

Was Para de Leon the one who'd incited Brandt into this ridiculous frenzy? The watchdog was probably vexed that she'd escaped him.

Kelly fixed him with a cold glare. "Everyone I met was helpful and friendly." She thought about her young friends, their pleasure in the pictures of themselves, the cable-car ride and the treats at the top. "Avida is a delightful city," she added with a definite so-there smile.

"Delightful city?" Brandt echoed, and something inside him seemed to snap. He'd been sick with worry, imagining her falling victim to all sorts of heinous fates, only to have her stroll in and announce that she'd been blithely cavorting in this "delightful city."

For the past four hours he'd been playing the role of panicked husband and somehow he'd begun living the role. He forgot that Kelly wasn't his impulsive, overemotional wife; he'd been transformed into the primitive male in danger of losing his mate, and adrenaline was surging through him. "You're coming with me!" Brandt dragged her toward the stairs. "Right now!"

Kelly balked. She didn't understand the dynamics of the situation; she hadn't even considered herself missing. Her head was pounding, and she was getting even more dizzy. And her temper was beginning to flare. "I'm not going with you! And I'm not sharing that room with you either!"

Para de Leon and the desk clerk burst into a torrent of hysterical Spanish. They were speaking too rapidly for Kelly to catch most of it, but she did pick up a few key phrases. Like "handling your woman" and "teaching her who is master." Brandt might not understand *espanol*, but she had no doubt that the two men had spent the past four hours indoctrinating him into machismo!

Kelly was incensed. "I won't be handled or mastered by anyone!" She said it in English and Spanish, so all three would be sure to understand. "And I'm not going to that room. I'm—I'm going out for dinner. I'm hungry!"

"You're hungry?" howled Brandt. "I haven't been able even to think of food these past four hours. I've been worried sick, picturing you hurt and lying in some filthy hellhole. ..." His voice trailed off. "And then you show up demanding a meal!"

"You've seen too many foreign-intrigue movies, Brandt." Kelly laughed, she couldn't help herself. *Filthy hellhole* did conjure up movies with deep, dark dangers—none of which bore any resemblance to her pleasant time in Avida. "I was perfectly fine. You shouldn't let your imagination run away with you."

Brandt made a growling sort of noise. That was the last straw! Condescending humor from the very person who*had caused his imagination to torture him. With one easy movement he swung Kelly over his shoulder in a fireman's carry and strode up the stairs. The cheers of Para de Leon and the desk clerk echoed up the stairwell. As did Kelly's indignant cries.

Brandt stamped into the small bedroom, locked the door, and unceremoniously dumped her onto the bed. If she'd been dizzy before, being carried upside down had exacerbated her condition alarmingly. Nevertheless, Kelly scrambled to her knees, smoothing her skirt, her green eyes irate. "I—" she began, only to be interrupted by a furious Brandt.

"Don't say a word, Kelly. I'm trying to decide whether to shake you or spank you or murder you, and anything you say might go against you."

"You're not going to do anything to me!" Nausea was beginning to creep over her, making it increasingly difficult to sustain her hauteur. "I'm a free agent. I can go where I please. It's bad enough having one watchdog along on this trip, don't expect me to gracefully endure *two!*"

She climbed off the bed, readjusted her bag over her shoulder and smoothed her hair with her hands. She guessed she must look a wreck—tousled hair, makeup gone, and clothes impossibly wrinkled. A sudden, intense weariness washed over her, and it took all her strength to walk to the door. If she didn't eat soon, she was going to faint from hunger!

"Does this hotel have a dining room? If so, I'm going to have dinner there. If not, I'm going out to eat. And don't you dare try to stop me!"

Brandt stared at her, the wild anger abruptly fading as rational thought returned. He felt drained of all emotions. He ran a hand across his forehead and closed his eyes for one brief moment. "Kelly, don't go," he said softly, wearily. "I thought—I wanted—I tried—" he broke off with a sigh. "I hope you're satisfied, lady. Now I'm incoherent as well as insane."

Kelly paused, arrested by the sight of his fatigue. Dark circles shadowed his eyes. He had been worried sick about her? The full import of his words began to sink in. He hadn't been able to eat because he'd so feared for her safety? She swallowed. And drew a deep breath.

"I'm sorry if I worried you." His gaze sought hers, and she abruptly glanced down at the faded rug on the floor. She studied the interwoven color patterns as if she were memorizing them. "It didn't occur to me that you would be concerned. I'm used to going off by myself. I do it all the time at home."

"Well, you're not at home now." Brandt smiled slightly. "You have an overanxious husband to answer to here."

"Ill keep that in mind." Kelly tried to return his smile. And then a wave of nausea rolled over her, causing her to grip the footboard of the bed for support.

"Kelly?" Brandt was instantly at her side. She felt his strong hands grasp her shoulders. "Kelly, you've turned white."

"Are you sure I'm not green?" She made a feeble attempt at a joke. She saw his look of concern for her.

"Brandt, I feel terrible," she confessed. "I started to feel funny when we got off the cable car, and it keeps getting worse." He helped her to the bed and she sat down on the edge. And promptly lay down and closed her eyes. The room was spinning. The dizziness was nauseating and her stomach heaved.

"I'm going to tell Para de Leon to call a doctor. Kelly." Brandt's voice chimed in over the drums in her head.

"Call a coroner instead. I'm dying." Kelly groaned without opening her eyes. "You'd better keep away from me: I may be infectious."

"Kelly, I'm going to get help!" She didn't see his panicked expression and she was too ill to pick up the alarm in his voice. "I'll be right back, sweetheart." He raced from the bedroom to the lobby and found Para de Leon talking to a young woman dressed in a short, tight red sweater-dress and impossibly high heels.

She was heavily made up and reeked of a floral cologne.

"Kelly is sick!" Brandt exclaimed and described her symptoms. "She needs a doctor!"

"Probably *soroche*, mountain sickness," the weasely little man said with a confidence that set Brandt's teeth on edge. "She did too much rushing around today. Too much overexertion, and she's not accustomed to the high altitude. Many visitors are susceptible, it's nothing serious."

"I'm supposed to take your word for that? You're no doctor!" Brandt glowered at him.

"Order her *mate de coca*," Para de Leon continued, his attention focused on his lady friend. Who was no lady, Brandt snarled to himself. He was supposed to stand idly by while a ferret face like Para de Leon diagnosed Kelly and ogled an Avidan hooker?

"It is a tea made from coca leaves and is quite effective in relieving the symptoms of *soroche*," Para de Leon continued, his beady little eyes riveted to the woman's ample chest. He murmured something in Spanish and the woman nodded her head with a sultry smile.

Brandt clenched his fists. Upstairs, Kelly was lying in that bed, looking so sick and small. What if she were seriously ill? Suppose he were to lose her?

He banished the thought, instantly, fiercely. No, that wouldn't happen because he wasn't going to let it happen. He'd lost Michele; he was not going to lose Kelly. With a wild glitter in his golden eyes, Brandt picked up Para de Leon by his shirt front, lifting the startled little man off the ground. "You're going to call a doctor right now. And he'd better be here within ten minutes. Do you understand? Because if he's not, I'll make you sorry, *senor*. Very sorry. Do *you understand*?"

Para de Leon squirmed and reddened. "Yes, of course, Senor Madison. There is no need to be upset, Senor Madison. Your wife will be fine. I will call the doctor right away."

The hooker gazed at Brandt with admiring eyes. He brushed past her and hurried back up the stairs to the bedroom. Kelly was lying quietly on the bed, her eyes closed. "The doctor will be here very soon, honey," he said softly as he crossed the room to sit beside her on the bed. He took her hand in his. It was icy cold, and he warmed it by holding and rubbing it between his palms. "Everything is going to be

all right," he added, his tone more fiercely determined than soothing. He reached for her other hand.

Kelly opened her eyes. A fine layer of perspiration coated her skin. She could never remember feeling so weak and limp. "I'm right here if you need me, sweetheart," Brandt said softly, holding her hands in his.

If she needed him . . . His words swam through her dizzied mind. She really didn't need anyone. But she was glad Brandt was here. Her defenses were down, and the thought slipped through as she basked in his attention. She was so glad he was here with her.

The physician who had been summoned to the hotel confirmed Para de Leon's diagnosis of *soroche*. He ordered her to rest and eat lightly and prescribed headache tablets and *mate de coca*, the tea made from coca leaves.

"The doctor said you should be feeling better tomorrow," Brandt told Kelly after the physician's departure.

"I feel better already. Lying down helps, as long as I stay still. Brandt, this tea I'm supposed to drink, the stuff made from coca leaves— isn't that where cocaine comes from?"

"Worried that you'll be drugged and I'll take advantage of your helplessness?" Brandt mocked lightly. Her pallor was already lessening and when she scowled at him, he felt like cheering. She *was* feeling better; there was nothing seriously wrong with her, and she was going to be all right. He realized in that moment just how deeply he cared about her, and the realization left him momentarily stunned. It had happened so quickly. He hadn't had time to see it coming. She'd attracted him. She'd intrigued him. She'd aroused him. But he hadn't known until now that he'd fallen in love with her.

"I'm not so helpless," Kelly retorted. "And I'm going to be perfectly safe sharing this bed with you tonight. Because the *soroche* has given me a rake-proof weapon. If I dare to lift my head off this pillow, I'll throw up all over the bed."

"That would definitely tend to put a cramp in any rake's style," Brandt agreed dryly. So dryly that Kelly couldn't help but grin.

And then she groaned. "Don't make me laugh. My head hurts too much." She touched her fingertips to her throbbing temples.

Brandt was instantly solicitous. "The doctor left some tablets for headache pain. I'll get them for you." He brought her two blue pills and a glass of the bottled water from the bathroom. Kelly managed to take the pills while lying down. She was still dizzy and feared a recurrence of the terrible nausea if she dared to sit up.

The bellboy brought the prescribed *mate de coca*, and Brandt ordered a light meal of chicken sandwiches for the two of them. He helped Kelly drink the tea through a straw, then fed her the baked chicken on thick, crusty rolls in small bites.

The combined effects of the tea and the pills began to make her sleepy, and Kelly yawned. It was suddenly difficult to keep her eyes open. But when she felt Brandt's hands on the waistband of her skirt, she stared at him in wide-eyed consternation.

He merely grinned. "Don't worry, honey, you've never been safer from a seduction attempt in your life. Your threat of losing your dinner is *mucho* effective. I'm just loosening a few buttons to make you more comfortable, that's all." "Oh." Kelly closed her eyes again as all traces of anxiety blissfully melted away. She felt warm and deliciously languorous, as if she were floating away on a sensuous, high-flying cloud.

"My nightgown is in my suitcase," she told him drowsily. She'd already forgotten to be modest or on guard. He wanted to make her comfortable; and it was more comfortable to sleep in a nightgown than her traveling clothes.

Brandt found the nightgown, a soft white cotton with a square-cut neck and wide sleeves. He tried to be briskly custodial as he slipped off Kelly's skirt, sweater, and blouse. But his hands were shaking a little and his body began to tighten in response to her languid assistance.

He studied her as she lay on the bed, her eyes closed, her chest falling and rising in tempo with her steady, quiet breathing. The swell of her breasts beneath her lacy white slip held him mesmerized. Underneath the slip, the outlines of a brief white bra and white bikini panties were clearly visible.

Brandt gulped. Her breasts were beautifully shaped and filled the filmy white cups almost to overflowing. He remembered how perfectly they had fit his hands. A tremor shuddered through him. He couldn't tear his gaze away from her relaxed form. Her throat was arched and vulnerable, the slender curve of her neck an exquisite temptation. Her waist was tiny, her hips and thighs slim and rounded.

He was aware that he was perspiring—and the room was not at all warm. Did he dare touch her again? Should he finish undressing her or slip the nightgown over her head right now? Kelly made the decision for him.

"Hurry up," she murmured with the sleepy, grouchy impatience of a child and lifted her arms above her head to facilitate the removal of her slip.

Brandt drew a deep breath and pulled off the slip, then drew another as he peeled the gossamer pantyhose from her well-shaped legs.

Kelly stretched and smiled, and Brandt's mouth went dry. His body was hard with arousal. Get control of yourself, Madison, he ordered himself sternly. She's been sick, and right now she's undeniably drugged from whatever was in the pills and tea. Only an egomaniacal, insatiable, omnivorous insect would take advantage of a woman in her condition.

The words made him smile. He visualized Kelly flinging them at him, her eyes flashing, her mind quick and alert. That was the way he wanted her to look the first time he made love to her—alive with fire and passion, as taut and brimming with urgency as he.

With renewed determination he lowered the straps of her bra and unfastened the clip. The languid doll was an erotic temptation, and someday he would have her. His body throbbed at the image of himself taking the soft, sleepy-eyed temptress who so pliantly offered herself to him.

But not now. Kelly trusted him to take care of her, and that precluded making love, however tantalizing the prospect. There would be other times for that. Kelly might not realize it yet, but she belonged to him.

He carefully removed her bra and pulled on her nightgown. As she lay there in the demure white gown, Brandt was struck by how virginal she looked. His sensual imagination was working overtime, he chided himself. She had already admitted to giving birth to a child.

...

Why did he keep coming back to that? he puzzled. It was all part of the paradox that was Kelly. She couldn't bring herself to discuss her parents, yet with an almost blithe unconcern she'd recited the details of her broken love affair and the child she'd given up.

He frowned. Kelly looked as innocent and as vulnerable as a child herself when she sighed and curled up on her side. He wanted her, all

of her—her love and her trust as well as her body. And he would have it all, he promised himself. He carefully tucked the sheet around her and couldn't resist stroking her hair as he bent to kiss her cheek.

Kelly lay quietly beneath the sheet, engulfed in a sea of sweet contentment. Being taken care of was a luxury, and she was savoring it to the fullest. It was strange how not feeling well could cause one to regress, to make one dependent and needy. . . .

She heard the water running in the adjoining bathroom, and knew that Brandt was showering. He had fed and dressed her, he had tucked her in and kissed her good night. He had babied her and she—she who was allegedly so strong and independent and self-sufficient—had loved it!

It was a harrowing thought. She couldn't let Brandt make her need him; couldn't surrender an iota of her independence for she would need it after he left her. That he would leave her, Kelly had no doubts. She lacked whatever it took to keep love; after all, she'd only managed to inspire two years worth of maternal feelings in her mother before the woman decided that she'd had enough and dumped her in the alley. How could someone who hadn't even been able to hold her own mother's love ever hope to keep a man like Brandt Madison?

When Brandt padded back into the bedroom a short while later, a thick white towel tucked around his waist, Kelly was sound asleep. He stared at her, arrested by the sight of her face, relaxed in sleep. She looked young and defenseless—and so utterly desirable. Brandt grimaced wryly at the impact she was making upon his senses. Perhaps he'd better step back into that cold shower.

And then he noticed the faint tracks of tears on her cheeks. He moved closer, frowning. Had Kelly been crying? The realization made him

ache. He wanted to protect her from hurt, to shield her from pain. Or at least to share it.

"Kelly?" Brandt called her name softly, but there was no reply. She was deeply asleep. Dropping the towel, he donned a pair of blue pajama bottoms and slowly, carefully, climbed into bed with her . . .

Seven

When Kelly awakened the next morning, sunlight was streaming into the room through the thin white curtains, and she was lying spread-eagle on her stomach in the middle of the bed, her nightgown twisted around her thighs, the pillow punched into a ball and smashed against the headboard. Her auburn hair, wild and tangled, fell over her face.

She raised her head, brushed the hair out of her eyes, and locked glances with a bleary-eyed Brandt. He was partially lying on the edge of the bed, clutching a pillow under his head. One leg was planted on the floor, presumably to keep himself anchored to the few square inches of mattress that he'd managed to claim. He was holding on to the corner of the top sheet, the rest of which trailed to the floor.

"You give a whole new meaning to the term *wild in bed*," he said with a slight shake of his head.

Kelly quickly pulled her nightgown over her knees and sat up. "I tried to tell you that it wasn't a good idea for us to share a bed."

"Yes, you did. I assumed it was because you were feeling shy with me. You neglected to mention that sharing a bed with you qualifies as a high risk to life and limb."

"I'm a very restless sleeper," she admitted.

"Restless is a definite understatement, honey. I feel like I went forty-five rounds with Rocky Balboa. And lost." Brandt groaned as he stood up. "You thrashed and kicked and flailed and pounded. You threw the sheet and pillows off the bed and everytime I retrieved them, you tossed them off again. At one point, when you were lying sideways across the bed, I tried sleeping on the floor. Unfortunately

the rug is too thin to be much padding against the tiles, so I had to climb back into the ring."

"Uh, sorry," Kelly murmured. She had been staring, she realized with a start. This was the first time she'd seen him only partially clad, and her eyes were riveted to his broad, bronze shoulders and hair-roughened chest. His waist and hips were lean in comparison to those powerful shoulders.

"What were you dreaming all night?" Brandt ran a weary hand through his hair. "That you were trying out for the Olympic wrestling team?"

"I don't know. I never remember my dreams." It was true. She'd always been oblivious to whatever battles her subconscious mind fought at night and to whatever demons were exorcised as she slept.

Her eyes lifted to his face and she stared at the fine film of masculine stubble that covered his jaws. His hair was tousled and fell carelessly across his forehead. He looked virile, sexy. Her body tingled. She had spent the night in bed with him.

Beating him up, that scrupulously honest little voice inside her head reminded her. Sleeping with her had not been an erotic experience for him; he was comparing her to boxers and wrestlers. Hardly the stuff of which dream girls are made.

Kelly stifled a sigh. "I'd like to take a shower and wash my hair now."

"How do you feel? Any more dizziness or headache?"

"None. I feel terrific." Which she did. She'd slept restlessly but deeply and awakened feeling refreshed. Physically, at least. She bounced from the bed and headed toward the bathroom.

"Kelly?" Brandt's voice stopped her in her tracks. She turned, her expression quizzical. "You never did give me an answer to the question I asked you the night of the blizzard."

Kelly went very still. "Question?" She watched him walk toward her, his stride slow and purposeful. There was a hot gleam in his tawny eyes. She told herself to make a dash into the bathroom and lock the door behind her. Instead, she remained rooted to the spot.

Brandt's long, lean fingers closed over the tops of her arms. "How do I make you feel, Kelly?" he asked in a low voice that seemed to caress her.

Kelly caught her breath. They were standing so close, she could feel the heat emanating from his body, and his musky masculine scent filled her nostrils. Her body tightened and she began to tremble. The urge to touch him was overpowering and blotted out all apprehension and restraint. Her hands seemed naturally to gravitate to his chest and her fingers tangled in the wiry thick mat that covered his skin. The hair felt sensuously soft between her fingers. Beneath her palm she could feel the solid thudding of his heart.

Brandt covered her hands with his. "How do I make you feel, Kelly?" he murmured again.

Her mouth felt dry. "It's—it's hard to describe. I—can't find the words."

"Try," he commanded gently.

"Dizzy:" she said at last. "Exhilarated and scared at the same time."

"Sounds like the same reaction produced by a ride on a roller coaster," Brandt said wryly.

His droll response made her smile. And somehow it made it easier to open up to him. "I've felt safe with you too," Kelly confessed. She remembered that exquisite feeling of security when he'd held her in his arms.

"You'll always be as safe with me as you want to be." He bent his head to kiss her neck. The masculine roughness of his chin and cheek sent a sensual shiver down her spine. He pulled her against him in one slow, easy movement. Kelly did not resist.

His big hands kneaded the sensitive small of her back, then slowly slid over the curve of her hips to the trace the soft curves of her bottom. The way he was touching her . . . the warm way he was gazing down at her . . . Kelly felt her body flush with heat. It felt as if he were drawing her out of herself. Her reticence seemed to vanish. The words flowed easily from her lips. "You make me laugh and you make me furious. I feel so alive when I'm with you. Yet I can feel relaxed and comfortable with you too."

"You affect me the same way," Brandt admitted huskily.

Kelly gazed up at him. He was going to kiss her, she knew it, and she wanted him to, so very much.

"Kelly." The way he whispered her name sent shivers of anticipation all through her body. She watched his head descend toward her, mesmerized by the fine, sensual lines of his mouth. Her lips parted.

"Senor Madison!" The loud, nasal voice was punctuated by a series of sharp staccato raps at the door. Kelly jumped and bolted away from Brandt like a startled deer.

"Para de Leon here," came the unwelcome voice of their watchdog. "We're expected at the children's home in an hour. Will you and Senora Madison be ready?"

Brandt stared at Kelly, who was scrupulously avoiding his eyes. He heaved a sigh. "Yes. we'll be ready," he called through the door, adding a silent curse.

Kelly slipped into the bathroom and Brandt heard the distinct click of the lock. "I'll order breakfast and have it sent up to the room," he called to her. There was no response; the water in the shower was already running. Muttering another oath, he picked up the receiver of the 1940s-style black phone and demanded room service.

The hand-lettered sign that hung over the door of the stucco-and-tile building read AMIGOS DEL NINOS. Friends of Children. Kelly and Brandt stood by the gate with Para de Leon, waiting in silence as a tall, dark-haired woman slowly pulled it open.

Kelly shivered and wrapped her cardigan sweater more tightly around her. She was wearing a floral print dress with a scooped neckline, dropped waist and elbow-length sleeves—one of her favorite dresses—and she should have been warm enough in the springlike climate.

But she wasn't. Her chill had nothing to do with the weather. It was the prospect of entering this institution that made her body turn cold. She'd spent time in various Chicago children's centers between foster home assignments and had thoroughly detested it. The warehousing of children would always strike a despondent chord in her.

"Are you all right, Kelly?" Brandt murmured, gazing down at her. He'd noticed that she'd grown progressively quieter during the taxi ride. And now she was pale and shivering.

"I'm fine." Kelly forced herself to smile and nod. "Don't worry, I'm not about to succumb to another bout of *Soroche*."

"There's no need to be ashamed or embarrassed if you do." Brandt watched her, a serious expression on his handsome face. "Promise me you'll tell me if you feel ill, Kelly." He draped a protective arm around her shoulders and drew her closer.

It wouldn't hurt if she leaned on him a little, just for a moment or two, would it? Kelly debated the question. And then allowed herself to lean into his hard, warm strength. She didn't really need him, of course, but it was nice to have someone to hold on to. Just for a moment or two.

The gate was open, and Para de Leon stretched out his arm in a welcoming gesture. "This way, Senor and Senora Madison."

They looked like a married couple who'd come to adopt a child, Kelly thought as she caught a glimpse of herself and Brandt reflected in the glass panes of the door. She appeared a bit anxious, but that was all right: who wouldn't be prone to a little anxiety in such a situation? And Brandt had his arm around her, the image of the steady, reliable husband. He gave her a little hug and drew her closer to his side.

They were led into a large room filled with twelve wooden cribs, a baby in each. The babies were of varying ages, from what appeared to be newborns to those sitting and standing in their cribs. Three young women dressed in white-and-blue uniforms stood in the back of the room, almost at attention, as Para de Leon marched in.

"The infants," the little man said, making a sweeping gesture with his hand. "All under one year."

Kelly surveyed the infants in the rows of cribs. On the plus side the room was clean and bright and the babies looked clean and well fed. And at the moment, none of them was crying. Still, her heart sank at the sight of them. All these little ones, needing homes. All these

babies, motherless and fatherless until— unless—Carista's price was paid, and they were adopted into a family of their own.

"This is the nursery of the one- and two-year-olds," proclaimed Para de Leon as he guided Brandt and Kelly into another large room filled with cribs. A smaller playroom was adjoining, and they peered in at the group of toddlers under the supervision of two uniformed women.

Kelly watched a dark-haired, dark-eyed little girl about two years old try to take a rubber ball from a little boy who looked a few months younger. The little boy howled and ran to one of the women who turned to scold the little girl. Kelly watched the child's face crumple. She wanted to scoop the little girl up in her arms and comfort her. But as she took a step toward the child, Para de Leon called for them to move on to the older children's room.

The older children were three and four years old; the Friends of Children didn't have any children older than four, Para de Leon explained in answer to Brandt's question. Kelly knew why. People wanted babies; barring that they would settle for toddlers. Even the three- and four-year-olds, adorable as they might be, were getting a bit long in the tooth for many prospective adoptive parents. She'd spent her childhood knowing that she was too old to be considered adoptable.

"You are not interested in these older children, you want a baby," Para de Leon reminded them, dismissing the group of children with a glance. "Let's return to the infants' room and choose your son or daughter."

Kelly stared at the group of preschoolers at play. They were running, talking, and laughing. "What happens to the four-year-olds who turn five and aren't adopted?" She asked Para de Leon.

He shrugged. "There is a government-run home we send them to. It is much larger and keeps the children until the age of sixteen, if they choose to stay that long. Most don't. Many children in that institution are apprenticed to wealthy families as servants. Five or six is a good age to begin to learn a few light chores. The children are housed and fed in return as part of the arrangement." He shrugged again, clearly indifferent to the subject. "It benefits everyone."

"Except the children used for free labor!" Kelly exclaimed. "I expect that a number of children run away from the institution and live on their own in the streets?"

"Once they leave, they are on their own. But let us forget them and return to our very pleasurable business at hand. " Para de Leon fixed them with a broad smile. "You have seen the babies. Which one will you choose to be your child?"

"How am I supposed to choose?" Kelly snapped, glowering at him. Forget them, he'd said. Forget all the unwanted, unloved children in the world. Kelly clenched her hands into fists. She made no motion to follow her guide from the room.

"It is—uh—a difficult decision, isn't it, Seriora Madison?" Para de Leon cast her a wary glance; she made him uneasy. He'd discovered yesterday how unpredictable she could be. He turned to Brandt, who was watching Kelly. "Senor Madison, perhaps you would like to take your wife back to the nursery and we can proceed with the business at hand."

"Kelly," Brandt took Kelly's arm. "Come along, darling."

Kelly allowed herself to be led away, through the corridor in the direction of the infants' nursery. All these children, all of them alone in the world, all of them needing families and homes. Their small faces ran through her mind's eye like frames of a filmstrip. And this

place at least provided a chance for them to find parents and a home of their own. Perhaps she and Brandt were wrong to try to interfere in the process; if a couple wanted a child enough to come here to get one, perhaps that should be enough . . .

"Brandt, I want to go back to the hotel," Kelly whispered, clutching at his arm.

He stared down at her. "Do you feel sick again, Kelly?" he asked worriedly. "No, I'm fine. I just don't want to go back to the nursery. I want to go back to the hotel." She spoke loud enough for Para de Leon to hear her.

"You don't want to go back to the nursery?" The little man repeated. He stared at her for a moment, and a slow smile spread across his ferretlike face. "Ah, Senora Madison. I think I understand. But you don't want to go back to the hotel just yet. Come with me. I think I know exactly what you are looking for."

Kelly and Brandt exchanged puzzled glances, then followed Para de Leon up the stairs to yet another nursery. There were just three babies in cribs in this room, all under a year old, and all—

"Blue-eyed blonds," Para de Leon said proudly. "Fair, like you and Senor Madison, Senora. You see, there is no reason for you to go back to the hotel now, is there?" He looked so pleased with himself, so smugly complacent. "I believe you'll find what you're looking for in this room."

Anger sparked within her as Kelly stared from the children to Para de Leon. He thought she'd been sulking because the Avidan children she'd seen were not to her liking. And now he was showing her the grand prize, the top-of-the-line merchandise for the discerning shopper.

"Where are these children from?" Brandt asked, walking from one crib to another.

"We have blond blue-eyed Avidans," Para de Leon said gleefully. He obviously saw a lucrative deal in sight. "Though the majority of our country's population is of mixed Spanish and Indian blood, about five percent is of European stock, from countries like Germany, France, and Switzerland."

"Fair, blue-eyed babies like these must be worth their weight in gold," Brandt said casually, and Kelly knew he was switching on the small tape recorder he had hidden in his coat pocket. They'd agreed to lead subtly into the buying-and-selling aspect and hopefully get the facilitator to incriminate himself and the operation on tape.

Para de Leon laughed and rubbed his palms together. Kelly stared at him, her outrage simmering to the boiling point. She'd been wrong to think, even for a moment, that this disgusting man and his unseen partner should be allowed to continue unchecked in the selling of children. The youngsters in this institution deserved better. They needed parents and homes of their own, but they shouldn't be forced to obtain them through the avarice and prejudice of men like Carista and Para de Leon.

Kelly turned and fixed Para de Leon with a glittering emerald stare. "How much do you charge for one of these children, Senor Para de Leon?" she asked coolly.

She would make sure that this disgusting little weasel incriminated himself and exposed his baby-selling business to the world, Kelly told herself. Then the government would have to take note; they would be too embarrassed not to. And then perhaps a church-sponsored or some other nonprofit agency could take over the home and find these children parents the legal, moral way.

"Well?" Kelly pressed impatiently. "I know the blue-eyed blond children must cost more than the dark-eyed, dark-haired ones. What I want to know is how much more?"

"Uh, Kelly, why don't you let me talk to Senor Para de Leon?" Brandt was frowning at her. She was not, Kelly knew, being very subtle about leading Para de Leon into the subject.

Para de Leon glanced from Kelly to Brandt. "It seems as though your wife is starting to get upset, Senor Madison," he said with an uneasy gulp.

"Yes, she does tend to get emotional," Brandt agreed, shooting Kelly a warning glance as he reached for her arm.

Kelly pulled away from him. "Stop talking about me as if I'm not here!"

"She's unpredictable too," Para de Leon observed, undoubtedly remembering her disappearance and the scene in the hotel lobby yesterday. He fixed her with an ingratiating smile. "Senora Madison, there is no reason to get upset."

"Then let's talk about buying a baby," Kelly demanded. "Quote me a price for that little boy in the crib by the window."

Para de Leon looked rattled. Clearly he did not trust Kelly not to indulge in another emotional outburst, right here in the Friends of Children Home. "Please, stay calm, Senora Madison," he implored. "If you want that child, you will have him for just twenty-five thousand American dollars."

"A real bargain," Kelly said sarcastically.

Para de Leon misinterpreted her sarcasm. "Yes. It includes all the necessary papers, the adoption certificate, the baby's visa, everything, rushed through in record time. All three of you will be leaving Avida within just three to four days."

"Suppose we only want to pay twenty thousand?" Kelly challenged.

"You can have the blond girl for twenty thousand," replied the facilitator, pointing to another child. "But we're holding out for twenty-five for the boy. We know we can get it."

"Of course. Just as blue-eyed children are worth more than dark-eyed ones, so baby boys are worth more than baby girls." Kelly quivered with rage. She despised this man on behalf of every dependent, homeless child in the world.

Para de Leon still did not see anything wrong. "Yes, that's right."

"You can name your price for a blue-eyed blond baby boy and get it," Kelly reiterated. She wanted the tape to be conclusive and undeniable evidence of the whole sordid business. "You'll sell that child to us for twenty-five thousand dollars." Her voice rose a little.

Para de Leon glanced nervously at Brandt. "Is she about to go off again?" he murmured.

"I just want to know if you really do intend to sell us this baby," snapped Kelly.

"Yes, yes," Para de Leon agreed hastily. "If you'll give me the money, we can start signing the papers."

Brandt and Kelly exchanged glances. The tape held more incriminating evidence than they'd ever hoped to secure. "We'd like

to go back to the hotel and discuss it first," Brandt interjected. "Kelly is looking pale and should rest. I don't want her to get overexcited."

They had the evidence they needed, he thought exultantly. Kelly had done a brilliant job in getting Para de Leon to incriminate himself, and they had it all on tape. And in record time too. Now all they had to do was to get out of Avida, preferably on the next flight to the States.

"Suppose we want to buy one of the darker-skinned babies?" Kelly pressed on, ignoring Brandt's hint to take their leave. She wanted to cover every angle, so there could be no mistake. "How much would a dark-haired newborn baby girl of mixed blood cost?"

Para de Leon was beginning to look wary. "Senora Madison—"

"Suppose we want to buy two Indian children, a four-year-old and a baby, a boy and a girl. Will you give us a good price, Senor Para de Leon?"

"Si, si," the rattled little man lapsed into Spanish.

"Name it," demanded Kelly.

"Ten thousand American dollars," he snapped.

"Buy one, get one free. A great marketing gimmick," Kelly observed. "I take it the ten thousand dollars will include both children along with all the necessary paperwork."

"Yes, *si*," Para de Leon said, sounding increasingly agitated.

"I'm taking Kelly back to the hotel now," Brandt put his arm around Kelly's waist and hustled her out of the room and down the stairs. "We'll talk after she's rested."

"But I—" Kelly started to protest.

"Shut up!" gritted Brandt, and hastened his stride.

"I will call a taxi and accompany you back to the hotel, Senor Madison," Para de Leon insisted. He didn't leave them for a moment. It wasn't until they were in their hotel room, that Brandt and Kelly were finally alone.

Brandt touched his fingers to his lips in a silencing gesture the moment he locked the door behind them. Kelly watched quietly as he searched the room, and finally found a tiny electronic device hidden under the tasseled lampshade.

"Something new has been added this morning," he said grimly, deactivating the device. "I suppose that now is when things begin to get sticky. The proposition has been made, but no money has exchanged hands. The prospective parents haven't done anything to ensure their silence. Yet."

Kelly examined the bugging device. "I wouldn't have .thought to look for one. You're a regular James Bond, Madison."

"And you're about as subtle as a wrecking ball, Malloy. Those questions you threw at Para de Leon ..." Brandt shook his head. "I thought we'd have to fence around, play word games and finally have to content ourselves with innuendos on this tape. But you made him blurt out enough to sign his own arrest warrant. Along with Carista's."

"He makes me sick," Kelly said hotly. "I hope they lock him up and throw away the key. I could've gotten him to say even more if you hadn't dragged me out of there." ^

"You were getting a little reckless, Kelly." Brandt studied her. "That's why I dragged you away. Para de Leon was starting to get nervous, and I was afraid you might provoke him into doing something we

might not be prepared for. Remember he's very vulnerable now. He's blatantly admitted selling children and has virtually nothing on us."

"Imagine charging more for blue-eyed kids than brown-eyed ones! Charging more for boys than girls! And complacently throwing away the older children!" Kelly's eyes burned. "He was willing to toss in a four- year-old for free if we bought a baby, because he thinks a four-year-old child is worthless!"

"We've got enough evidence to warrant an investigation, Kelly. All we have to do now is get out of Avida with it. I thought we might go directly to the American Embassy and request an escort to the airport."

"Don't we have to tell Para de Leon that we don't want to adopt, after all? Since he has a ready supply of blue-eyed blonds, we'll have to come up with another excuse though." Kelly felt tears burning in her eyes. She quickly turned away. Good Lord, was she going to cry? Why would she do that?

"We could tell him that we want a green-eyed redhead," Brandt suggested dryly. "I didn't see any of those in the children's home."

"Maybe they were stashed in the attic for a higher- asking price." Kelly made a stab at humor. An unsuccessful one. Her voice sounded breathless and trembly. She was astonished with herself, with the tears that filled her eyes to overflowing and trickled down her cheeks. She hadn't cried in front of anyone in years! What had come over her?

"Excuse me," she said hastily and made a dash for the bathroom.

Brandt caught her before she reached the door. "Let me go!" Kelly demanded desperately, trying to jerk her arm from his grasp. "I'm all right. It's just— just allergies."

"Mmm-hmm." Brandt gave her a tug that brought her hard against his chest, and he trapped her in his arms before she could escape. "What are you allergic to, Kelly? Para de Leon?" Kelly struggled fiercely to break free. Brandt merely tightened his hold and brushed the top of her head with his lips. "The repulsive little creep is enough to cause anyone to break out in hives," his voice soothed.

Kelly stopped wriggling for a moment to gather her strength for another round in her fight for freedom. And in that moment her body reacted to the feel of Brandt's hard frame against her. He felt so strong and warm, so solid and safe.

"Don't fight me, Kelly," he whispered huskily, his mouth caressing her temple, then lowering to nuzzle the curve of her neck. "I just want to hold you. Let me hold you, love."

She stood still; too electrified by his words, by his touch, to move.

"I can't stand seeing you cry," Brandt continued softly. "Kelly, I—"

"I'm not crying," she insisted. "I never cry." Slowly, hesitantly, her arms crept around Brandt's waist.

"And these aren't tears?" Brandt's tongue tasted the salty wetness on her cheeks. His voice seemed to be coming from far away. He continued to hold her, to rub her back with his big hands. "It's the children, isn't it, Kelly? I watched you at the home. You looked as if your heart might break."

"I was depressed, especially for the older ones. They're never going to have a home of their own, Brandt. And they don't even know it yet." Kelly swallowed. "But they will. Soon. And it—it hurts so much to finally realize it. To know that you're all alone, that no one wants you. That no one ever will."

She wasn't just talking about the children in the Friends of Children Home. Brandt's heart contracted with pain for her. She was talking about herself. "How old were you when you reached that conclusion, Kelly?" he asked softly.

"Around five." Her voice was muffled against his chest, and she was trembling, her body as tense as a coiled spring. "The same age that Carista and Company kicks out the unadoptable children from the Friends of Children Home. But I was rather slow on the uptake. I should've realized it a lot earlier: when I was two and my mother dropped me off in an alley and never bothered to come back for me."

There was a moment of silence. Brandt's hands stilled. "Your mother abandoned you?" he asked quietly.

She'd told him! Kelly drew back in shock. She'd never told anyone of her abandonment; she'd always thought she would rather die than to share her shameful secret. But she had just blurted it out to Brandt Madison.

Why had she done it? A totally unreasonable anger surged through her. It was easier to be angry with Brandt Madison than to face the fact that she'd bawled like a baby in his arms and then spilled her deepest, darkest secret! She felt so exposed, so vulnerable. And she loathed the feeling, she feared it. . . .

"Dammit, I told you to let me go!" Tears were streaming down her cheeks, and she was jerking wildly in his arms. "You have no right to—to—"

"Hold you against your will," Brandt finished calmly, holding on to her despite her frantic struggle to break free. "I know you're furious with me, Kelly. You hate talking about what happened to you. You hate remembering it. although you'll never let yourself forget it."

"How can I ever forget?" Kelly rasped hoarsely. "Dumped! In a rainy alley one night like a—a bag of garbage." She felt alternately blazing hot and freezing cold. "It was in March—March seventeenth to be exact. Saint Patrick's Day. It was cold, and I wasn't even wearing a sweater. If Officer Malloy hadn't found me . . ." It was difficult to talk around the huge lump in her throat. Had her mother hoped she would die on that cold and rainy night, left alone in an alley in a thin little dress and a pair of sneakers? The answer seemed painfully obvious to Kelly.

"You were found by a policeman?" Brandt prompted gently.

She nodded. "They—the—the authorities . . . gave me his last name. Malloy. He wasn't married; he lived with his mother and never dated. I guess everyone thought it would be a good joke to give his name to the kid he found in an alley. I needed a last name. I could say a few words: I told them that my name was Kelly and that I was two. That was the only information they had about me. It's all there's ever been. I don't even know the day I was born. My birthday is listed as March seventeenth, the day I was found."

Brandt felt her body trembling with pain, with bottled rage and grief. "Kelly," he whispered, sinking down to the bed, and pulling her onto his lap. "Poor little girl. Poor little Kelly."

She felt as if she could cry for a million years. What had happened to her iron control, her strictly enforced stiff upper lip? Kelly thrust her hands against his chest and tried to lever herself away from him. "Please let me up. I—I need to be alone—"

"I'm not going to let you go, Kelly." He was holding her tight, stroking her hair, her face, with strong, soothing hands. "You don't need to be alone, you've been alone for too long. But no more." He rained kisses over her tear-swollen cheeks and nibbled lightly at her lips. "You have me now, sweetheart."

He was trying to comfort her; she mustn't let his words mean anything more than that, Kelly reminded herself. He was a kind man who would naturally feel sorry for the abandoned baby that she had been.

"You've been so brave, so strong," Brandt said huskily, rocking her in his arms.

"But I've just proved how silly and weak I can be," Kelly whispered miserably. She was sorely disappointed with her loss of control.

"Carrying on like this, about something that happened years ago ..."

"It's not weak or silly to grieve, Kelly. Or to need someone. Or to—love someone. Loving can make you strong." Brandt cupped her chin in his hand and lifted her face to his. Kelly's heart leaped at the golden flames in his eyes. "Let me love you, Kelly. I *need* to love you. ..."

Eight

Kelly's heart seemed to come to a halt, then begin beating again in a pounding rush. *Let me love you.* His words ricocheted crazily through her brain. What did he really mean? Kelly didn't care for euphemisms; her strictly disciplined mind demanded clarity. Which she sought from him now. "You want to make love to me?" she whispered.

She felt closer to him at this moment than she'd ever felt to anyone, but she wanted to be even closer. He'd given her comfort, kindness; just talking to him had helped to ease her pain. And now she wanted to give to him, whatever he wanted, whatever she had to give.

She'd never felt this way before. Was she in love with him? For the first time Kelly put aside all her self-protective restraints and cautions. She wanted to make him happy, regardless of the cost to herself. If making love to her would make him happy, would give him what he needed ... If making love to her was what he wanted . . . she wanted it too, Kelly admitted achingly. She wanted to merge with him, to be part of him, if only for just a little while.

"I want to make love *with* you," Brandt corrected softly. "Kelly, I want you. I need you, sweetheart, but I don't want to rush you. If you'd rather wait..."

"I wouldn't rather. Kiss me, Brandt," Kelly interjected her sensuous command, shifting in his lap to touch her mouth to his. She could feel the burgeoning strength of his masculinity straining against her, and she heard his swift, harsh intake of breath as her lips touched his. She loved him, she knew that now. And he wanted her. Kelly exulted in the knowledge. To be wanted, to be needed by the man she loved—what more could she ask for?

"I want you too, Brandt," she whispered huskily. She would've liked to tell him that she loved him, but she didn't want him to feel obliged to parrot it back. She wanted to give herself to him with no demands and expectations. Kelly silently promised that she would never make a nuisance of herself and demand what he couldn't—or didn't want to—give.

"Kelly, my sweet little love." Brandt's mouth moved lightly, lazily over hers in a whisper-soft caress. "You taste so good. I've been hungry for you for what seems to be forever."

Kelly tried to catch her breath, but she couldn't seem to take any air into her lungs. Her heart was pounding so loudly, it echoed in her ears. Then his tongue traced a languid path over her lips, and she could do nothing but melt against him.

His hands moved ardently over her body, circling her breasts, kneading them until she gasped with pleasure. He cupped her in his palms, the warmth of his hands burning through the silky material of her dress; he rubbed her nipples with his thumbs until she was writhing with an ache that radiated from between her thighs to every nerve ending, making her whole body throb with a need she had never before experienced. "Oh, Brandt." She sighed his name, and he kissed her hungrily, his tongue thrusting into her mouth in excruciating sensual simulation. She felt him slowly lower the zipper of her dress, his mouth caressing the trail of bare skin exposed along the open track.

He pulled her dress away, then the lacy slip before easing her back on the mattress. He lay beside her, one hand resting possessively on the flat plane of her stomach, the other lazily tracing an imaginary line from the hollow of her throat to the shadowy cleft between her breasts.

"You're beautiful," he whispered, bending to touch his lips to hers. Her body felt hot, burning, and she twisted with an urgency and a need that she couldn't control.

"You're sweet and strong. You're bright, you're funny, you're compassionate." Brandt brushed his mouth slowly over the filmy bra, lingering on the hard, tight points that the light material did not hide. "And you're so damn sexy, you make me lose my head." He laughed with delight. "Ah, Kelly, I can hardly believe that I found you, that I have you here with me at last."

His words affected her like a potent aphrodisiac. Never had she imagined feeling so wanted, so cherished, so desired. *I can hardly believe that I found you*, he had said. She couldn't believe it either. All her life she'd been lost and now . . . now she had finally been found.

He removed her bra with a deft expertise and his hands -found her breasts, warm and full and aching for him. He massaged them gently, then dipped his head to take one strawberry-pink nipple into his mouth. She cried out at the touch of his hot lips on the taut peak, and her fingers convulsively clenched in his hair.

"Yes, you like that," he breathed against her flesh and as he spoke his hand inched deliberately toward the elastic waistband of her bikini panties. "I like it too. You're so responsive, so passionate. Do you know how it makes me feel, knowing I can excite you this way?"

Kelly drew in a shuddering breath. Her every nerve, all her awareness was focused on his big hand, which was caressing the softness of her belly. His thumb traced the hollow of her navel, and she held her breath, then expelled it as his fingers slipped lower.

The large, warm hand slid inside her panties, and his long fingers brushed the darker auburn curls. Kelly gasped and lay motionless,

resisting a wanton urge to arch her hips and open her thighs for him. Her eyes locked with his, and she felt the heat within her grow hotter.

"Please," she whispered helplessly, as his mouth hovered over hers, her senses reeling in a swirling sensual torment. She was unaware that she was pleading with him; the words were instinctive. "Brandt, please."

His eyes held hers as he stripped her panties from her with one downward sweep. "Is this what you want?" he murmured, and her hips moved involuntarily, rotating in sinuous primal rhythm. His fingers found the melting warmth of her, gently touching the most exquisite pleasure points until she was panting and squirming and clamping her legs against that masterful hand.

He probed the moist secrets of her, and suddenly there was a flash of pain, a pain so mixed with the pleasure he was giving her that she wasn't sure it was pain at all. Kelly moaned a little and clung to him, her eyes shut tight.

"Kelly." The sound dimly penetrated the erotic mists that were engulfing her, but she ignored it. "Kelly," Brandt repeated, his mouth against her ear. The sound reverberated in her head, and she winced. "Open your eyes, Kelly."

It was no use. The voice was not going to go away. Slowly, reluctantly, she opened her eyes.

"You've never had a baby, Kelly," Brandt stated positively. "I had my doubts before, but I think I knew it for certain the moment I saw you look at those children in the home today."

Kelly nodded.

"And that tale about Richard and Rupert was—"

"Just a tale," Kelly finished.

"You're a virgin. I just discovered that."

She nodded, blushing and tensing, wariness creeping into her eyes.

"Are you mad?"

"Of course not, sweetheart." He pulled her on top of him, his hands stroking her back, his thumb finding the small dimple at the base of her spine and caressing it. He watched the incipient tension fade from her face. She was so vulnerable; she needed love, his love. He felt incredibly protective and possessive of her. She belonged to him, and he wanted to spend the rest of his life making her happy.

His lips curved into a smile. "Should I ask why you felt the need to invent R and R—and their westward flight together into the sunset?"

Kelly traced his lips with her finger. "You were so pleased with yourself when you invented my baby. You were congratulating yourself on being so intuitive and perceptive. Why should I be the one to rain on your parade? I just added a few colorful touches to it."

He gave her bottom a playful spank. "It serves me right. Because I ignored the truth when you did try to tell me, didn't I, Kelly? I said it was impossible for you to be an inexperienced virgin, swept away by passion."

"And that's exactly what I am." Kelly rubbed herself provocatively along the length of his hard, rough frame.

He flipped her over onto her back, his eyes gleaming. "A passionate little virgin." His mouth sought hers, the kiss hard and hot and slow. When he raised his head, her pupils were dilated and her face was flushed. "A sweet and hungry virgin who is going to be an exciting and responsive lover."

Her heart jumped. "Do you think so?"

He kissed her ardently, tenderly. "I know so, darling."

Kelly sighed and cuddled closer, and he kissed her again. With a swiftness that astonished her the kiss deepened, changing from totally gentle to totally erotic.

She eased her tongue into the warm darkness of his mouth, her breasts taut against his chest. Everything she'd ever wanted was in that kiss. Want and need. Giving and taking. Offering and receiving. Kelly's heart swelled with love. A heady feminine power swept over her as she felt his big body shudder as she stroked him with her hands. He wanted her kisses and caresses, he wanted her. It was the sweetest gift he could have given her.

Brandt groaned her name and shifted her, so that she could feel the starched cotton bedspread against her bare back. Kelly gazed up at him, her eyes full of love.

"I don't want to hurt you," he murmured, looming above her, so big and powerful, so excitingly male. "I'll be gentle, Kelly. And I'll protect you. Don't be afraid, love."

"Never," she whispered. She gave her love freely, without strings or demands or expectations. Whatever happened between them in the future, she would have the memory of this time when he had wanted her.

Their bodies merged, his gaze holding hers, watching her, whispering to her as she enveloped him. Her body opened like the petals of a flower and she sucked in her breath as the aching void was filled and she became one with the man she loved.

It was like nothing she'd ever dreamed of. She said things to him she never thought she could say to anyone; he whispered back to her—dark, sexy words of passion that inflamed her. She moved with him, for him, as the pulsating tension built and grew until he arched his body into hers with a hoarse cry. She held him tightly, loving him as his body quaked with sensual tremors that rippled through her, intensifying into a hot wave of ecstatic, unbearable pleasure.

It went on and on, and Kelly cried out Brandt's name and clung to him, as his love poured into her, and they were both carried away into a rapturous world of sublime oblivion.

It could have been minutes or hours before she drifted down from that magical dimension: ordinary time had no relevancy. Kelly lay in Brandt's arms, cradled against his sweat-dampened body, soothed by his big, caressing hands. She felt both exhilarated and languorous, excited and replete. She felt like laughing and crying at the same time.

"I never knew it would be like this," she whispered, leaning up to kiss the hard, tanned column of his neck.

"It isn't, always. This is making love in the fullest sense." Brandt brushed his lips over her kiss-swollen mouth. "We fulfilled each other completely."

Kelly flashed a mischievous grin. "Not bad for an amateur, hmm, Madison?"

He laughed and kissed her eyelids, her nose, her soft lips. "You want to be graded on your performance, Malloy?" He hugged her tight. "An A-plus. You're summa cum laude material. "

"High praise indeed from a nationally renowned Bachelor, of the Month. Do you know I've always wanted to go to bed with a Pulitzer

prize-winning author who likes Italian food and drives a midnight blue Maserati?"

"No kidding? Well, just drop a pair of black lace panties with your phone number embroidered on them into the mail, and the Bachelor will add your name to the list."

They both laughed, and she playfully punched him in the ribs. He caught her hand and carried it to his mouth, pressing his lips against her palm. "I never realized how drab my life had become until you came in to brighten it." His voice was husky with emotion and his golden-brown eyes darkened. "I love you, Kelly."

Kelly's breath caught in her throat, and she stared at him, stunned. Had she heard right? Nobody had ever said those words to her before. She cleared her throat. "I—uh—beg your pardon?"

It was Brandt's turn to stare at her. "I didn't hear what you said," Kelly said defensively.

He relaxed and smiled at her, somehow managing to pull her even closer than she already was. "I said, I love you, Kelly."

A sharp spasm of joy spun through her, and her eyes shone. He'd said he loved her! Kelly closed her eyes and savored the moment, knowing she'd remember everything about it forever: the way the sun was dappling the wall, the feel of his arms around her, his strong, hard frame pressing her into the soft mattress. The deep sound of his voice when he said those words she'd never expected to hear. *I love you, Kelly*. She opened her eyes and gazed at him, memorizing every detail of his face. Long after he'd gone, she would be able to conjure up this magical moment and feel the bliss she was now feeling.

Overcome with emotion, she cupped his face with her hands. "I'll never make you sorry you said that, Brandt," she said earnestly,

gazing up at him with wide jade eyes. "I'll never give you cause to regret it."

"Of course not, love." He hugged her.

She meant what she said. Brandt had been thoughtful enough to say those precious words because he undoubtedly believed a woman needed to hear them the first time she made love. But Kelly knew not to believe him or to expect anything to come of his impassioned declaration. Brandt Madison love *her*? She was a confirmed realist, not given to flights of fantasy.

"You're a wonderful man, Brandt." Kelly sighed with happiness. She had fallen in love with a prince among men, and she wouldn't ever make him unhappy by weighing him down with her own needs and demands. She wouldn't drive away the man she loved: he was free to go whenever he wanted. She loved him that much.

Brandt grinned and kissed her. "You're a rather wonderful lady yourself, my love." And then very unromantically he yawned. "I'm sorry, honey. Suddenly I'm so tired, I can hardly keep my eyes open. I didn't get much sleep at all last night."

"That's what comes from sharing a bed with a nighttime contender for the Olympic wrestling team," teased Kelly.

Brandt heaved a sleepy, contented sigh. "I'm willing to brave it again. Let's take a nap, Kelly." He settled her against him, tucking her into his side, one big arm draped across her waist, their legs intimately entwined.

He was soon sleeping soundly and Kelly lay placidly in his arms, savoring their closeness, relishing every sweet moment that they were in each other's arms.

But she wasn't at all sleepy. Kelly shifted in Brandt's arms and caught sight of the gold watchband that spanned his wrist. It was already past noon. Something stirred in her mind. Past noon . . .

She sat up in bed. Brandt mumbled something in his sleep and rolled onto his stomach. The children! She was supposed to meet her little friends at one at the Monsambra cable-car station. Kelly quickly climbed out of bed, taking care not to disturb Brandt. He was still tired, poor darling! Lovingly, she bent down and kissed his cheek.

It never occurred to her not to go. When Kelly made a promise, she kept it. She searched through her suitcase for some comfortable, casual clothes and finally pulled out a pair of slim yellow slacks and a cotton sweater splashed with swirls of jade, yellow, and blue. She decided that sneakers were more practical for keeping up with the lively young gang. Running a brush through her hair, she grabbed her canvas bag and started out the door. And then paused on the threshold.

Brandt had been so angry yesterday when she'd left. She certainly didn't want to upset him again today. Kelly pulled a small tablet and a pen from her bag and scribbled him a note. *Meeting friends at Monsambra cable-car station.* Signing with a capital K, she tucked the note into the mirror and slipped quietly from the room.

Her first sight upon entering the lobby was Para de Leon ogling an enormous-breasted woman in an eye- popping crocheted dress and the highest, narrowest spike heels Kelly had ever seen. Kelly paused for a moment and stared herself. Was the woman naturally endowed? If so, the *Guinness Book of World Records* had a place for her!

Para de Leon was clearly entranced. His eyes never left the woman. He said something, and the woman nodded and took his arm. Kelly watched them head for the old-fashioned elevator and disappear inside it. She hurried gleefully out into the sunshine. Her creepy little

guardian would be too occupied with his new inamorata to even notice she was gone.

To save time, Kelly took a taxi to the Monsambra station and found her young friends waiting for her alongside the building. Little Diego was wearing shoes, she noted, and hoped that her contribution yesterday had made it possible.

"Senorita Kelly, you came!" The girl Marisol greeted her joyfully in Spanish.

"Of course, I came. I said I would, didn't I?" Kelly grinned at the children. "What shall we do this afternoon?" "Senorita Kelly, did you get your baby?" asked Juan solemnly, and Kelly glanced at him in surprise. Then she remembered that she'd told the children that she was in Avida to adopt a child. She was sorry she'd told them the cover story and decided to set the record straight.

"We have a baby for you!" Marisol exclaimed before Kelly could speak. "Come with us!" She grabbed Kelly's hand and little Diego snatched her other hand. Intrigued, Kelly followed the children from the station.

In just a short while they were in a crowded shantytown, the likes of which Kelly had never seen before. There wasn't a trace of Avida's wide, paved boulevards or the stately buildings and elegant shops in this bleak slum. The road was dirt and stone and lined with makeshift shacks, some made of thin wooden boards, others of mud and sticks and clay and—corrugated cardboard? At the bottom of the hill a few people were lined up at a pump, filling cans with water and carrying them to their hovels. No indoor plumbing? Kelly's eyes widened. There was a conspicuous lack of electrical and phone lines too. She berated herself for her naivete. How could a cardboard box be wired for electricity and a phone?

"Is this where you live?" she asked the children, her heart turning in her chest. She'd never seen such abject poverty—never. It hurt to think of any children living here.

"Here!" Juan pointed to a one-room shack and motioned her inside. Still clinging to Marisol's and Diego's hands, Kelly entered.

It was dark inside and the only furniture was a table with a broken leg and a chair. Blankets were piled up on a set of box springs and a small girl was playing with a doll in the middle of the makeshift bed. In the corner of the room, two toddlers—twins?—were amusing themselves by rolling a brightly colored ball between them.

The sight of the toys surprised her. They looked brand-new and were obviously treasured by the children. "This is my sister, Carmelita," Juan said proudly, pointing to a pretty young woman who huddled at the foot of the bed, cuddling a small dark-haired baby. "Carmelita, this is our friend Senorita Kelly."

Kelly smiled in greeting. Carmelita's dark eyes filled with tears. "Thank you for the food and the children's toys," she said in soft, rapid Spanish.

Kelly understood at once. Some of the money she'd given to the children yesterday had been used to purchase food and the toys for these little ones. She looked over at Juan, who was watching his sister's children with an avuncular fondness that made him seem old beyond his years. She was filled with warmth for him. Instead of keeping all the money for himself, he'd bought food for his family and toys for his small niece and nephews.

Carmelita stood up. "Juan tells me that you want a baby, that you came to Avida from America to get one." She placed the infant into Kelly's arms. "Take him. He is yours."

Kelly gaped at her. The baby squirmed in her arms, and she stared down into his big, dark eyes. "You— you want to give me your baby?" A cold lump of—fear? horror?—was building inside her.

All the children began talking at once. The baby began to wail. And Carmelita threw herself down on the rumpled bed and sobbed. For a moment Kelly wondered if she was caught in some surrealistic nightmare. But she knew she wasn't dreaming. It was a nightmare, all right, but a real one, and Carmelita and her children were living it.

She sat down on the bed beside Carmelita, who was shaking with the force of her weeping. Kelly was certain of one thing: Carmelita did not want to give up her baby. "Juan." she said softly as she rocked the shrieking baby, trying to quiet him. "Why don't you tell me what's going on here?"

Juan looked ready to cry too. He looked at the straw-covered ground as he haltingly told his story. He'd lived with his sister and her family for the past five years. Carmelita's husband, Antonio, had been a good man, a hard worker, and they'd been trying to save up enough money to move out of here. But the babies kept coming and six months ago, just two months before little Luis was born—

Kelly's heart sank. She knew what the boy was going to say before he said it. Antonio, the good man, the hard worker, the father of the children, was dead. She gazed at the children, at Carmelita's crumpled figure. "I'm so sorry," she said softly. She felt like crying along with Carmelita and the baby.

"Antonio was struck by a car and killed." Carmelita sat up and picked up the story. "And after Luis was born, the vulture Carista came down and asked to buy my baby."

"Carista?" Kelly gasped. "Manuel Carista?"

Carmelita nodded. "He comes here often and buys babies from those who are too poor and too desperate to resist his offer. He promises to give them to rich people in America, where they will live in fine houses and have everything. But I could not bear to sell my child. Even now ..." The woman drew a breath on a sob. "I cannot keep Luis. There is no money. I must give him up. But I cannot sell my baby to that man. Juan told me that you were a kind and generous woman and you wanted a child. I will give my baby to you. Will you take my Luis back to America with you and give him a good home?"

Kelly heard the desperation in Carmelita's voice, saw the despair etched in her face, and was struck by a flash of insight. Could her own mother have been as desperate and despairing as this young woman? Had she been driven to act against her better judgment because she'd been blinded by hopelessness and fear?

It was too late to spare the baby Kelly had been, but it wasn't too late to help little Luis and his family. Kelly handed the baby to Carmelita; she noticed that he stopped crying the moment he was in his mother's arms, and her resolve was heightened. She dug into her red canvas bag and pulled out her wallet. She had one hundred fifty dollars of her own money, and the seven hundred fifty that was her advance from the magazine to cover her expenses on the trip. Of course, she was to pay for her meals and half the hotel bill with it, but. . . Kelly pressed the wad of bills into Carmelita's hand. "Luis belongs with you and his family here in Avida. You were right not to sell him to Carista." She paused. "Can you change American money?"

A shocked silence had descended over the room. At last Carmelita nodded.

"I want to help, Carmelita," Kelly continued quietly. Perhaps if someone had helped her own mother, she might not have been driven to leave her child in an alley that long ago rainy night in Chicago. "I want to send you some money every month." She could do it, she

reasoned. She didn't have too many expenses with only Butter and herself to support. And she was a master at coming up with odd jobs for cash, should the need arise.

Juan was smiling widely. He embraced his sister, who was staring at the money, dazed. Kelly pulled her pad and pencil from her bag. "What is your address?" she asked.

"Send it to Father Ramon at the church," said Juan. "Come, I will take you to him."

Kelly nodded. "And then will you take me to visit some of the women who sold their babies to Manuel Carista? I'd like to take down the facts. ..."

Three hours later Kelly bid good-bye to her young escorts at the Monsambra cable-car station. Impulsively she handed Marisol her camera and packets of unused film. "Send me some pictures sometime. Father Ramon has my address."

She d met with the priest in the dilapidated old church on the edge of the shantytown and made arrangements to send the money to Carmelita via the church address. The priest was distressed by the crushing poverty of his parishioners, and her offer of assistance to Carmelita's family was gratefully accepted. And then Juan took her to visit five young women who told her how they'd been approached by Carista and offered the American equivalent of one hundred dollars to "help their babies find new homes with rich American parents." The sum had seemed a fortune to the destitute women and their families, the promise of a wonderful life for their babies too irresistible to turn down. None was aware that their children were in turn sold by Carista to the highest bidder, and Kelly didn't have the heart to tell them.

She thought of the prices that Para de Leon had quoted—beginning at ten thousand dollars!—and her blood boiled. Now, more than ever before, she wanted to nail the two human vultures—and they *were* vultures, feeding on the misery of others—and bring their baby buying and selling to an immediate end.

Kelly hugged each of the children good-bye and left the station. She didn't have a dime left, so a taxi was out, but the prospect of a long walk back to the hotel didn't daunt her. She was smiling as she walked along the sidewalk. Wait until she showed Brandt her notebook! With the stories from the mothers, plus the tape, they had an airtight case against the two Latin baby sellers.

And then her thoughts turned to Brandt, her lover. A sweet shiver of anticipation tingled along her spine as she contemplated seeing him again, touching him, kissing him . . .

A taxi pulled alongside of the curb so quickly and so close that Kelly had to jump back. And they said New York cabbies were bad! "Crazy Avidan drivers!" she muttered. And then shrieked as the back door of the cab was flung open and an arm reached out to grab her. A big hand fastened around her wrist and yanked her inside.

"Brandt!" she squealed as he tumbled her onto the seat. He pulled the door shut and ordered the driver to go. "This is a surprise!" She smiled at him in delight. "I was just on my way back to the hotel." And then she noticed that he was positively glowering at her. "B-Brandt? Is there something wrong?"

" 'Is there something wrong?' she asks! In that oh-so-innocent tone! Yes, Kelly, there is definitely something wrong. I've been searching the city for you for hours, dammit!" Brandt thundered. "Where in the hell have you been?"

Her green eyes widened. "I went to Monsambra to visit my friends. And they took me—"

"You left the hotel without me to roam around the city with—who in the hell were you with anyway, Kelly?"

She didn't like his tone, nor did she like him swearing at her. "I was with the children I met yesterday." What was the matter with him? Why was he staring at her in that cold, angry way? "I promised to meet them today and—"

"Let me get this straight," Brandt cut in, his nostrils flaring, his eyes an icy yellow-brown agate. "Knowing how I felt about you wandering around the city, knowing how worried I was yesterday, you blithely disregarded my feelings, not to mention any grain of common sense, and deliberately did the same thing again today!"

Kelly stared at him. His face was drawn and tight with anger, his voice brusque and stiletto-sharp. Instinctively, she inched away from him toward the window. "I—I left you a note," she offered softly.

"A note?" He exploded. "*A note!* Is that supposed to make it all right? I wake up to find a note saying you've gone off to one of the most notorious haunts for hoodlums in the city of Avida, a place that borders on one of the worst crime-ridden slums in South America—"

"The slum certainly was a terrible place, but I wouldn't say it was crime-ridden. I went all over with the children and no one bothered me. In fact, everyone was quite gracious and welcoming."

"You were traipsing through the Monsambra slums?" Brandt choked out the words. His face was red, bordering on purple. Kelly stared at him in fascination. "The taxi driver told me that there's at least a murder a day in that place. Just last week, a Florida businessman was found in there with his throat cut!"

"Maybe he was a drug dealer or something," Kelly suggested helpfully. "I didn't see anyone who looked like a cutthroat today."

"And how would you know what a cutthroat looked like? You stupid little fool! Didn't you realize the danger you were in?" shouted Brandt. He'd just spent hours in a hell of terror, and his fear for her safety had exploded into a wild, relieved fury at the sight of her. The fact that she seemed unable to comprehend the danger she had been in—or the extent of his terrible anxiety for her—served to increase his rage to new dimensions.

"That place is so dangerous that warnings are printed about it in tourist guidebooks! And then there is the matter of Para de Leon. The man is a criminal, Kelly. He bugged our room! Didn't you stop to think about what might happen to you if he were to suspect we had the goods on him? It would be so damn easy for him to get you alone in the city. ..." Brandt's voice trailed off, leaving the rest unsaid.

"But he didn't get me," Kelly pointed out with maddening rationality. "Para de Leon was occupied with a woman who possesses the biggest

mammaries south of Dolly Parton. I was the last thing on his mind at that point. He didn't even see me leave."

Brandt understood the imagery of "seeing red" for the first time. Fiery red flames seemed to flare before his eyes. How could she be so utterly unconcerned about her own safety? If he'd lost her . . .

The red grew deeper, more vivid. "Well, he knows you're gone now. He's looking for you, Kelly. Fortunately he doesn't realize what a dim-witted little daredevil you really are, and I didn't tell him. He headed off to search the shops—where one normally might expect to find a young woman!"

"I never pretended to be normal," Kelly said lightly. "Good old-fashioned, ail-American normalcy has eluded me all my life."

"What about using your brain to assess danger? Has that eluded you, too?" snapped Brandt.

Kelly stole a glance at his furious face and gulped. Her heart was sinking in her chest. She was beginning to understand. Brandt had had all afternoon to rethink his hasty declaration of love. And he was in a panic; there could be no doubt of that. He wanted to be free-of whatever meaning and expectations she might have construed from his much-regretted words of love.

Pain stabbed through her and she dug her fingernails into her palms until it hurt, trying to divert herself from the far worse mental anguish. She'd known he would want to leave her, of course, but she hadn't thought it would be so soon. She'd wanted more time with him, more memories. But if there was one lesson in life Kelly had learned well, it was that wanting something did not make it so. One had to adjust and accept the inevitable, and the sooner the better.

She straightened her shoulders and blinked back the tears that she didn't dare to shed. "I wasn't frivolously gallivanting around town. I was researching Carista and the Friends of Children Home. I have a notebook full of testimony from the mothers of babies who were coerced—figuratively if not literally—into selling their children to Carista."

"Dammit, I don't want to talk about Carista now. I—"

"I'll give you my notes, if you'd care to look over them," Kelly offered politely. "You'll find documented names, dates, and figures."

Brandt was angry with her for making him feel trapped; she knew that now. Kelly withdrew her notebook from her purse as she herself withdrew behind her carefully built wall of years of self-protective reserve. She would show Brandt that she wasn't going to fall apart because he no longer wanted her in his life. Their relationship began with a professional collaboration and would end with it. She handed him the notebook. "Have you taken the tape to the embassy yet?"

Brandt stared at her. He could actually feel the cool mask she was suddenly projecting, and frustration and fury raged within him. "Of course, I haven't been to the embassy yet. I've been searching for you! What an oversight I didn't think to go into the slums, eh? I might have found you playing Lois Lane, girl reporter, trailed by a bunch of pickpocket street urchins."

The more he talked, the more aloof Kelly became. Which made him even angrier. Which made her even more remote. He became increasingly caustic, determined to crash through her maddening air of reserve. He wanted to pierce through that distancing calm, to break her down and make her cry—the way she had cried earlier today. And then he would take her into his arms and love her, and the walls between them would tumble down. But he couldn't get through to her.

The harder he tried, the more unreachable she became. Physically she was by his side; emotionally she was a million miles away from him.

Kelly sensed his desperation. And was sure that she understood it. He wanted to be free of her. She was driving him mad, and he had to push her away from him. She guessed that she had affected her mother much the same way all those years ago. Something about her—that inherent unlovability with which she'd been born—had given the poor woman no choice but to abandon her. And now Brandt was reacting in the same way. Except she was no longer a needy, greedy child who had to be abandoned. Now she was a grown woman who could take care of herself, who could walk away on her own, granting her lover freedom from her.

At Brandt's request the taxi driver drove them to the American embassy, where the two of them talked at length with officials who then summoned the Avidan police. The information was turned over to the authorities, but not before copies were made to be taken back to the States as background for Brandt's book and Kelly's article.

A young Marine guard escorted Brandt and Kelly back to the hotel, where they quickly packed, and then drove them to the airport. He had been assigned to remain with them until their flight to Miami was to board, even though a phone call to the embassy revealed that Parade Leon had been arrested in the hotel in the company of a well-known Avidan *puta*.

"Charles, before I get on the plane, I wonder if you'd mind doing me a favor?" Kelly smiled at the handsome young Marine who was gazing at her appreciatively.

Brandt eyed them sourly. Kelly had been charming and friendly to their escort, a marked contrast to the unbreachable coolness she'd displayed toward him.

"Would you lend me ten dollars' worth of pesos? I'll pay you back," Kelly added quickly. "I want to bring my Little Sister back a present from South America, and I think she'd love one of those Avidan Indian dolls in the gift shop."

"Sure." The Marine reached into his coat pocket and removed the money from his billfold. "Buy her one of the big ones."

"You're an angel." Kelly beamed at him. "I'll send you the money tomorrow. I promise, Charles."

"I know you're good for it," Charles said easily.

"Why do you need to borrow money?" Brandt demanded, irritated beyond measure that she hadn't asked him for it. Didn't she know he would give her anything? That he'd do anything for her? After driving him half-mad with worry, she *should* know how much she meant to him!

Kelly debated whether or not to answer his question. The past two hours had been easier because she hadn't spoken to him directly. It hurt too much to talk or even to look at him.

"Where's your expense money?" Brandt pressed. "And you said you'd brought some money of your own to—"

"I don't have any of the money anymore," Kelly cut in. He was obviously going to badger her until he got an answer.

Brandt stared at her. "But you didn't buy anything, you . . ." He paused, and his stomach lurched. "My God, Kelly, you were robbed today in that slum, weren't you?" And she hadn't mentioned a word about it to him. Of course, he had been so angry with her when he'd first seen her that he hadn't given her much chance to talk at all.

Remorse washed over him in waves. "Kelly, tell me what happened. It's not too late to go to the police and—"

"I wasn't robbed. I gave the money away." Kelly said with a trace of defiance.

"You gave away all your money?" This from an incredulous Charles. *"All of it?"*

Kelly nodded. Brandt was momentarily speechless. He was glad that Charles had taken over the inquisition. "Who did you give it to, Kelly?"

"To Carmelita, the young mother who wanted to give me her baby so she wouldn't have to sell him to Carista."

"How much did you give her?" asked the awestruck young Marine.

"Nine hundred dollars," Kelly said reluctantly. She saw the two men exchange glances. "She needed it more than I did," she hastened to add.

"You gave away nine hundred dollars to a woman you'd never seen before? One you'll never see again?" Brandt gritted out the words. "Good Lord, you need a keeper! Or a cage! Both, probably!"

"I wanted to help Carmelita and Luis," snapped Kelly, stung. "She loves him, and a baby belongs with his mother. And if I want to give away every cent I have, it's my business. It's nothing to do with you!"

She stalked off to the small airport gift shop, leaving the two men to stare after her.

"I never met anyone who gave away nine hundred dollars to a stranger," Charles marveled. "Is she rich?"

"Far from it," Brandt said grimly. "She probably earns less than you do."

"Oh. Then she's—uh—sort of nuts?" surmised the marine. -

"She has a—different way of looking at things," Brandt tried to explain. He wanted to understand her, sometimes he was certain he did until he ran into a roadblock that he couldn't seem to see his way around. One thing was certain though. His falling asleep after they'd made love this afternoon had been a major mistake. He should have told her all the things he needed to say to her, all the things she must have needed to hear.

It was the first time she'd ever made love, hardly the time for him to roll over and go to sleep! But he'd been so exhausted from the sleepless night before and so incredibly replete from their fantastic lovemaking that he'd been unable to hold his eyes open. And Kelly had seemed so happy, so secure. They'd kissed and teased and laughed together. What had possessed her to leave him to wander through the slums with a bunch of young hooligans? And now she was back . . . but somehow still lost to him.

"I'd like my ticket, please." Kelly had returned, holding the doll in a plastic bag.

Brandt automatically handed her the envelope. They had the entire trip together to patch things up between them, he consoled himself. The three-hour flight to Miami, the layover there, and then the flight to Chicago.

"First class?" Kelly examined the ticket. She remembered their flight to Avida, Brandt's kisses, his caresses. Their amiable Spanish vocabulary drills. He'd wanted her then, and she'd been so determined to keep from becoming involved with him. The tears welled up again, and she blinked them back.

Funny how things changed in just a few days. Now he didn't want her anymore and she *was* involved with him, but determined not to inflict herself upon him. The pain that jolted through her was as forceful as having a two-by-four slammed into her solar plexus. She had to stop thinking and act.

"I'm going to exchange this ticket for a seat in coach," Kelly announced. Her thoughts fell into practical order. There would be a refund from the price differential and she could use the money for cab fare home from O'Hare in Chicago. And there would be something left to pay back to the magazine, as she'd given away her expense-account funds and had no receipts to show for it.

"Kelly, don't be ridiculous!" snapped Brandt, but she didn't glance at him and headed straight for the airline's ticket desk. He followed her, arguing the whole time the clerk made the transaction. Charles joined them without comment.

Brandt watched as she took the new ticket from the clerk. How could he get through to her? She kept drawing away, farther and farther.

"Kelly, for God's sake, you'll be at the back of the plane! And I'll be at the front!" he exclaimed in a mixture of exasperation, frustration and pure desperation.

"Good!" Kelly said succinctly. "Then I won't have to listen to you constantly yelling at me."

"I haven't been constantly yelling at you," protested Brandt. Had he?

"Yes, you have. And you show no signs of letting up. I know you think I'm stupid, but I'm tired of hearing it."

"Kelly, I don't think you're stupid, just rash. And impulsive." He pictured her in the squalid Avidan slum, danger lurking in every

corner. "And reckless." Every time he thought of how easily he could have lost her, he wanted to brain her for taking foolish chances. "There are enough natural risks in life without deliberately courting crazy ones."

Kelly nodded. "And you're not about to spend your time worrying about an idiot who does. I understand." She did too. He'd made his point perfectly clear. He didn't want her in his life. This morning had been an impassioned mistake, one he heartily regretted. And he was letting her know it under the guise of concern. Brandt Madison was a gentleman; he would never be crude enough to tell her bluntly to get lost. Fortunately for him, she was clever enough to pick up his nonverbal message. And had enough pride to act on it.

Kelly lifted her chin and set her jaw. "I'm going to board the plane now." She turned to the Marine. "Charles, thank you for everything. I'm glad to have met you."

"Likewise." Charles grinned and they shook hands. "Good luck, Kelly. And—uh—try to hang on to your money."

She gathered her things and scurried toward the boarding gate without a backward glance. Brandt watched her, his expression bleak. "Have I been doing a lot of yelling?" He posed the question more to himself, but Charles answered it.

"Well, you have been scolding her a lot since I've been with you."

Brandt looked troubled. "Today I thought I'd go out of my mind worrying about her. And every time I thought of what could've happened to her, I'd get furious all over again."

Charles chuckled. "Sort of like a mother whose kid runs off without telling her. She's so glad when he comes back that she hugs him, but

she's so furious with him for scaring her that she screams at him at the same time."

Brandt grimaced. "Exactly like that." It was a universal experience that anyone could relate to. Hadn't everybody provoked such a reaction from their mother at least once while growing up?

It wasn't until he was on the plane that the thought struck him. Had Kelly shared that universal experience? Had anyone ever been temporarily irrational with worry over her? If not, then his behavior today would've made absolutely no sense to her. Suppose she didn't see the love and concern beyond his anger, his yelling? What had made her withdraw so completely when only hours earlier she had given herself to him in the most open and loving way?

He *had* to talk to her! But Kelly was sitting in the crowded coach section of the plane, where there ; wasn't a single extra seat. And she struck up a friendship with a young woman traveling alone with two small children and stuck like glue to them during the layover in Miami. Brandt's every attempt to get her alone met with failure; he couldn't even carry on a conversation with her because the two little chatterboxes and their equally verbose mother kept Kelly's attention fully engaged.

When they reached Chicago, he would get her alone, he silently promised himself. Only to be foiled again. Somehow Kelly managed to collect her luggage and leave the airport in a taxi before he could catch her. When he called her apartment—the moment he set foot in his own—Susan Lippert answered the phone.

"Kelly's in bed," Susan told him cheerfully. "That must be one killing flight from Avida! Poor Kel looked like a train wreck when she staggered in the door. She said she was exhausted and went straight to bed. I'll leave a message that you called."

"She didn't mention anything about the trip to you?" Brandt asked carefully.

"Only to say she was positively beat from the long flight."

Brandt frowned. Susan obviously had no intention of rousing Kelly for his call. Was she really asleep or was she barricaded in her room, purposefully beyond his reach? She had done that once before, the night of the blizzard when she'd thought Corinne was his lover. And only by physically restraining her had he been able to force the issue and clear the air between them.

Now he couldn't get near her. He stifled a frustrated groan. "Susan, do you know if Kelly intends to go into the office tomorrow?" he managed with what he hoped passed for politeness. Because he certainly wasn't feeling polite. He was tired, discouraged, and frustrated beyond measure.

"Oh, she'll probably go in, no matter how tired she's feeling. Kelly's a real diehard when it comes to her job." Susan said chattily.

"She's a real diehard about a lot of things. Good night, Susan." Brandt replaced the receiver into its cradle and stared blindly into space.

"That was him." Susan turned to Kelly, who was leaning against the doorjamb, holding Butter. "He sounded like he really wanted to talk to you, Kel." Susan eyed her speculatively. "About something other than business?"

"No." Kelly shook her head. "He wants either to discuss the information we collected or to tell me again how stupid I was to give money to Carmelita. And I'm not up to listening to either tonight." She couldn't bring herself to confide any further in Susan; she wasn't used to sharing her pain. She would have to cope with it on her own.

That she was used to. Kelly nuzzled the soft yellow-striped fur around Butter's ears. The cat purred loudly.

"Who's Carmelita? How much money did you give her? Kelly, what actually happened in Avida? I wasn't exaggerating when I told Brandt you looked like a train wreck. You do, you know." Susan frowned her concern.

Kelly shrugged. "It was a killing flight from Avida." She conveniently borrowed Susan's own words as an explanation. "I'll tell you all about Carmelita and little Luis and the rest of the children tomorrow, Susan. Right now I'm tired, really tired." She started toward her bedroom. "I need to get some sleep."

"Butter missed you," Susan called after her. "He kept going into your room and meowing. And he insisted on sleeping with me. Ugh! I don't know how you stand that feline tub of lard in your bed at night, Kel. He weighs a ton and he's constantly thrashing around the bed." "Butter would probably say the same thing about me." Kelly thought of the night she and Brandt had shared a bed and her lips curved into a sad smile. "We're both nighttime contenders for the Olympic wrestling team."

"Well, I couldn't take it. I dumped him out and locked my door."

Kelly carried the cat into her bedroom, placed him at the foot of her bed and climbed in herself. Two minutes later he was sitting on her pillow. Kelly rolled over on her stomach and pulled the other pillow over her head. Butter scooted under the covers and settled himself alongside her. She shifted to accommodate him. The cat began to purr. He knew that his position in Kelly's bed was secure, no matter what feline gymnastics he chose to perform.

As she lay in bed Kelly willed herself not to think about Brandt; there was no use pining for what could never be. He'd given her a lot

actually. The beautiful, special memories of her first lovemaking. The words I *love you* for the very first time. It wasn't as if she had expected him to stay with her, Kelly reminded herself. She'd known all along that he would leave eventually.

But all her reasoning didn't lessen the hurt. She loved him, and some stupid, irrational part of her had wanted to believe that he loved her too. Somewhere deep inside her, the foolish little girl who wanted to believe in fairy tales and happy endings still lived on. Kelly cried that night, for the lost little girl and for the woman who had lost her first and only love.

"Hey, Kelly, there's someone to see you in Witt's office." Janie, *In the Know's* combination receptionist-secretary-editorial assistant, poked her head into the cubicle surrounding Kelly's desk to make the announcement.

"Thanks, Janie, I'll be right there." Kelly gave a half wave and hoped she sounded more alert than she felt. She'd spent a long and sleepless night trying hard not to think of Brandt and failing utterly. Images of him had tumbled through her mind's eye in kaleidoscope fashion; his voice had sounded in her ears. And though she'd delivered bracing lectures to herself designed to put him out of her head and her heart, the pain and longing were not eased.

She loved him. And just as she'd always known, pain and longing inevitably accompanied love. Sighing, Kelly stood up and smoothed the light wool of her blue-violet skirt, adjusted the collar of her matching blouse, and combed her fingers through her thick auburn hair, hoping her primping would improve her appearance a bit. She knew she looked terrible. She was exhausted; there were dark circles under her eyes and her face was pallid. Susan had advised her to spend the day in bed. "That trip must've taken a lot out of you, Kelly. You need at least one day of rest before you face the grind again."

Kelly hadn't even considered it. She was eager to return to the office and immerse herself in her work at the magazine. When she was writing, she wouldn't have to think about Brandt. Or so she'd thought. Instead, he filled her every thought, blocking each and every step of the creative process. Since she'd arrived this morning, she'd chatted with her coworkers, made several trips to the coffee machine, and even reorganized her already impeccably organized desk drawers. But she hadn't written a word. Not a single one.

The door to Witt's office was partially ajar, and Kelly entered without knocking. "Witt, Janie said there's—" She lapsed into an immediate silence. For leaning against Witt's desk, one leg hitched over the corner was . . . Brandt Madison.

"Your collaborator is here to collaborate with you, Kelly." Witt arched his brows, his eyes gleaming speculatively.

"So I see." Terrific. Witt had decided to play it semantically cute. Kelly managed a politely bland smile that didn't reach her eyes. "Hello, Brandt." Her heart began to thump, her pulses raced, a thrill of excitement brought a flush to her cheeks. She was as conditioned to the sight of him as Pavlov's dogs were to that infernal bell.

Brandt straightened and his tawny gold eyes locked with hers. "Hello, Kelly." He watched her abruptly pull her gaze from his. She stood before him, stiff and ramrod-straight, a poor imitation of her beautiful smile pasted on her face. Her invisible wall was firmly in place; she was tangibly remote and aloof.

"Susan told me you called last night after I'd gone to bed. I know that you're eager to begin working, and I'm sorry that I was unable to take your call." Her voice was cool and maddeningly polite.

Brandt felt the futility build within him. He'd awakened this morning hoping that they could put yesterday's misunderstanding—or whatever it was—behind them. Kelly was making it clear that it wasn't going to happen. But they still had their collaboration to keep them together. And when he was alone with her, he would do whatever it took to break down those barriers she'd constructed against him.

He cleared his throat. "Yes, I am eager to begin working." He kept his tone carefully impassive. Whatever was going on within her, he didn't want to scare her off. "I've been talking with Witt here, and he sees no

reason why you should remain here in the office to work on your article. We'll leave for my apartment immediately."

It hurt to look at him. Kelly wanted to close her eyes to block out the sight of the man she loved, the man who no longer wanted her, who was totally out of her reach. She listened to his flat, impassive voice, discussing their working together, and her heart turned to stone in her chest. He didn't want to; she could tell from the tone of his voice. Witt had probably suggested that she accompany him to his apartment, thinking it would better accommodate the Pulitzer prize-winning writer. Who also happened to be a close friend of their publisher, Tucker Norwalk. Witt could be incredibly ingratiating if he thought the occasion warranted.

Kelly knew she could never keep up the facade of cool indifference if she was alone with Brandt for any length of time. She needed him, and it was becoming harder and harder to contain that need. In a flash of mental horror, she saw herself desperately seeking his attention, begging him to love her. And she saw him walk away, of course. Kelly shivered. She wasn't about to put either of them through such a dreadful scene.

"I've decided not to do my article on adoption, Brandt," she heard herself say through a haze of pain. Her voice was as flat and impassive as his had been. "The experience in Avida isn't the aspect I'd planned on writing about, anyway, so I'll just turn all my notes over to you to make use of as you please. "

"Kelly, you don't mean that!" Brandt's voice rose on a note of panic. She was slipping farther and farther away from him: at this rate, it wouldn't be long before she was irretrievably out of his reach.

"Yes, I do." Her lips twisted into something she hoped was akin to a smile. "You see, I've thought about what you told me the first night we met. Your book will draw international attention; it'll get the big

sales. The entire Avidan story belongs in your book, where it will have the greatest impact. You can follow it with a postscript on whatever happens to Carista and Para de Leon. And I hope you win another Pulitzer." She smiled, a genuine smile, for she meant what she was saying. "I really do."

Witt beamed. "Kelly, that's extraordinarily generous of you."

And a wise political move. Kelly could almost read her editor's thoughts. He believed that Kelly was putting the personal friend of their publisher in her debt. In the magazine's debt.

"But you wanted to write about adoption!" protested Brandt. His eyes darted from Kelly to the editor, who was smiling in approval. "And what about your travel expenses to Avida? The magazine paid in full. Don't they even get an article out of it?" That wasn't fair, he knew. Particularly since she'd given away every dime of the expense money and couldn't account for it. But he'd pay back the magazine, if they insisted. Right now he was fighting for Kelly, and he would use whatever means he had to.

"I could write an article on Father Ramon's ministry to the slums," Kelly suggested to Witt, knowing full well that he'd hate the idea, maybe even enough to write off her travel expenses to spare himself the article.

He did. "Do it as a free-lance piece for *Reader's Digest*, Kelly. Let's come up with something more on target for *In the Know*. You know, less—uh— heartwarming. And don't worry about the trip to Avida. There's enough in the budget to absorb an occasional story that doesn't get written."

Kelly nodded. "How about something like 'Is There Life After Cajun Cooking?' "

"Wonderful!" seconded Witt. "But we'd better move fast before Cajun cooking becomes passe."

"I'll get to it right now," Kelly promised. She turned to Brandt, looking in his direction without focusing on him. "I'll give my notes to Janie to give to you. Best of luck on your book, Brandt. I'll be looking for it on the best-seller list."

She was proud of herself. She hadn't broken down, hadn't disgraced herself and embarrassed Brandt. She'd kept her promise to herself and given him no cause to regret saying "I love you."

Kelly left the office, knowing she'd seen the last of Brandt Madison. And yet, even as she was congratulating herself on her self-containment, that hopeless romantic who dwelled within her was dying a little bit more. If only he'd stopped her, taken her into his arms and—and—

She gave her head a small shake and walked back to her desk to get her notes for Janie.

Brandt watched her leave and had to fight an almost overpowering urge to stop her, to grab her into his arms and drag her away from here, to take her to a place where there were no distractions. To make her admit her need for him.

But Witt was talking, and Janie came into the office with Kelly's notepad, and Brandt left the building alone.

* * *

He arrived at Kelly's apartment at seven that evening with a large bouquet of daisies. Susan was charmed and quickly found a vase. Kelly wasn't home. Brandt didn't even bother to conceal his disappointment and his frustration.

"When will she be back? I have some important news for her regarding Carista and Para de Leon and the Friends of Children Home in Avida."

Susan eyed him thoughtfully. "And that's the reason you came over here tonight? To give her the news?"

"I didn't think she'd talk to me over the phone if I called. I thought she'd get you to say she was in bed or something," Brandt said bluntly.

"Like last night," Susan affirmed. She raised her brows. "But am I wrong in thinking that it isn't business you want to discuss? A man doesn't bring a woman daisies in January if it's strictly a business call.

Brandt was growing impatient with all the questioning. "Where's Kelly?"

"Why daisies?" Susan countered with another question of her own. "I mean, they're whimsical and sweet and all, but from the looks of this situation, you need to bring in the heavy guns. At least a couple dozen long-stemmed red roses. What happened between you two in Avida, anyway?"

"Didn't Kelly tell you?"

"No. And she won't. Kelly and I are good friends, but I'm not her confidante. No one is, except maybe Butter." As if on cue, the big yellow cat sauntered into the room, meowed his greeting, and jumped up onto a chair to stare at them. Susan smiled slightly. "And he's as enigmatic as she is."

"I don't know what went wrong." Brandt began to pace the floor. "I know things happened quickly between us, but I was sure of my feelings and I thought Kelly was too. Then she shut me out so firmly

and so completely—" He flopped down onto the sofa. "God, listen to me. Why am I telling *you* all this? I should be talking with Kelly. Where is she?"

"She went to visit Cindy, her Little Sister. She had some presents for her."

"Oh, yes. The doll from Avida." Brandt frowned. The one she'd asked Charles to lend her the money for, instead of asking him. That still rankled. He would've gladly bought the child a dozen dolls if only Kelly had asked.

"The doll and the nightgown and the books and slacks and sweater. She went shopping this afternoon. Kelly spends a mint on that kid." Susan sighed. "And now she's taken on a family to support in Avida, of all places. I guess she'll be back to typing and ghosting papers for university students, along with any other odd job she can scrounge up for extra cash."

"She's going to send money to the family in Avida?" Brandt thought of the nine hundred dollars she'd already given away. It hadn't been merely a rash gesture of largess; she intended to continue her aid.

"Kelly is very generous. She wants to give and she wants to be needed." Susan shrugged. "And she's the only person I've ever met who expects absolutely nothing in return. I don't really understand her, but I admire her very much."

Brandt straightened. *Expects absolutely nothing in return.* Those words struck a chord in him. Kelly could give but not take. Why not? A vivid picture of her, crying in his arms that morning in Avida, flashed in his memory. What had she said? *It hurts so much to finally. . . know that you're all alone, that no one wants you. That no one ever will.*

Kelly wanted to give love, she needed to give love. And she did. But she expected nothing in return. Because she'd never shaken the belief that she was unwanted and unloved? And that she deserved to be both?

Dumped! In a rainy alley one night like a— a bag of garbage. She believed that her mother had abandoned her as a baby. Such a crushing rejection had left scars deeper than he had comprehended. He'd made love to her and told her he loved her, thinking she would understand the depth of his feelings. Obviously she didn't. It would take time and patience. Steady reassurance. And a continued, demonstrative love.

Brandt stood up, suddenly buoyed by the challenge. Michele had placed tremendous demands upon his time and patience and love. And he had loved her all the more for it. He was a man who needed to be needed. He was at loose ends when he wasn't. He'd been delighted to give Corinne and Debbie and Todd a home for a year; had enjoyed all the demands family life had placed upon him. Had some perceptive instinct in him divined how much Kelly needed his love, drawing him inevitably, irrevocably to her?

"Thanks, Susan." He smiled at her, his spirits soaring. "You've helped a lot. And you're invited to the wedding on Friday."

Susan stared at him. "Uh, don't you think you're being somewhat overly optimistic? Kelly won't even talk to you, but you're planning to marry her in four days?"

"I'd marry her tomorrow, but there's the blood test and the license and waiting period, so that takes us to Friday," he explained, grinning at her incredulous expression. "But maybe you'd better not mention the wedding to Kelly just yet. There are a few things we have to get settled first."

"I should say so," agreed Susan dryly. "Don't worry, Kelly won't hear about her wedding from me."

Susan believed he was a tad crazy, Brandt thought with a grin. And he was. Crazy about one Kelly Malloy. He was still smiling as the heavy front door of the building was swung open, just as he reached for it. His grin faded as Kelly stood before him.

Kelly drew back. "Hello, Brandt." She pasted a smile on her face even as she noted that his own smile had abruptly vanished at the sight of her. "Did you run into any difficulty translating my notes?"

Her aura of bland politeness was as impossible to penetrate as her remote coldness, Brandt acknowledged grimly. Did she *really* think he'd come here to discuss the project? "No, they're quite clear and concise. I—uh—have some news of Carista and Para de Leon."

"Oh?" He looked wonderful, strong and big and male. Kelly devoured him with her eyes. He had made love to her, told her he loved her. Never again, however. Her heart contracted. Now, of course, he was here to share the final news of their collaboration.

"Both of them have been arrested and charged with child selling, child buying, extortion, bribery, and a host of lesser charges. Carista is facing deportation to Avida."

She looked cold and tired. He'd never seen her eyes so large, so green. And she was tense and guarded. He could practically feel the force of her fierce control. Why wouldn't she let him near her? He was her first lover. She'd given herself to him, and he'd taken everything she had to give—her virginity, her passion, her soft, sweet cries as she climaxed beneath him. . . . Why were they carrying on this superficial dialogue about two criminals instead of saying what really mattered?

"Good!" Kelly said succinctly. "What about the Friends of Children Home?" She was aching inside. If only he had come to see her instead of to discuss the disgusting Carista and the equally loathsome Para de Leon.

"An international relief agency will take it over and handle adoptions legally and aboveboard." His eyes fixed upon her mouth. What would she do if he snatched her into his arms and crushed her soft, sweet mouth under his? Would she respond? Or withdraw even further?

"I'm delighted. The children there deserve so much better than to be bought and sold by a pair of greedy profiteers." Her heart was slamming against her ribs. He was staring at her, staring in such a way that made her think, made her hope—

"Butter, come back in here this minute!" Susan's voice sounded from the floor above.

Butter appeared on the landing. Susan joined him a split second later. "Oh, Kelly, you're home! I accidentally left the door ajar, and the damn cat escaped. He must've heard your voice."

Kelly immediately headed up the stairs and picked up the cat.

"You saw Brandt, then? He brought you a lovely bouquet of daisies!" enthused Susan.

"Daisies? How very nice," Kelly replied in a faultlessly polite tone. She turned to call down to Brandt. "Thank you very much, Brandt."

Brandt suppressed a groan. Susan had been absolutely right. Red roses would've said it better. To Kelly's unique way of thinking, daisies were probably exactly what one collaborator sent another. He'd rejected roses as too cliched, too obvious. Now he knew that

Kelly needed exactly that. Forget subtlety, forget whimsy. He was bringing in the artillery. . . .

Kelly ripped the page from the typewriter, crumpled it into a ball and tossed it into the trash. What was the matter with her? She'd done an article on Indonesian cooking when it was the current rage; she'd done another on mesquite grilling when it was the newer current rage. So why was she finding it impossible to come up with an entertaining piece on Cajun cooking, the newest current rage?

But how could she write about blackened redfish when her fingers were itching to type the story of Carmelita and baby Luis and the street urchins of Monsambra? Witt wouldn't care for such an article, she knew. It wasn't trendy enough. He would go for an adoption story with an upwardly mobile angle, but he would claim that *In the Know's* readers weren't interested in people mired in permanent poverty.

How had Brandt described the magazine? Relentlessly trendy? Kelly sighed and determinedly reached for another sheet of typing paper, rebuking herself for her disloyal thoughts. What was the matter with her? She loved the magazine; she wasn't dissatisfied with it. She was well aware that when writing commercially, one couldn't always choose the topic. But there were usually enough compensations to make it satisfying.

Damn Brandt Madison for criticizing *In the Know* in the first place! Kelly tried to work up a righteous anger. And failed. Instead she found herself thinking of the magazine's monthly "What's Hot and What's Not" column. An Avidan widow living in a hovel with a group of ragged, hungry children wasn't hot and never would be.

"Kelly," Janie sang out, materializing in front of Kelly's desk. "Witt says to tell you that someone is waiting to see you in his office."

Kelly's heart leaped into her throat. Yesterday it had been Brandt. Was he back today? "Thanks, Janie." She wished she were wearing something a little more exciting than her gray pleated skirt and gray and white blouse. And that she'd bothered with eye makeup.

Kelly caught herself as she frantically rummaged through her purse for her compact. What was she doing? Brandt didn't care about her clothes and lack of makeup. This was a business call, like yesterday. No doubt there had been another development regarding Carista or Para de Leon.

With grim determination she managed to compose herself and walk into the editor's office. Brandt wasn't there. So great was her disappointment that for a moment she was scarcely aware of the tall silver-haired man who stood talking to Witt.

"Kelly!" Witt rushed forward to greet her. He was nervous, she noted, wondering why. "I'd like to introduce you to our publisher, Tucker Norwalk. He's come down here especially to meet with you."

Tucker Norwalk? Kelly caught her jaw just before it dropped open. No wonder Witt was nervous! She stared at the famous—some would say infamous—publisher. His exquisitely tailored three-piece dark blue suit looked expensive, even to her untutored eye. Unfortunately he had teamed it with a bright pink shirt whose color matched the flamingos printed on his tie.

"So you're Kelly Malloy?" The publisher scrutinized her thoroughly, a wide grin splitting his face. He extended his hand to her, and she took it in a firm shake. "You don't mind if I call you Kelly, I hope? I like to think that everyone associated with Norwalk Publishing is one big family."

Kelly winced. Both at the cliché and at the thought that she was in any way connected with the wretched *National Cesspool* and its other

Norwalk clones. But she managed a smile. "I'm pleased to meet you, Mr. Norwalk." She realized she was staring and tried to tear her eyes away from the mesmerizing flock of pink flamingos standing one-legged on his tie.

"I understand you were in Avida with my godson, Brandt Madison," Norwalk boomed, and Kelly started. He spoke again before she could form a reply. "I love the idea, the story, the whole gimmick. Pretending Jo be married to expose an adoption racket! Great human-interest stuff. Just the kind of story our *Informant* readers love."

Kelly cast a frantic glance at Witt, who was deliberately avoiding her eyes. "I want to feature the story, Kelly. Front page headlines," Norwalk continued eagerly. "Of course, I'd like a more satisfying ending. Something on the order of you and Brandt actually adopting a baby together. Our readers would eat that up!"

Kelly was aghast. Herself in the *Cesspool*? She must be having a nightmare. Perhaps if she remained calm, she would wake up. "Mr. Norwalk, I really don't think—"

"Kelly is one of our finest writers here at the magazine," Witt interrupted, shooting her a warning glance. "Perhaps she could—"

"On the other hand, why don't we just write the ending that we want?" Norwalk suggested gleefully. "Why bother with facts? We never have before! Yes, that's how we'll do it. Kelly and Brandt adopt a child from the orphanage together and return to Chicago, where they all live happily ever after. Our readers love a traditional happy ending in these kinds of stories," he added confidently.

"Mr. Norwalk!" Kelly gasped. She wasn't waking up. Hundreds of pink flamingos were dancing in front of her eyes as Norwalk paced back and forth in front of her. "I absolutely cannot—"

"Do you have any pictures of yourself, honey?" Norwalk interrupted. "Sexy ones. You in a bikini or some flimsy lingerie, something along those lines. We want to titillate our readers' imaginations as to what went on in that hotel room between you and Brandt during those steamy Avidan nights."

"Oh!" Kelly had moved beyond appalled to incensed. The man was everything she'd always imagined the *Cesspool's* publisher to be! And she would not be fodder for his—his trash mill! "Mr. Norwalk, I—"

"Kelly, I'd like to speak to you privately for a moment, please." Witt caught her by the shoulders and hauled her out of his office before she could tell Tucker Norwalk exactly what he could do with his atrocious rag that tried to masquerade as a newspaper. "Kelly, I can guess what you're thinking, but for God's sake, don't say it to Norwalk! You'll give him no choice but to fire you."

"Witt, I will not be splashed all over the pages of the *Cesspool*, side by side with stories like 'Zookeeper Goes Ape and Falls in Love with Gorilla!' "

"You may not have to be, Kel," Witt soothed. "Norwalk did say that the article would be published only pending Brandt Madison's approval. All you have to do is to get Madison to kill the story. And it seems to me that he owes you, Kelly. You did give him rights on all your Avida info, remember?"

Kelly was shaking. With rage, with indignation— and with the prospect of confronting Brandt Madison with Tucker Norwalk's unspeakable plan.

The office door opened, and Tucker Norwalk stepped out. "I have to leave now," the publisher announced jovially. "I'm due at the airport within the hour. Kelly, send those photos of yourself over to the

Informant's office as soon as possible." He took her hand and pumped it, then grabbed Witt's and did the same. "Keep up the good work, you two! *In the Know* is pure class all the way."

Kelly clenched her fists. "Mr. Norwalk—"

"Thank you, sir," Witt cut in. "We'll certainly work to keep *In the Know* the trendiest, classiest timeless- yet-today magazine on the stands. Won't we, Kel?" But before Kelly could answer, he shoved her back into his office. Tucker Norwalk disappeared down the corridor^,

"Witt. . ." Kelly began, but he held up his hand in a silencing motion.

"Kelly, I don't blame you for not wanting to appear in the *Cess*—uh—the *Informant*. Look, Norwalk left Madison's address." Witt handed her a sheet of paper with an address scribbled on it. "Why don't you head on over there now and straighten the whole thing out?"

"Thanks, Witt." Kelly snatched the piece of paper. "I'll be back shortly. It shouldn't take long to convince Brandt Madison that Norwalk's brand of trash fiction could actually harm his book's credibility."

"So that's the approach you're going to use on him, hmm?" Witt speculated. "You're going to keep the sex angle out of it?"

Sex angle? Kelly shot the older man a withering glance. "I think you've spent too much time in Norwalk's company, Witt." She pulled open the door. "I'll see you later."

The editor watched her sweep from the office with a glint in his eye.
"Much later, Kelly," he said with a chuckle.

Eleven

"That was Tucker, calling from his limo," Brandt said to his sister, Corinne. "He just saw Kelly leave her office building and hail a taxi."

"Then she should be here within half an hour." Corinne glanced at her watch. "If the kids and I stay away from the apartment till ten tonight, will that give you enough time to work things out with Kelly?"

"That's a little over ten and a half hours from now. " Brandt smiled grimly. "I intend to have things worked out with Kelly within fifteen minutes of her setting foot in here. "

"But just in case it takes you longer than fifteen minutes to convince the girl that she's madly in love with you, the kids and I will stay gone till ten tonight."

"Thanks, Corinne. Of course, you and Todd and Debbie are invited to our wedding on Friday."

"Friday, hmm? You always did have the most extraordinary confidence." Corinne patted his cheek. "Brandt, if having Kelly will make you happy, then I wish you all the luck in the world with her."

"She'll make me happy," Brandt affirmed. "And I'll make her happy. I have no doubts on either score."

He had no doubts, but he was nervous, Brandt conceded to himself. After Corinne had gone, he paced through the empty apartment, waiting for Kelly to arrive at his door. She had to come. Sending Tucker to her office with the outlandish proposal to put them in the *Cesspool*—the *Informant*, he quickly corrected himself—was his own equivalent of dropping a bomb in this private little war of theirs. She *had* to respond. He didn't let himself think about what he would do if she didn't.

Precisely thirty-one minutes after leaving the office, Kelly arrived at Brandt Madison's apartment door. She'd spent the entire taxi ride vacillating between ways to convince Brandt to veto Norwalk's story idea. Should she be threatening? Cajoling? Calmly reasonable? Each approach had its pros and cons.

Brandt opened the door on her first knock. For a moment they simply stared at each other in silence. Kelly felt the blood roaring in her ears as her jade eyes drank in the sight of him. He was wearing khaki chinos and a beige-gold sweater that seemed to heighten the dark gold color of his eyes. Her mouth was suddenly dry, her palms moist.

"Come in, Kelly," he invited, stepping aside to let her pass.

He wasn't at all surprised to see her, she noted nervously, taking in the spacious, well-appointed living room in one sweeping glance. She heard the door close firmly behind her. And heard the lock click.

Whirling around to face him, she found him casually leaning against the locked door, his golden brown eyes surveying her lazily. Suddenly she felt a lot like a hapless mouse who had foolishly wandered into a lion's den.

Her mind went blank. "May I take your coat?" Brandt asked politely, but she clutched it around her. "No. What I came here to say won't take long." She took a deep breath. "I—I'll sue for defamation of character if my name appears in Norwalk's slimy scandal sheet." Threatening. "Brandt, you're a respected, acclaimed writer. You don't need trashy advance publicity for any of your books." Cajoling. "Carista's operations violated international law and ought to be reported by legitimate sources rather than a quasi- newspaper." Calmly reasonable. There, she'd used all three approaches. Kelly permitted herself to steal a glance at Brandt to gauge his reaction.

He was walking toward her, a gleam of unholy amusement in his tawny gold eyes. "It's quite warm in here. You really must take off your coat," he said smoothly, ignoring her resistance as he swiftly undid the buttons.

"No!" Kelly swallowed and gripped the lapels. "I—I didn't come here to—"

"To undress?" He slipped the coat from her shoulders.

"To socialize," she corrected quickly, blushing at the innuendo. Her fingers were trembling, and Brandt had no trouble removing her coat from her.

He tossed it on a chair and immediately went to work on the buttons of her blouse. She tried to jerk away, but he'd already anchored her in position with one strong arm. He deftly removed her blouse and dropped it to the floor.

"Brandt," she whispered, her mind whirling in a maelstrom of confusion. He was so close to her that she could feel the heat of his body, the strength of his hard masculine frame. The sexual tension emanating from him was making her weak. It was difficult to breathe normally; her breaths came in short, shallow pants.

"I—I didn't come here to—to—" She lost the thought as his hand closed over her breast. Through the light, lacy material of her pale pink slip and matching bra, she could feel her tingling nipples harden as his fingers sought them.

"No, you probably didn't." His tone was amused and affectionate, and he hauled her closer to sensuously nibble on her neck. "You probably came here sincerely believing that Tucker was planning to splash us all over the pages of *The National Informant*. I'm sure you were

absolutely convinced that the sole purpose of your visit was to make me stop him."

Kelly was dimly aware that her skirt had drifted to the floor and was lying in a gray pool at her feet. "I—I don't understand."

"You were set up, sweetheart. I asked Tucker to make up that tale about doing an article on us because I was getting desperate." His mouth hovered over hers, teasing her lips with alternate nips with his teeth and soothing caresses with his tongue. "Of course, I didn't mention your aversion to his paper. I simply said that you were an intensely private person who would naturally shun any kind of publicity. Tucker was delighted to help me. Did I tell you that he was my father's oldest and closest friend? That when Dad was disabled in an accident and was considered unemployable. Uncle Tuck gave him a job?"

"Uncle Tuck?" Kelly repeated dryly.

"My godfather. Corinne's too. He's had an almost proprietary interest in us all our lives."

"You didn't mention that. I can see why you were so hesitant to say no to him when he asked you to collaborate with me."

"Mmm. And it was the biggest favor Uncle Tuck has ever done for me."

He paused to kiss her lingeringly, a kiss that left her trembling and clinging to him. Brandt smiled. "This is where you belong, Kelly. With me, in my arms. And I knew if there were one surefire weapon to blast through those self-protective barriers of yours and send you running to me, it was the prospect of yourself starring in an *Informant* article." He gave a husky laugh. "With pictures yet!"

What he was saying was too wonderful to contemplate, and Kelly didn't dare let herself assume the obvious. "There— isn't going to be an article?" was the only conclusion she permitted herself to draw.

Brandt gave an exasperated mock groan. "I can see I'm going to have to do all the interpreting here. No, Kelly, there isn't going to be an article." He drew back and gazed into her wide, uncertain eyes. "Kelly. I love you. I told you so in Avida. but you obviously didn't take me seriously. And I am serious about loving you. Kelly. I'm going to spend my life proving it to you."

A small, gasping sound escaped from Kelly's throat. She could hardly take it all in. "I can't believe you really love me" was all she could manage to squeak.

"Believe it, Kelly. I love you and I want to marry you—as soon as possible. And that means no later than the end of the week." He bent his head and kissed her. Kelly was so stunned that her eyes didn't close, not even when the kiss deepened and became heated and passionate. Seeing him somehow reaffirmed the reality of it all.

He lifted his mouth from hers, still holding her tightly against him. "What went wrong in Avida, Kelly?" he asked quietly. "I know you stopped believing that I loved you. Why?"

"I—I didn't stop believing that you loved me," Kelly confessed softly. "I never believed that you did in the first place. I thought you were saying the words to be . . . kind."

"A man doesn't tell a woman he loves her to be kind, Kelly," Brandt said wryly.

"But we were in bed. And in the heat of the moment . . ." Kelly shrugged. "Later, when you got so angry with me, I was sure you

were feeling trapped. I knew you wanted to leave me." She looked down. "I understood." Her voice held no recrimination or bitterness.

"So you decided to make things easy for me by removing yourself, physically and emotionally." It made him sad that she didn't think she had the right to be upset or angry at his supposed defection. "Kelly, I wasn't feeling trapped. I didn't want to leave you, and I sure as hell didn't want you to leave me. Darling, I need you—and not only in bed. It goes much deeper than that. I want you with me all the time. I want to share my life with you, to laugh with you, to be with you when you're feeling unhappy or afraid or angry. And I need you to need me in the same way."

She gazed at him raptly, listening to all the words he should have said in Avida, but hadn't because he thought she'd taken them as understood. A smile crossed his face. He knew in that moment that the prospect of their future happiness was excellent because he was beginning to truly understand the way she thought. All those years of studying and writing from a psychological perspective, from climbing inside his subjects' minds, had enabled him to see into hers. Or perhaps he intuitively understood her because he loved her. Whatever, there would be no more disastrous misapprehensions on her part and no more false assumptions on his. He would see to that.

Kelly saw him smile and managed a tentative, tremulous smile of her own. "You—you really need me?"

"I need you more than anyone or anything. Tell me that you won't leave me, that you won't make yourself inaccessible to me ever again."

Her arms crept slowly around his neck. "I love you, Brandt. I'll never leave you. Not if you need me."

"I do. I always will."

"Oh, Brandt," she breathed his name as her hands pressed on the back of his head to bring it down to her lips. And then he was kissing her the way she yearned to be kissed, hot and hard, his tongue deep in her mouth, his hands evoking her body's hungry responses.

"I love you, Kelly," Brandt told her, his voice deep and passionate. "We aren't in bed, and though I'm very much caught up in the heat of the moment, I want you to know that I'm fully aware of what I'm saying. And I expect you to believe me this time. And to hold me to it."

Her silky pink slip joined her skirt and blouse on the floor. "Brandt," her voice caught as his big, warm hands slid inside her panties to cup the rounded softness of her bottom. "Furthermore, I expect you to make demands on me," he continued in gruffly husky tones. "To need me. You belong to me, Kelly. You're mine and I'm not going to let you go."

His blatant possessiveness thrilled her. She'd never belonged to anyone. The words *You're mine* were as sweet as *I love you*. Slipping her hands underneath his sweater, she dared to say them herself. "I love you, Brandt." Her breath caught in her throat. "And—and you're mine."

"You're damn right I am." Brandt scooped her up in his arms and carried her into his bedroom, where he lay her gently down on his wide, king-size bed. "And I don't want you to ever forget it."

He lay down beside her and his mouth closed hungrily over hers. Kelly moaned, and her lips parted instantly to allow his tongue to slip inside her mouth. Her hands tightened on his shoulders and she felt his hard, warm weight upon her. It was almost like a dream, being here with him, feeling loved and wanted, knowing that he belonged to her as fully and completely as she was his.

The kiss deepened and his tongue probed hotly, seeking a fuller, deeper penetration. His fingers found her taut nipples straining against the thin material of her bra. He rubbed them with his thumbs,* driving her to the point of aching madness before finally removing her bra and soothing the hot, pink buds with his mouth.

Kelly trembled at the force of her own need. No, this was no dream. Their passion was very real, very physical, and as binding as the love they had pledged to one another.

It took him only seconds to pull off his clothes and to divest her of her pale pink panties, then he was coming down beside her, and she could not stop herself from moaning and writhing with fevered sensual anticipation.

There was a wildness in both of them. She reached for him, aching and empty, demanding to be filled by his driving masculine heat. He thrust deeply into the moist softness of her, moving with masterful strokes, staking his own claim upon her while she held him tight in primal feminine possession.

The firestorm between them burned higher and brighter, consuming them in its intensity, showering them with rainbow sparks of pleasure. And then waves of white-hot ecstasy crashed over them, carrying them through the tumultuous storm on a tide of unbearably sweet fulfillment. . .

They lay together for a long time, united both physically and emotionally, savoring their completeness as they kissed and caressed and talked softly.

"Our wedding is on Friday," Brandt informed her, punctuating each word with a kiss. "I've already invited Susan and Corinne and the kids."

"Nice of you to mention it to me." Kelly teased, stroking his neck with her fingertips.

"Mmm. I thought you'd need a few days notice to shop for a dress and arrange to take some time off for our honeymoon."

"Where are we going on our honeymoon?"

"Someplace warm, someplace far from Chicago and winter. Not Avida."

Kelly chuckled. "I wouldn't mind going back there. As long as we didn't have to visit Para de Leon and Carista in their respective prison cells."

"Someday we will go back to Avida, Kelly. To visit Carmelita and the children. And perhaps to adopt a child from the *legal* Friends of Children Home."

She stared at him. "Do you mean it?"

"One of these days you're going to learn that I mean exactly what I say." He pulled her on top of him and hugged her fiercely. "I want to help you support Carmelita and the children. I'll even arrange for us to sponsor her and her family into the U.S. if you want. And I'm quite serious about us adopting children."

Kelly's eyes filled with tears of joy. "Brandt, you— don't know what that means to me. I want to have your baby, but I've always wanted to give a homeless child a family too."

He visualized the lonely little girl that she had been, longing desperately for a family of her own. "We'll have natural and adopted children. We both like kids. And I think we both have what it takes to be good parents to a big family."

"Oh, Brandt, this is the happiest day of my life. I don't know what I've done to deserve such happiness. It's—it's like a miracle."

"It's no miracle, Kelly. You deserve happiness because you give happiness. Honey, I've thought a lot about what you told me, about your being found in that alley by the policeman. " He felt her tense, and his hands immediately began to caress her with slow, soothing strokes. "No one knows why or how you happened to be in that alley that night. Have you ever considered that it wasn't your mother who left you there?"

Her eyes widened. "N-no. I never have. I always assumed, and so did everyone else that—that it had to be my mother who left me there."

"Isn't it possible that the person who ditched you in that alley had stolen you from your mother? What if you'd been kidnapped from some faraway state and brought to Chicago by the kidnapper? It could have been a stranger, it could have been a family member bent on revenge upon your mother. There was no national media focus on missing children back then. Years ago a foundling child in Chicago wouldn't be news all over the country. Had you been stolen today, your picture might have shown up on a milk carton or a television program dealing with missing children. There are organizations that use computers to track children who disappear." He frowned thoughtfully. "That's now. But it was quite different when you were two years old."

"Oh, Brandt, do you think it's possible?" Kelly was riveted by the notion. What if she hadn't been abandoned by the mother who should have loved her? Suppose that very woman had been as much a victim as she, had lived for years suffering from the very same loss and loneliness?

"Kelly, chances are we'll never know what happened. But despite your terrible childhood trauma, you've matured into a strong, warm

and successful woman. As a child, you were deprived emotionally, but you grew into a loving and giving adult. No one would have expected you to be anything but an emotionally crippled product of your environment, but you rose above it. How?"

"I—I don't know, " Kelly whispered.

"Maybe because you had two years with a mother who taught you to love and trust, a mother who loved you so much that you were able to function successfully, even after you were taken from her. That's quite a tribute to you both, Kelly."

It was an entirely different view of her life. Brandt had rewritten her past as thoroughly as revisionist historians alter previous historical perceptions and events. And suddenly the past didn't seem to matter as much, didn't weigh on her heart with the familiar leaden darkness.

Whatever had happened, it was over—and she had overcome it. And now she loved a man who loved her enough to give her mother back to her in a way she had never dreamed possible. A man who would make her a mother while becoming a father to the family she'd always dreamed of having.

"I love you, Brandt," she said fervently. Saying the words were as wonderful, as healing, as hearing them. "For always."

"And I love you, my darling." He leaned down to kiss her passionately.

And then the phone rang. Groaning in unison, they reluctantly broke apart. "If this is Corinne, phoning in for an update ..." Brandt muttered, reaching for the receiver, but leaving his threat unsaid.

"Hello?" he barked into the phone. "Tucker?" His tone altered considerably. And then he laughed. "The wedding is on Friday. Of

course, you're invited. Thanks for your help, Uncle Tuck. You were just the—uh—catalyst needed." Another chuckle. "No, I don't think so, Tucker. No, sir, definitely not!"

"Definitely not what?" Kelly asked, after Brandt had said good-bye and hung up.

There was a devilish gleam in Brandt's tawny gold eyes. "Uncle Tuck wanted to feature our—uh—love story as a human interest article in *The National Informant*. He thinks it's a natural, and he's particularly pleased with his own role in bringing us together. He played matchmaker twice, he claims, in the initial idea for our collaboration and then again today. He offered to have an *Informant* reporter and photographer at our wedding. You heard me decline."

"Wise decision. Our wedding will be too tame for the *Cesspool* anyway. We're far too ordinary. How could we ever compete with the likes of 'Space Alien Weds Egyptian Mummy'?"

Brandt* gave a shout of laughter. "You've got to be kidding!"

"I'm not! I read it while standing in the checkout line at the supermarket. The ceremony took place in a U.F.O. over the Mediterranean. The bride wore white."

"Which is what you'll be wearing at our wedding." "Which won't be held in a U.F.O. " Laughing, kissing, holding each other, they began to plan their life together.