

K I M A N I R O M A N C E



ESSENCE BESTSELLING AUTHOR
GWYNNE FORSTER

DRIVE_{ME}
Wild

**Lightning flashed, and the roar
of thunder sounded as if
the earth would crack.**

Justin grabbed Gina's hand as sheets of rain drenched them. He pulled her to an abandoned storefront, wrapped her in his arms and turned his back to shield her from the pelting rain.

He held her closer, and she let him, pulling down his fences, laying wide his vulnerability. The rain pummeled his back, and he tucked her head beneath his chin, stroking her hair and her back as he did so. "Look, I... Something's happening here, and I—"

She snuggled closer to him, and her arms went up to his shoulders.

"Gina, do you know what you're doing to me?"

Her lips glistened, and her breathing shortened as she stared into his eyes with the hottest expression of female want that he'd ever witnessed. He would regret it, but he was human, and he wanted her worse than he wanted air to breathe....

Books by Gwynne Forster

Kimani Romance

Her Secret Life

One Night with You

Forbidden Temptation

Drive Me Wild

GWYNNE FORSTER

is a national bestselling author of twenty-three romance novels and novellas. She has also written four novels and a novella of general fiction. She has worked as a journalist, a university professor and as a senior officer for the United Nations. She holds bachelor's and master's degrees in sociology, and a master's degree in economics/demography.

Gwynne sings in her church choir, loves to entertain at dinner parties, is a gourmet cook and an avid gardener. She enjoys jazz, opera, classical music and the blues. She also likes to visit museums and art galleries. She lives in New York with her husband.

GWYNNE FORSTER

DRIVE_{ME}
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Dear Reader,

Your continued support has made my novels for Kimani Romance outstanding successes. In the change from BET Books to Harlequin's Kimani Press, I had wondered if you would find my titles. I, along with my fellow Kimani writers, am rejoicing that you have embraced this new line.

I hope you have enjoyed Gina and Justin's story. After reading several newspaper reports of individuals whose lives were adversely affected by the acquisition of sudden great wealth (including one who inherited \$342 million and who, two years later, was heavily in debt and without family and friends), I decided to explore the experience in this novel to demonstrate that the wise and responsible use of suddenly acquired wealth can bring happiness. I hope you've had a chance to read *Just the Man She Needs*, my latest Kimani Arabesque novel, released in June 2007. John Austin Underwood would light any woman's fire.

Warmest regards,

Gwynne Forster

To Carole A. Kennedy, who never passes up an opportunity to show me true friendship. To my stepson, Peter, who is my solid rock and comfort and never-failing support; and my thanks to Almighty God for my talent and the opportunities to use it.

Chapter 1

Gina Harkness watched the preacher sprinkle what looked to her like gravel over the coffin of her dear friend Heddy Lloyd. “A wonderful, loving and God-fearing woman,” he said. Common words from a minister, but they fit Heddy. At least the first two words did. Gina had no idea how God-fearing Heddy had been, but the old woman had certainly been kind and loving to Gina. The preacher said, “Amen,” and Gina rose slowly, softly said goodbye to her friend and walked slowly toward the door of the funeral home. It didn’t seem proper to stride away as she longed to do. She’d found the solemn, almost dreary, atmosphere inside the parlor depressing. Certainly, Heddy would have detested it.

Halfway to the door, an older man—the only other human present when the preacher said the last words over Heddy’s remains—joined her and walked with her to the

door. "How do you happen to know Heddy?" he asked her. She didn't question his right to ask her, for she knew he found it odd that a young black woman should be the old white woman's only other mourner.

"I met her in the reading room of the public library about six years ago. I discovered that the library was her second home. I saw her whenever I went there. She told me she was a widow and that she had no children. She wanted to be friends, and I liked her, so we saw a lot of each other."

"She had no close friends, mainly because she wanted her friends to be like her, generous, tolerant and liberal. My name is Miles Strags. I was her lawyer."

"Gina Harkness. Glad to meet you, Mr. Strags. For years, I went to the movies, dinner, the theater and concerts with Heddy, saw her two or three times a week, called her just about every day, and visited her daily during her final days in the hospital, but I didn't know she had a lawyer. She didn't talk much about herself except to say jokingly that she'd outlived everybody close to her, that she didn't reminisce and couldn't stand complainers. I loved her deeply."

"I expect a lot of people would have cared deeply for Heddy if she would have let them get to know her," he said.

"I'm glad you came," Gina said as they walked outside. "I was feeling very much alone in there until I saw you."

"I'm executor of Heddy's estate, Miss Harkness." He handed Gina his card. "Would you please come to my office tomorrow morning for the reading of the will?"

"The...the will? She had a will? Uh, okay... Goodbye, Mr. Strags."

"See you tomorrow," he said, and she didn't miss his bemused expression as he walked away.

Estate? What was Heddy doing with an estate, and why would she have a will? The woman had dressed as if she bought all of her clothes from a thrift-store bargain bin.

Gina took a deep breath and headed back to work. It perplexed her that Heddy could have left a will and she began to doubt the veracity of Miles Strags's words. Perhaps he attended funerals in order to trap lone women. As soon as she sat down at her desk at the prestigious Hilliard and Noyes accounting firm, she opened her computer and located his Web site where she found enough information about him to convince her that the man was indeed an attorney.

The following morning at exactly nine-thirty, as agreed, a very curious Gina walked into Miles Strags's office and sat down.

"I see you're punctual," he said. "Good. This won't take long."

Gina looked around for other beneficiaries, and saw none. "Isn't anybody else coming?" she asked him.

"We're all here," he told her in an officious manner that her boss sometimes adopted and which she hated. He read:

"To Gina Harkness, my best and only friend, I leave all my worldly goods, including the building in which I lived, stocks, bonds, bank accounts, the furnishings of my apartment, jewelry and whatever I own that I've forgotten to mention here."

When Gina gasped, he said, "There's more." He read on:

"If Gina accepts this bequest, for the first three years, she must live in the building that I owned and which

she inherits, though not necessarily in my apartment, and she must have a car and chauffeur, participate in uplifting social functions and devote herself to the service of others. I am sure that Gina will find a way to help the neediest, for she is naturally a kind and giving person. Separate and apart from my bequest to Gina Harkness, I bequeath to my attorney, Miles Strags, a life pension from a trust that I have established for him. Heddy Lloyd.

“Well, that’s it,” Miles said. “You’ve just inherited about forty-three million dollars in addition to a building in the eight hundred block of Park Avenue. I don’t know what it’s worth.” He handed her a portfolio and several keys. “I’m here to assist you in any way I can.”

“What happens if I decide not to do those things and forget about all this?”

“Oh, you won’t entertain that idea for long. She wanted you to live as a wealthy woman should,” the lawyer said smugly.

“But why did she want me to live in that building?”

He walked over to the window and looked down on Lexington Avenue. “Heddy wasn’t happy living there after her husband died. While he lived, the tenants shunned her, but they couldn’t move against her because she and her husband owned the building. I guess you know her husband was African American. Made his money in shipping. He invested wisely, mostly in real estate, and died a very rich man. Her family disinherited her, and her neighbors never forgave her for marrying a black man. The codicil to her will specifies that if she outlives you, her wealth goes to support homeless and abused women and children.”

Gina shifted in her chair, feeling that a weight had come to rest on her shoulders. "You haven't told me why she wanted me to live in that building."

When he shrugged, she detected an air of impatience. "They're intolerant, and she wanted to teach them a lesson. They love their apartments, and they won't be able to force you to move." He threw his pen up and caught it, as if he thought the conversation frivolous. "I once asked her why she wanted you to be uncomfortable there, but she never gave me an answer. Doesn't make sense to me, but those are the terms of the will."

Gina stared at him, trying to size him up. "What gives you the idea that I'll be uncomfortable? Not on your life! Which one of these keys is the key to Heddy's apartment?"

"They're all labeled," he said with raised eyebrows. "Remember that you must live as a wealthy woman for the first three years," he added.

Gina remained seated and smiled inwardly when she noticed Miles staring at her swinging leg with what appeared to be a frown. The man didn't like the thought of her with all that money. *Too bad*. She stood, slung her shoulder bag over her shoulder, walked toward the door and then reversed her tracks.

"Why for the first three years only?"

"I suppose she figured that's more than enough time for you to get used to being rich. I suspect that once bitten, the disease will stick with you." His plump fingers caressed his chin, giving the impression that he was deliberating about something. "You know where I am, and I'm here to assist you in whatever way you need me. It's all taken care of."

She walked into her apartment half a block from

Broadway and 125th Street, closed the door, put the chain on it and dropped her body into the nearest chair. It was true. She was now a very wealthy woman. She opened the large manila envelope, looked through its contents and saw among the stock certificates and other papers a letter addressed to her in Heddy's handwriting.

My dear Gina,

By now you are probably in shock. I loved you dearly, for you were the only person to befriend me in the nineteen years after my husband's death. Most people thought me weird, laughable and treated me that way. But not you. Miles is a pompous ass; don't let him upset you. He's white, a man and a lawyer, and that seems to be all he needs from life. And I want you to teach my neighbors that all human beings are equal. You can do that just by being yourself. I lived for ninety-some years, and no matter what happens, I shall die happy.

Love, Heddy

Gina folded the letter and returned it to the envelope whose contents testified to her new status as a rich woman. She rested her elbows on her thighs, cupped her chin with both hands and closed her eyes. It occurred to her to give prayerful thanks, but as she did so, tears rolled down her cheeks. She'd been reasonably happy—well, at least content—earning forty-three thousand dollars a year, saving ten percent of it for her old age and living in a modest apartment. Now, she had a bundle of money and the responsibility that went with it.

What on earth was Gina thinking? She reached for the

telephone and dialed her aunt Elsa. "I hope you're sitting down, Auntie," she said.

"I'm not, so wait till I get a chair." She imagined that her aunt was somewhere near her sewing machine. Elsa Bowen's wizardry as a designer-cum-seamstress had provided Gina and her aunt with a pleasant enough life, even if they hadn't been able to move more than three blocks from the projects in D.C.

Gina told her aunt first about Heddy and Heddy's death. "But that's not really why I called you, Auntie. I just learned that Heddy wasn't poor. She was very rich, and she left everything to me."

"What? Child, you go 'way from here," Elsa said in awe.

"It's true. I just left the lawyer's office, and he turned over everything to me. Auntie, she owned an apartment building on Park Avenue and had a lot of money. You can stop sewing, and you can—"

"Now, you wait a minute, Gina. I know you mean well, but I sew because I love it. Anyhow, I don't know anybody named Heddy."

"Well, Auntie, I hope you'll at least let me buy you a nice house on Sixteenth Street. I can't live on Park Avenue like the will says I have to do if you're living next to the slums. As soon as I get things organized, you can find a house you like and you can keep on sewing."

Elsa's laugh rang out loud and clear over the wires. "God bless you child. You be careful now. If you act the fool, you could be broke in less than a year."

"Don't worry, Auntie. You're the only person I'm telling about this money. I'm just taking care of it for Heddy. 'Bye for now."

* * *

“Well, I’d better get started. I suspect Miles would give anything to deprive me of this blessing,” Gina said to herself. She phoned the *Daily News* and placed ads for a chauffeur, wrote a letter of resignation from her job, mailed it and took a taxi to the building on Park Avenue that, according to Heddy’s will, belonged to Gina Harkness. One look at Heddy’s mammoth three-bedroom apartment, and Gina threw up her hands. She definitely would not live in that cheerless place, even if it did overlook some of the most expensive real estate in the world. She phoned Miles.

“I have no use for most of this stuff. I’ll get somebody to catalog it and put it on e-Bay for sale,” she said.

“You can’t do that, Gina,” he said. “No woman in your position would consider such a thing. She would choose what she wants to keep, and give the rest to a charity. A charitable organization will go there and collect whatever you don’t want.”

“Thanks, Miles. I suppose you’ve counseled a lot of heirs about the disposition of unwanted items. What charity do you suggest?”

The lawyer offered a couple of suggestions and she thanked him, hung up and called Harlem Children’s Zone. With considerable difficulty, she dismissed her suspicion that Miles enjoyed letting her know he thought she was out of her class. Still, she needed Miles. And, until she got a firm footing in her new life, she would call upon him. She didn’t know the value of Heddy’s belongings and couldn’t decide what to keep and what to give away, so she asked Miles to help her.

Immediately, she realized that she could and should have engaged an expert, for Miles delighted in providing her with advice that she didn’t need and that didn’t interest

her in the least. Furthermore, she suspected that his knowledge was less broad than he led her to think.

Even so, she stopped by Miles's office one Tuesday morning at the end of March to show him her lease for the Park Avenue apartment, evidence that she had fulfilled that term of the will.

"So you have chosen an apartment for yourself," Miles said, aware that she had closed Heddy's apartment and had the managing agent list it for rent.

She told him she had and enjoyed letting him know that she had engaged a decorator without any advice or assistance from him. She had begun to suspect that not only her status but her five foot nine inch height, that placed her well above him when she wore three-inch heels irritated Miles. The man was a shade under five-eight. Gina suspected that her height wasn't the only thing that irritated Miles. He probably wished that Heddy had left her money to almost anybody, as long as the person was white.

"What's the proper salary for a chauffeur?" she asked him.

"Hmm. I'd say around forty grand," he said.

Gina had interviewed several men for the job, but none of them suited her. Heck, she didn't even need a car in New York, much less a chauffeur, but she was determined to abide by the terms of the will.

"Haven't you found a chauffeur yet?" Miles asked her one afternoon when she visited his office to get a paper notarized. "You'll soon be moving into that apartment, and you want to make a good impression. You'll need that driver," he said.

"I don't need any such thing." She flung the words at him, angry that he thought she needed the trappings of wealth to meet the expectations of her narrow-minded

neighbors. “Incidentally, I fired my decorator, and I’m going to furnish my apartment according to my own taste, so it’ll be a while before I move in. That decorator’s taste would send me to an asylum.”

His left eyebrow lifted slowly and remained up. “Gina, a woman in your position does not run from store to store looking for furniture and vases.”

“I don’t give a damn,” she said in exasperation. “Maybe women in my position don’t have my level of competence. By the way, I’ve rented office space on Madison Avenue, and the name on the door reads, Heddy Lloyd Foundation For Homeless And Abused Children And Women, Inc.” She handed him a card that identified her as president of the charity.

“Well,” he said through pursed lips, “you don’t seem to need me.”

She refused to dispute him and remained silent.

Gina didn’t enjoy the trip from her apartment on Broadway at 125th Street to her office on Madison Avenue at Thirty-eighth Street. It was either a long bus ride that included a transfer, or she could take the subway plus two buses. “My Lord,” she said to herself one morning as she walked to the subway in a heavy downpour, “I can afford to take a taxi to and from my office. What have I been thinking?”

Before the end of the day, however, the taxi was a moot point. At 5:00 p.m. her destiny walked into her office. One look at the man—tall, smartly dressed and drop-dead handsome—and her heart turned somersaults.

“I’m Justin Whitehead,” he said, offering to shake hands. “You advertised for a chauffeur, and I want the job.”

Gina simply stared at him.

“Mind if I sit?” She nodded toward the chair. “Before you say no, please check my references. I need this job. I’m a good driver, I only drink when I’m off duty, I don’t smoke and I’m punctual. I was raised to be respectful to all human beings and I am loyal.” He leaned forward. “Ms. Harkness, I promise you will not regret hiring me. I’ll always support you in every way that I can. You can depend on me.”

She opened the portfolio, read his letters of reference, put them back into the envelope and looked at him. She had no basis for turning him down, and especially not in view of the other seven applicants she’d interviewed. But why would this gentleman take a job as a chauffeur? She had a feeling that she was about to make her first big mistake as an heiress. He might be a gentleman and a good driver, but he was also a sexual tornado. Considering her limited experience with smooth-talking, knock-out-your-eyeballs men, she didn’t think it wise to hire him.

She started to tell him that he was overqualified for the job, but his hopeful expression stopped her. She knew what it was like to look for a job and have door after door closed to her. He wasn’t the potential problem—she was.

“All right. The job involves irregular hours. The pay is forty-thousand dollars a year and you don’t have to wear a uniform, although I expect you to wear a jacket and tie. Get the picture? Does that suit you?”

His eyes lit up with a brilliant twinkle, and his wide grin exposed a set of perfect, sparkling white teeth. “It’s more than I hoped for. I can’t tell you how grateful I am.”

His happiness touched her charitable heart, and she couldn’t help smiling in return, for nothing pleased her more than to have been able to brighten someone’s day. He raised himself to his full height, which she guessed to be

around six foot four, and walked over to her desk. She wouldn't swear that she didn't shiver at the thought of touching his hand. When he extended it, she hesitated, though only briefly. Gina felt rush a of excitement when he grasped her hand in a strong and reassuring handshake.

Still smiling, he turned to leave, but stopped. "When do you want me to report for work, Ms. Harkness?" She could get used to his deep, mellifluous voice, she thought. When he spoke, it seemed to caress her.

"Monday will be fine," she said, assuming an officious manner.

He frowned. "Monday? That's April Fools' Day. If you don't mind, I'd rather start Tuesday. No point in jinxing my chances for success."

"Tuesday it is," she said.

He smiled again. "Thanks a lot. I'll see you Tuesday morning at seven-thirty."

"Eight-thirty will be fine. See you then," Gina said, and closed the door behind her new driver.

Justin Lyle Whitehead braced his lithe frame against the March wind and headed up Madison Avenue on the short walk to the Yale Club to keep a luncheon date with his editor-in-chief.

"Well, how'd it go?" Mel Scott asked him when they met at the elevator.

"Great. She's a down-to-earth, intelligent woman, and her inheritance won't change that."

Mel bunched his thick shoulders and leaned against the wall of the elevator. "I see she impressed you."

"She did, but mainly with her honesty and her desire to be fair and accommodating."

“Just don’t let your sympathy for her get in the way of your story,” Mel said.

Justin stared down at the little man, his face devoid of even a hint of friendliness. “I’m a reporter. Remember?”

“Sorry man. I didn’t mean to ring your bell. Is she the old lady’s illegitimate child?”

Mel Scott was a good editor, but there were times—like right now—when he’d like to wipe the floor with the man. “Mel, you’re way off. You only have to look at Gina Harkness to know that neither of her parents is white.”

Mel shrugged as they seated themselves in the dining room. Mel loved to dine at the Yale Club, because it made him feel important. Justin perused the menu, certain that his companion would order the most expensive entrée, and he did.

“I’ll have a hamburger on a whole-wheat bun,” Justin told the waiter.

“Man, you can’t order a hamburger in the Yale Club,” Mel said.

Justin leaned back and eyed the other man with amusement. “I can order anything that they serve here,” he said pointedly. “I do not eat a big lunch, and I do not drink midday, because I have to work after I eat.” The hamburger arrived, and he realized he’d forgotten to order French fries.

Mel regarded Justin with slightly narrowed eyes. “If you weren’t such a good journalist, you’d be somewhere eating dirt.” He savored the lobster bisque. “You coulda had this, and it wouldna cost you a cent. As I was saying, your attitude could use some fixing.”

“Probably could, depending on whose company I’m in. What about the six months’ leave? Do I get it or not? I

promise to send you an occasional piece, but this job and this story will take up most of my time.”

“All right. I’ll expect you back full-time October first.”

“Thanks,” Justin said, and handed Mel a statement authorizing his leave of absence. “Would you sign this, please? I’ve learned to have anything important in writing.”

“Yeah. I see you typed it on the paper’s letterhead.” Mel signed and dated the document and handed it back to Justin. “If you let any other reporter on the staff know about this, I’m through with you. Get it?”

Justin folded the paper and put it in his shirt pocket. “Fair enough. I’ll keep in touch.”

Justin said goodbye to Mel Scott and walked to his apartment on West End Avenue. He wondered if Gina Harkness had noticed his upscale address. Would she have hired him for the job if she had? Was she familiar enough with New York neighborhoods?

What a woman! He had expected an older woman and not one so solidly in control of her life. And he certainly had not expected to see a woman who took his breath away. She wasn’t as beautiful as she was perfect. When she smiled and stood to greet him, tremors had streaked through him. He knew he was looking at a warm, loving woman who liked what she saw when she looked at him.

Justin was used to having women take a second and then a third look at him, not that it fazed him one bit. He considered female admiration as much a nuisance as anything.

He flagged a taxi and got in it seconds before a heavy rain shower would have drenched him. When the car reached the building in which he lived, he paid the driver. Although he sprinted to the door, he still got soaked. Upstairs in his apartment, he stripped, hung up his wet

clothing, sat on the side of his bed and phoned a close friend in the Department of Transportation.

"Hi, Jake, this is Justin. I have a difficult assignment, and I need a chauffeur's license today. Can you manage it?"

"Sure thing, man. E-mail me a photo and fax me a copy of your driver's license. It'll be ready in an hour. You'll have to come for it because you have to sign it."

"Thanks, buddy. I owe you one."

"Gotcha."

Gina answered her office phone that Friday morning hoping the caller wasn't Miles. She did not plan to give him a daily accounting of her activities, though she suspected that he would like that. "Hello. This is Gina Harkness. How may I help you?"

"Miss Harkness, this is Justin. Where do I come for you Tuesday morning?"

She gave him her address on Broadway. "It's very temporary, Justin, because I'll be moving in a few days. Actually, I probably don't need you until after I move." She listened to the silence. "Are you still there?"

"Yes, ma'am. I'm here. I was just thinking maybe I could help you move. I want to earn my pay. Besides, you have to get to work, don't you?"

She thought for a moment. Maybe he needed the money. "Justin, I was hoping that you'd be willing to check out suitable cars for me and help me choose the best one for my purposes. We'll have to take some long-distance trips occasionally. I'm not interested in prestige, I want comfort," she said.

"Fortunately, you don't have to choose between comfort

and status in this case, ma'am. The cars with the most prestige usually offer the most comfort. I take it you don't want a limo," he said.

"Nope. Not my style," she said. She wouldn't know how to sit in one of those things, she thought. "Definitely not, but I want a car that was made here. Seems as if we import everything, and if that weren't enough, we ship the rest overseas wholesale."

She thought she heard him clear his throat. "My sentiments, precisely, ma'am. That leaves us with a choice between a Lincoln and a Cadillac."

"Is there a big difference?" she asked him.

"To me, yes, ma'am, but you have to be satisfied. Why don't we meet tomorrow and shop around? We can even test drive a few models."

"Oh, dear. I was going to pack, but—"

"Miss Harkness, excuse me for making a suggestion, but why don't you hire a good moving company and let the movers do the packing."

"Good gracious, I hadn't thought of that. Great idea. Would you say four hours is all we need to shop for a car tomorrow?"

"Absolutely."

"Good. Call a car service and make arrangements for them to pick you up, then get me, and we'll go shopping?"

"Works for... Yes, ma'am. I'll be at your place at ten o'clock tomorrow morning."

She called a moving company, agreed to an estimate and rubbed her hands together, symbolic of freeing herself from the packing chores. "Maybe I'll eventually learn how to live like someone who doesn't have to count pennies."

* * *

What did a woman wear when she was going shopping with a gorgeous chauffeur to pick out a car that cost as much as her previous year's salary as an accountant? Gina stepped out of the shower, sat on the little stool in the corner and began drying her feet. "This is stupid," she said to herself as she got up and toweled her body. *I've never been so discombobulated. Maybe poor is better. You just go to a used car lot and get the cheapest model they have. No fuss. No choices and no wasted time.*

Gina enjoyed a good laugh at her silliness and then decided to wear whatever she liked. After all, it was none of Justin Whitehead's business how she dressed. In a green silk suit, black accessories and with her hair down, she told herself she'd dressed for a casual day of shopping. However, when she put gold loops in her ears, she knew she'd lied to herself. She wanted to make an impression on the man she'd hired to be her *chauffeur*? "I was never stupid," she said aloud in an effort to console herself.

Butterflies seemed to have found a home in her stomach, so she made coffee and managed to drink half a cup before the building guard—the building in which she lived didn't have a doorman, but an armed guard—rang her buzzer.

"A gentleman here to see you, Miss Harkness."

"Thanks, Arthur, I'll be right down."

She managed one more swallow of coffee, locked her door and headed for the elevator. She hated to keep anyone waiting, and it seemed as if the elevator would never come. When she stepped into the lobby, she saw him leaning against the guard's desk.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," she said, and suspected

from Justin's raised eyebrows that she'd said the wrong thing.

"My time is your time," he said with a half bow, and she knew she'd made a mistake. She could only thank God that Miles hadn't been there to witness it. Her feeling of discomfort at his appreciative appraisal was immediately overlaid with feminine pride that such a stunning man found her attractive.

He opened the back door of the hired car for her, closed it and then sat beside the driver.

Had she actually expected him to sit in the back with her?

Justin sat with his back to the door and spoke to her. "We're going to Eleventh Avenue to look first at Cadillacs and then at Lincolns. I made an appointment with a salesman at each dealership."

"Thank you, Justin. I didn't think to make an appointment."

"I wouldn't expect you to, ma'am. If you tell me to do something, I'll try my best to do it right."

She didn't doubt that. She also knew that the shopping trip wasn't her idea, but his. "I see from the logo that this is a Lincoln, Justin. Which Lincoln is it?"

"A Town Car, ma'am."

"It's very comfortable," she said.

Justin turned face forward and spoke softly to the driver. She locked her gaze on the back of his head, noticed that his hair was perfectly trimmed. She recalled that when she'd seen him lounging against the guard's desk, she'd noticed her new driver's grooming was impeccable.

The car stopped, and Justin turned so that he could look at her. "This is the Cadillac dealer, ma'am. We're right on

time.” He got out, walked back and opened her door just as she reached for the handle. If he noticed that, he didn’t let on.

“Will he wait for us?” she asked Justin as they entered the dealer’s office.

“Yes, ma’am. We’ve hired him for four hours. I think that’s all we need.” A salesman approached them and spoke to Justin.

“Mr. Whitehead? Glad to meet you.” He shook hands with Justin and then with her. “Thank you for your patronage, Ms. Harkness.” He smiled at Justin. “May I see your driver’s license?” Justin showed him the license. “This way, please. I suggest you take it up the Major Deegan, Mr. Whitehead,” the man said with such pride that one would have thought he engineered the automobile.

Justin opened the back door for Gina, then seated himself behind the wheel. “Relax, and let’s see how comfortable this thing is. Wait a minute.” He got out, opened the door beside her and reached across her to fasten her seat belt.

She noticed that he avoided looking at her when his hand brushed her thigh. At first, she expected him to apologize, but he didn’t, and it dawned on her that he didn’t want to call attention to what was evidently an accident. He seated himself behind the wheel and pulled out of the lot to the sound of Mozart’s *Concerto for Flute and Harp*.

“I take it you like Mozart’s music.”

She opened her eyes and sat forward. “What did you say?” He repeated the question. “I love chamber music. It’s so peaceful.” She looked out of the window at the river beside them. Did you or the dealer choose that radio station?”

“I did. Why?”

“I thought for a minute that it was part of the dealer’s sales pitch. Thanks for selecting it.”

"My pleasure, ma'am. What do you think so far?"

"I can't see the difference between this and the one you rented for us, but I'd like to test the other one."

"Then, we'll take this one back. The Town Car dealer is also on Eleventh Avenue around Fifty-fifth Street."

"Well, what do you think?" the salesman asked when they returned the car.

Justin made the thumbs-up sign. "As I told you, she wants to check out another model. You'll know one way or the other this morning." They thanked the man and left.

"Gee, there're three couples ahead of us," she said as they entered the second dealership.

"Not to worry, ma'am. They didn't make an appointment, I did." He showed the salesman his driver's license, and they were soon once again driving north on the Major Deegan Expressway. "I thought we'd take the same route as we did in the Cadillac, go over the same bumps and around the same curves so you can make a proper comparison," he said.

"Smart thinking. If the service and the performance histories are the same or approximately the same, I think I'd like this one, but before I choose, I'd like your opinion," she said.

"Thank you, ma'am. If all things were equal, I'd take this one, but I'd like to check the ratings."

"Then, can we get some information on the performance and the ratings of these cars?"

"I have it right here."

"Wonderful. Let's stop somewhere and go over it."

"Good idea, ma'am. I suggest we return the car, get our driver and find a quiet coffee shop somewhere."

I wish he'd quit calling me ma'am. He could only be a few years older than me. Now, where did that thought come from?

Twenty minutes later, the driver of the rented limousine stopped in front of a small, yet elegant café. Justin got out and opened the back door for Gina. He stood beside the door trying not to notice her long shapely legs as she maneuvered herself out of the car. Then she looked up at him and smiled. *This is definitely not going to work.* And as if she read his thoughts, she lowered her lashes and moved away.

He held the chair for her, all the while wondering how he was going to get used to her paying the bill on the occasions when they had to eat together in restaurants.

"I didn't have any breakfast," she said, "and I'll bet you didn't, either. I'd had about two swallows of coffee when the guard buzzed me. I'm going to have waffles and sausage with maple syrup, lots of it."

He stared at her. "You mean, you're not worried about gaining weight?"

She shook her head. "I get plenty of exercise. Order whatever you want. I'm starving." She gave the waitress her order. "Could you bring some coffee now, please?"

He ordered waffles with bacon fried to a crisp and coffee. "I don't usually allow myself all these calories," he told her, "but if you've got the nerve to do it, so have I." She smiled when he said that, and her eyes shone with what he could only describe as merriment. He told himself to remember that he was a journalist working on a story, and that he couldn't afford to let himself succumb to the spell she had begun to weave. If she were less considerate, he could at least manage not to like her. But she took great

care not to treat him as a chauffeur in the presence of others. He corrected himself; she hadn't treated him as an employee.

Their waitress poured each of them a cup of hot coffee, and it didn't escape him that she said "please" and "thank you" to the waitress. He'd give this woman high marks for good manners. She sipped the coffee, closed her eyes, and inhaled its aroma and sighed.

He squirmed. *Good Lord, this woman was sensuous.* Suddenly, he wanted to know everything about her, everything she'd done and who she did it with. He wanted to reach out and touch her smooth brown face.

"Damn," he said to himself. "I'm way off." He gulped down a swallow of coffee and wished he'd been more prudent when the liquid burned his throat. He opened the envelope that he'd placed in the chair beside him and put his mind on the business at hand.

"Let's eat first," she said. "We've got time for that."

"Yes, ma'am," he said as the waitress placed his food in front of him.

To his amazement, she said grace. She continued to look at her plate and then, clearly having come to a decision, she said, "Justin, how old are you, if I may ask?"

His eyebrows shot up, and he didn't try to control his reaction. "I'm thirty-seven. Why do you ask?"

This time, her eyebrows went up. "I'm thirty-four, which makes me too young to be your mother. So, would you please stop calling me *ma'am*. It's getting on my nerves."

He didn't laugh, although he'd have given anything for the right to let it out. Instead, he savored his meal for a minute, glanced up and saw that she hadn't begun to eat.

"Age doesn't have anything to do with it," he said. "It's a matter of respect, and *ma'am* is shorter than saying Ms. Harkness all the time."

She sucked her teeth so loudly that he stopped chewing. "Is the sky going to fall if you call me *Gina*?"

He wanted to tell her that calling her *ma'am* was a hell of a lot safer for both of them than calling her by her first name. He needed all the help he could get if he was going to keep his mind on his two jobs—his work as a journalist and his job as her chauffeur.

"Maybe not," he said to himself, "but if I don't watch it, we'll both think it fell."

"What? What did you say?"

"Nothing. Looks like I was thinking out loud, *ma'am*. Did you make arrangements for a mover to pack your things?"

"Yes, and I thank you for the suggestion. How long do you think I'll have to wait for my car?"

"Not long. I'll speak with the dealer and let him know this is an emergency." He finished eating, pushed his plate aside and showed her the chart he'd made comparing the ratings of the two cars. "There's not much of a basis for choosing between them. On the matters that count, they're both boss cars." He handed her the chart.

She studied it for a few minutes, waved the waitress over and said, "Miss, could we please have some more coffee? You're right. They're fairly equal, and that's comforting. Which do you like to drive?"

"I like the Town Car. I've driven it a lot, and I enjoy riding in it." She didn't have to know that his parents always drove one. "If you do much traveling, you'll appreciate its roomy trunk, too," he added.

She sipped coffee, thoughtfully it seemed to him.

“Okay. We’ll get the Lincoln.” She folded the papers and handed them to him. After he drained his cup, she rose. “Ready to go?”

He stood at once. Didn’t she know that a rich New York woman wouldn’t ask her chauffeur if he was ready to do *anything*, and she certainly wouldn’t have waited while he took his time drinking coffee.

He stood. “After you, ma’am.”

She gave him an outraged look, and he couldn’t help laughing as he walked behind her. But his mood immediately switched to serious as the view of her perfectly shaped tush wiggling in front of him heated his groin. He’d never been so relieved as when he stepped outside into the cool of April, and his gaze could fix itself on something other than her mobile behind.

She looked up at him. “Do you think we should have brought our driver a cup of coffee?”

He needed no more evidence of her humble background than that question. “I’m sure he’d appreciate it,” he said, mainly to avoid making her feel bad, “but his company probably has rules against his drinking or eating anything while on the job.”

They returned to the dealer where she wrote the salesman a check for half the price of the Town Car. “I want a silver-gray one,” she said. “These big black cars make me think of funerals.” She looked at him with what he thought was a silent appeal for approval.

“Ladies tend not to like black cars,” he said, based on his experience with his mother and sister. “Silver-gray is elegant.”

“When will I get it?” she asked the manager of the dealership who had joined his salesman.

"I can have it here for you Wednesday afternoon."

"How'll he manage that?" she asked him as they headed for her apartment. "It usually takes weeks to get a new car."

"You didn't ask him to give up any of his commission. If you had, you'd have had to wait at least six weeks. He'll call around, find out which dealer has a gray car coming in, give him a few hundred bucks, and you'll get your car."

"Are you serious?"

"In deals this big, Gina, money talks."

"I thought it always talked," she said.

"There are some mountains that money won't move, and I'm sure you've encountered one or two of them." The car stopped, and he got out and opened the door for her.

She stood between him and the open car door. "Yes, Justin, and that's a good thing." She stared up at him as if searching for something, then shook her head from side to side. "Life is strange," she murmured, almost inaudibly. "You never know what will happen next."

Chapter 2

Once inside her apartment, Gina kicked off her shoes, walked into her living room and looked around. What on earth did she need a big expensive car and a chauffeur for? She could drive as well as anybody, provided she had something to drive, and her need of a man like Justin Whitehead definitely had nothing to do with automobiles, large or small. She didn't have to pack, she didn't have to clean because she was moving in less than a week, so what could she do? The phone rang and she raced to answer it.

"Well, how're we coming?" Miles asked.

"I don't know what you mean," she replied, aware that her tolerance for Miles lessened each time she saw him or spoke with him.

"Well, we ought to be getting on with the terms of the will."

"We? You mean, there's something in the will that ap-

plies to you? I read it carefully, and that is not the impression I got.”

“Well, you know what I mean. As executor of the will, it’s my duty to see that it is carried out to the letter.”

“Miles, I appreciate help when I need it, but if you lean on me too heavily, I may make you very uncomfortable. Goodbye.” She suspected that Miles Strags would one day be her enemy, but knowing it didn’t mean she’d kowtow to him.

Later that day, Gina went furniture shopping for her new place. Being wealthy certainly had its perks, she thought. Her first stop was Bloomingdale’s furniture department to choose the furnishings for her bedroom and guest bedroom. She didn’t like what she saw, called a car service and visited the big furniture-store showrooms in the borough Queens. Two months earlier, if she had needed furniture, she would have gone directly to the Lower East Side. Within two hours, she found what she wanted. After releasing the car, she stopped by her favorite Italian restaurant and ate dinner. It wasn’t the haunt of the hoity-toity, but it suited her. Veal scallopini with spaghetti and broccoli, a salad and a glass of pinot grigio, all for under thirty dollars, was as much class as she needed. She felt as if she’d just splurged. As she walked out of the restaurant, she wondered what Justin would have thought of her having dinner in the same suit she’d worn all day. She did that regularly when she dined out, but she’d bet his previous employers wouldn’t have done it.

I wish I’d met him under different circumstances. I wonder what he did before he decided he had to work as a chauffeur. He’s nice and all, but somehow, it doesn’t suit him.

Sunday, after church, Gina went to Heddy’s apartment for one last visit. While there she saw a vase that reminded

her of Heddy and decided to take it. She telephoned Miles. "People from the charity will be here tomorrow to take the things from Heddy's apartment. Would you like to come and see if there's something here you'd like to have, perhaps as a memento of Heddy?"

"Uh...well, now...that's very nice of you. I think I would. Are you there now?" She told him she was. "If you can wait about twenty minutes, I'll be there."

Hmm. Interesting. The man was too proud to ask for a souvenir of someone he'd known, by her calculation, approximately thirty-five years. When he arrived, he went directly to a hutch in the dining room, lifted a pair of blue porcelain lions and caressed them.

"These are very old. I believe Heddy said they were Ming Dynasty or something like that. I'm not sure, but I've always loved them. Thank you so much. I...uh... Would you care to join me for supper?"

She caught herself just before her bottom lip dropped. "Thank you, Miles, but I already have plans," she said.

"Some other time?" he asked, leaving no doubt about his purely male interest in her.

"Perhaps, but I'm so busy, I can't say when." Suddenly ill at ease with him, she walked toward the door.

After closing the door behind him, she slumped against it.

Was he after her or Heddy's money? Stupid question. If he got her, he'd have both with no further hassle.

She heard her cell phone ringing and raced back to the living room where she'd left her purse. The ringing stopped just as she reached the phone, but a check of the messages showed Justin had called her.

"Sorry to bother you," he said when she identified her-

self, “but I dialed your home phone and you didn’t answer, so I dialed your cell number. Where are you? Can you turn on a television? I’m watching an unbelievable show on channel thirteen.”

“I don’t think this TV is working. Can you tape it?”

“Yeah. I’ll save it for you,” he said.

“Thanks for thinking about me,” she said. “I’ll look forward to viewing it. Have a pleasant evening.”

“You, too.”

She hung up and stared at the cell phone in her right hand. Her driver was somewhere watching a program and enjoying it and wanted to share it with her. That wasn’t normal, was it? And he was thinking about her, too. Surely, his mind was not immersed in appreciation for her as an employer. He’d said he needed the job, but that suit he wore when they shopped for a car fitted him as if it had been tailor made. Annoyed because she seemed to be developing a crush on her mysterious chauffeur, Gina looked toward the ceiling and blew out a long breath.

“Everybody’s innocent until proved guilty,” she reminded herself aloud. “I’m going to stop second-guessing the man. He behaves properly, and seems to be an expert driver, and that’s all I can ask.” Her shoulders sagged. “But if that man isn’t a walking advertisement for sex, I don’t know what is.”

Justin stared at the television set, seeing nothing. The program had been off the air for a full fifteen minutes and he hadn’t willed himself to move. He was a grown man, and he was used to women—all kinds, ages, colors and shapes of women. But there was something about the way Gina looked at him. Every time she smiled at him, she

threw him for a loop. The woman was educated, intelligent and, he suspected, accomplished. But she wasn't jaded, nor did she have the sophistication that comes with old money. He walked over to the window and looked out into East River.

He felt protective toward Gina, and he had to get over it. Feeling for her would interfere with his performance as her employee and with his professionalism as a journalist. He needed to be totally objective.

Ordinarily, on a balmy Sunday afternoon when he didn't feel like working, he'd take his bike over to Central Park, or ride or walk along Riverside Drive. But being alone didn't appeal to him right then. He phoned Craig, his younger brother.

"Hi. This is Justin. If you don't have a date, how about dinner somewhere?"

"Hi. I had a date, but she came down with a cold, and I have these two tickets to the Met. Feel like seeing *Madama Butterfly*?"

Justin thought for a minute. "Why not? It's been a while since I went to the opera. Want to eat at Hanks? Say, around six-thirty? I'll call and make a reservation."

"Fine. I'll see you there. Uh...anything wrong? I mean... You seem kinda down."

"Don't worry about it. Resilience is my middle name. Remember? See you later." He had to decide how much to tell his brother. Craig wouldn't repeat anything he told him, but he didn't have a clear picture of what was bothering him.

As the first born of two university professors, much had been expected of Justin Whitehead. And he had delivered plenty. An honor graduate from Yale University, Justin distinguished himself as an investigative reporter early. Now, at thirty-seven, Justin was in a position to call

his shots. Though a salaried newspaper reporter, he enjoyed the status of a syndicated columnist whose work appeared regularly in newspapers and magazines under the by-line, J. L. Whitehead. Justin attributed his success and fame to his habit of “living” in the situations about which he wrote.

Over the past couple of years, Justin had followed the story of a thirty-one-year-old woman who won a lottery for eleven million dollars and died four years later. The notion that sudden wealth changed a person’s lifestyle, and not always positively, intrigued Justin. After weeks of interviewing relatives, friends and acquaintances of people who had become suddenly rich, he decided to get to know one. He saw Gina’s ad for a chauffeur—placed in the *Daily News* and not *The New York Times* as one would have expected—and, after investigating, he learned of her recent inheritance and applied for the job.

For the first time in his career as a journalist, Justin had a tinge of guilt about not revealing to Gina who he really was and why he took the job as her driver. His guilt stemmed from a suspicion that he would not walk away from their relationship unscathed. He was beginning to think that his deception would bring pain to both of them. Had he known what she would be like, he doubted he would have taken the job.

He walked into Hank’s restaurant at precisely six-thirty and Craig rose to greet him as he approached the table. They hugged and then sat.

“I don’t think I’ll have a drink,” Craig said, “because I don’t want to go to sleep during the show.” He looked at the waiter. “Just bring us the dinner menu, please.” Craig knew that Justin rarely drank and never before going to a performance of any kind.

“What’s up?” Craig asked him. “Spoken with Mom and Dad lately?”

“Yeah. You know I call them at least once a week. Mom would freak out if I didn’t. She said something about Lynn falling in love. Geez, I hope not.”

“Why not. She’s twenty-eight,” Craig said.

“I don’t feel like sweating through it. When Lynn fell in love before, she had the whole family in turmoil.”

“That’s because the guy was a jerk, and everybody but Lynn knew it.”

After they placed their orders, Craig—a man who never procrastinated—leaned back and looked at his older brother, his friend and idol. “How are things with you, Justin? I sense that something’s amiss. Can you share it? Is it a woman?”

“In a way, I suppose it is. Keep this in strictest confidence. The only other person who knows about it is Mel Scott, my editor, and he doesn’t know the woman’s name.”

Craig leaned forward with his piercing gaze on Justin’s face. “I’m listening.”

Justin related to Craig details of his latest project. “I go undercover all the time, Craig. This time, I’m using my real name. So far, she hasn’t associated me with J. L. Whitehead the reporter, and I’m praying she doesn’t.”

“Maybe she won’t. So what’s the problem?”

“The problem is that I hadn’t counted on the type of woman she is. Honest, gracious, respectful. Man, she’s soft, feminine and intelligent. She’s just plain nice,” Justin said.

“Good-looking?”

“Absolutely, and she’s in over her head. She has no idea of the benefits of being rich, and she snapped at me for addressing her as *ma’am*. Said she was getting tired of it.”

"She wouldn't be tired of it if you looked and acted like a chauffeur is supposed to look and act. Do you wear a uniform?"

Justin laughed. "When I asked about that, she said I should just be neat. So when I took her shopping for a car, I..."

"You took her shopping in your Jaguar?"

"Real funny. I called a limousine company and got us a car and driver. As I was saying, when I went with her to choose a car—she picked a Town Car—I wore a suit, shirt and tie," Justin said.

"So far, the problem I see is deception, and I imagine that doesn't sit well with you, but why has it depressed you?"

"Beats me. She's uh... I uh... She's got a hook in me, and I'd swear it's mutual." Both of Craig's eyebrows shot up and his lower lip dropped.

"That's right," Justin went on, "and I feel protective toward her. How'm I going to keep my hands off her, and what the hell do I do when she asks me to chauffeur her and her dates? I've taken six months from the office, though not from the paper, so I can complete this project. Mel's expecting what amounts to a treatise on the subject of the suddenly nouveaux riches. I'm not used to defeat, but I feel like walking away from this thing."

Craig nodded. "I see what you mean. You're feeling guilty, because you're attracted to her."

Justin tapped the table lightly with the tips of his fingers. "That's it in a nutshell," he said.

"Look. Do your best to minimize the damage to her. I wouldn't encourage her feelings. You know what I mean."

"Craig, I felt the chemistry between us from the moment I walked into her office. That's when I should have walked out, but I was too shocked to think straight."

“Yipes. I’m afraid you’re in for it no matter what you do. What was her job before she came into all that money?”

“She was an accountant, and she has an MBA from New York University. I’m not sure how much she inherited, but I went down to the probate office and learned that the terms of the will stipulate that she live like a wealthy woman. I couldn’t read the entire document. I’ve a friend who works there and who let me see it, but he could only give me two minutes with it. I found out that she inherited from a very rich white woman.”

“Mom’s going to faint when she finds out what’s going on with you. Just imagine one of her children working as a chauffeur.”

Justin joined Craig in a good laugh. Their mother wanted all of her children to become university professors, but the three of them had chosen other careers—journalist, investment banker and linguist-interpreter.

“Tell me about it,” Justin said. “And she’ll never like Gina, because—”

“Gina, huh? That’s her name?”

“Yeah. And it suits her,” Justin said.

“Am I ever going to meet her?”

“If, after this story goes to press, all is right with the world, you may.”

“Well, do what you can to keep it between the lines,” Craig said in a tone that suggested he didn’t hold out much hope.

“That’s a tall order, brother.”

Justin had no way of knowing that, at the moment, Gina was searching for an excuse to call him. After some thought, she told herself that she’d better hire an office assistant. Per-

haps if she had two employees, she wouldn't concentrate on Justin. She arrived at her office just before nine o'clock on Monday and Justin arrived shortly thereafter.

"I figured that, while we're waiting for the car, you might need me for something else," he said into the heavy silence.

"I need some decent office furniture. This furniture came with the space and it's really boring. If I'm going to be fund-raising, I'll need a more updated look. I also want the place to look like me."

"Some people rent office furniture, but if you want individualized surroundings, you have to buy. If you'd like, I can find you a couple of places that sell first-quality furnishings."

A smile lit up her face, and for a few seconds, he struggled to hide his reaction to her. "That's wonderful, Justin. Why don't you use that desk over there? I'll be right back."

Among other things, the office needed a kitchen, or at least a pantry in which she could hide a coffee maker and a small refrigerator. She took the elevator to the street floor and dashed down the block to the coffee shop, bought two large cups of coffee and three cranberry scones. She got back in the office just in time to hear Justin say, "I'll give her your message, Mr. Strags."

"Strags called. He seemed annoyed that you weren't here."

She put the bag on her desk. "A lot of things annoy Miles. He's the executor of my friend's estate, and he thinks he controls me. Nobody I ever knew could lay claim to that. I got us some coffee." She took the coffee and scones out of the bag, placed a couple of napkins where a tablecloth would have been and said, "I noticed you like milk and sugar in yours. I only use milk."

She didn't understand his frown, so she said, "It's all

right if you don't want it. I couldn't drink mine without knowing you had some if you wanted it."

"I would gladly have gone out and brought coffee for you. Why didn't you ask me?"

She lifted her right shoulder in a quick shrug. "It didn't occur to me to ask you. You were busy checking furniture stores."

"I love coffee and scones," he said. "Thank you. But next time, I'd be happy to get it."

He sipped the coffee, and she could see that he really enjoyed it. "Did you eat breakfast?" she asked him.

"Yeah, if you call half a pint of yogurt and a cup of instant coffee breakfast. I can cook, but I don't enjoy cooking breakfast."

"I've just decided that we need a pantry large enough for a microwave oven, a small refrigerator, a coffee maker and some storage space. What do you think?"

He grinned. "I would definitely supply the coffee and the milk."

She looked at him. *Did he know what his smile did to a woman?*

"We also need a way for you to account for your expenditures. You could keep a record of your expenditures, such as the costs of our car and driver on Saturday—which, incidentally, you haven't given me—or you may have a credit card. Which would you prefer?"

"I'd rather have the expense account. It's more than decent of you to offer me a credit card, and it would make my life simpler, but in my opinion, it would be unwise for you to give a man you don't know a credit card."

She stopped eating the scone, leaned back and looked him in the eye. "I am a good judge of character, Justin."

"I have no reason to doubt that, ma'am, but why do you think so many congressmen and corporate CEOs wind up in jail?"

"Justin, there are times when I wonder why you'd work as a chauffeur."

"Life happens, ma'am. We never know what we'll wind up doing."

"That's true. If anybody had told me I'd be running a charitable organization in honor of my best friend, I wouldn't have believed it."

Justin waited until she drained her coffee cup and took it and his to the wastebasket. He flashed her a smile and headed back to the desk that sat about six feet from hers. "You'll never know how that coffee and scone hit the spot. Let me get started on this search." He reached for the yellow pages of the telephone book. "If you're planning to get more computers, it may be a good idea to have an expert hook up a computer network that includes your computers, your faxes, scanners, printers and copiers."

She looked up from her list of possible contributors to the foundation. Unlike Miles, Justin tried to help her without being condescending. His past employment must have exposed him to numerous learning situations. She wished she could ask him about his other jobs. She wanted to know everything about him. Everything.

Just then, Justin looked up and caught her ogling him. She quickly lowered her gaze. She hoped her face didn't mirror what she'd been thinking.

She could feel the heat of his gaze and, as hard as she tried not to squirm, her body twisted in the chair. She couldn't get up and walk out now, because that would be downright humiliating. Gina swallowed hard and resisted

the temptation to cover her taut nipples. *What was wrong with her, and why didn't he stop looking at her?* With as much defiance as she could muster, she looked straight at him. The man grinned, and she restrained an impulse to scream in frustration.

"You'll be delighted at what I found," he said, easing the tension. "There are two great stores within three blocks of each other. If we hail a taxi, we can check them out at lunch time. It shouldn't take long."

"I was just thinking of reorganizing this space. I need three offices, and I don't need that conference room back there. I need a front office for an office assistant, and an office for you and one for me. I don't expect you to sit in that car when you're not driving. I want each office equipped with appropriate office machines, and that reception area out there should have comfortable seating, attractive lighting and a television. I think I should make the changes before we get the furniture."

"Want me to check out a contractor to do the work? I think you'll probably have to get a permit. I know a guy who can get you a permit today if you want it." When she appeared skeptical, he said, "Don't worry, ma'am. It will be perfectly legal. I wouldn't mislead you."

"I'm sure you wouldn't, Justin. Didn't I tell you I'm a good judge of character? Please call your friend. I want to get this operation underway as soon as possible."

"Yes, ma'am. I'll get on that right now."

Justin walked over to Park Avenue, flagged a taxi and settled back to contemplate all that had transpired that morning. He was rapidly concluding that Gina Harkness did not regard herself as a rich woman or, if she did, she

didn't plan to change her outlook on life. She went out in the street and bought coffee when she should have asked him to do it. She offered a man she'd seen twice a credit card. She was damned lucky to have hired him and not a swindler. The woman was way too trusting.

When he caught her ogling him, she'd almost lost her composure, but he had to hand it to her, the *sistah* could give lessons in cool behavior. She planned to give him an office, and he appreciated that. In fact, he needed it. But whoever heard of a personal chauffeur with a private office?

The taxi stopped at the address he'd given the driver. He paid, got a receipt and asked the man to wait for ten minutes, and in less time, he was back in the cab with an official permit enabling Gina to renovate her office space.

"You're wonderful," she said with a smile when he handed her the permit. "I don't know how I'd get along without you. The manager of this building suggested a company for the renovations, and he'll be here day after tomorrow. Gosh. I could never have gotten this far by myself."

She talked on, but he was still at the point where she said she didn't know what she'd do without him. "I'm flattered, ma'am. Thank you."

When she narrowed her eyes, he suspected that she'd get down on him again about calling her *ma'am*, but whatever she intended went unsaid. The door opened and, without having knocked or rung the bell, a man who wore his tie too tightly knotted walked in.

"Who was the man who answered the phone while you were out? I can't believe you went off and left your foundation to a stranger. You're supposed to be—"

Justin looked at Gina. From her demeanor, he wouldn't

have been surprised to see smoke coming out of her ears. "Miles, what in hell do you mean by strolling in here and throwing your weight around. You have absolutely no authority to take me to task about anything. Who answers my phone is my business, and I want you to leave this minute."

"You...you can't speak to me that way."

"Why can't she?" Justin asked him.

Seeming to swell by the minute, Miles looked at Gina. "Who is this man? Is he the one who answered your phone?"

"This man is my chauffeur and my office assistant, not that it's any of your business. Now, if you don't mind, I have work to do," Gina said as she saw Miles out.

"So he's the executor of your friend's estate. Something tells me he oversteps his authority," Justin said.

"He tries to intimidate me, but that is not easily done. I suspect he thinks that Heddy should have left her estate to him, or at least to someone who's white."

"You may have a point," Justin said. "But as far as the renovations go, remember that we pick up the car Wednesday, and that's the day the builder comes. Did he say what time?"

"Ten o'clock. So we can pick up the car around two in the afternoon. This is perfect. I'm moving tomorrow, so we'll be able to park in my building's garage."

She still hadn't given him the building's address, but he'd seen the address in the will. Of the chauffeurs working for residents in that building, he'd be the only one who didn't wear a uniform. He'd bet anything on that. It occurred to him that he'd better buy a pair of glasses. In that building, he might be recognized.

He looked at his watch, saw that it was twelve-thirty and

asked her, "What's your policy about lunch? I'd like to find something to eat."

When she didn't answer, he saw that she was still angry and trying to control it. "Don't let it get to you," he said, and the minute he opened his mouth, her lips trembled as she fought back tears. "Please. He's not worth getting upset about." She turned her back to him and, man that he was, he rushed to her and drew her into his arms. He couldn't help himself.

"It will be all right. We'll find a way to stop him. Please, Gina, we're in this together, and I won't let him hurt you." Soft and yielding, she snuggled to him as a lover would, and he wanted to squeeze her to him, to protect her and love her, but he didn't dare.

"I...I'm sorry," she murmured, but didn't move out of his arms.

"I know. He was pretty rough, but you handled it well. Stay here. I'll get you some water." He stroked her shoulder, taking what he could get, before easing her away from him. When he returned from the water cooler, she was sitting at her desk with her head resting on her arms. He leaned over her and rested an arm across her shoulder.

"Do you feel like drinking this?"

Gina took the cup of water, drank it and put the empty cup in the wastebasket beside her desk. She didn't look him in the eye, but found a spot past his shoulder and fastened her gaze on that. "He's been harassing me ever since he read that will to me, and he's becoming increasingly bold. Thanks for being so understanding."

"Don't mention it. If you're all right, I'll be back in an hour."

He needed to get away from there. She'd nestled against

him like a chick under its mother's wing, or like a woman enjoying the protectiveness of her man. She felt as comfortable as if she'd been born in his arms. Soft. She was so soft and so feminine. True, she had a temper, but he didn't mind that. He liked a woman with fire. If only he could keep his hands off her.

For nearly half an hour, Gina sat where Justin had left her. Her anger had subsided, but her fear that she might fall for her chauffeur had reached alarming proportions. Nobody had to tell her that he could be down on his luck, but if he wasn't, he undersold himself and forfeited his potential. Some people only took what they needed from life and left the rest to the overachievers. He could be one of those. She shook her head. Maybe she would never understand him, and perhaps she shouldn't try. But she had needed his gentleness and tenderness and hadn't wanted to move out of his strong arms.

"I could love this man," she said to herself. She remembered one of her auntie's prayers: *Lord, please don't let me look at him with scales over my eyes.* She heard the door open and busied herself with the papers on her desk.

He walked over to her desk. "What do you want to eat? I'll be glad to get it for you." And he meant it. In his present mood, he'd do anything for her so long as it was legal.

"You're asking me to take advantage of you, Justin. You're not a messenger or a gofer."

"Forget about what I am. What do you want to eat? I can bring you a sandwich, a salad or a full-course meal."

"All right. Surprise me."

That sounded a little coquettish to him. "Other than

coffee and scones, I don't know what you like. Okay. What if I bring lasagna and a salad? What would you like to drink? Coffee?" She nodded, and he whirled around. "Be right back."

Justin met Miles Strags just before he reached the elevator. Certain that the man had returned to harass Gina, he followed him back to Gina's office.

"I think we've met before," Miles said, with curled lips and a frown on his face.

"I'd remember if we had," Justin said.

"I thought you were her chauffeur, not her bodyguard."

Justin glared down at the man. "I'm both, so don't bother trying to intimidate her unless you want to go out head first." He opened the door. "After you, Mr. Strags." He followed the man inside. "Mr. Strags forgot something, ma'am. He'll tell you what it was."

She sat up straight and laid back her shoulders. "What did you forget, Miles?"

Miles forced a smile. "I didn't want any unpleasantness between us, so I came back to straighten things out. You know how fond I was of Heddy—" he cleared his throat "—and you, too, of course—and I don't believe in letting misunderstandings simmer."

Justin nearly laughed when she leaned back in her chair, made a pyramid of her fingers and narrowed her eyes. "What did I misunderstand?"

"I have your interest at heart, and I don't think you realize that."

"I know very well where your interests lie, Miles. Please excuse me, I have a lot of things to get through today." She looked at Justin. "Would you please see him to the elevator?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Justin left the building with Miles Strags and walked as far as the corner with the man before Miles spoke. "If you're after her money, forget it. It will never happen." With those words, Miles strutted across the street barely missing being struck by a taxi.

Now we know where we stand. Miles Strags is after Gina and the Lloyd estate. Hmm. Knowledge is power, and I intend to learn everything possible about that obsequious bastard, including his rights as estate executor.

Justin strode down Madison Avenue until he reached an Italian restaurant operated by a man with whom he occasionally enjoyed a fencing match. The quaint restaurant reeked with the smell of seafood, garlic and tomato sauce. He'd always liked the simplicity of the red-and-white and green-and-white checkered tablecloths on tables that were hosts to Chianti bottles holding lighted candles.

"Where's Tony?" he asked the waiter. "Tell him J.L. is here."

Smiling broadly, the handsome restaurant owner approached Justin with open arms. "Hey, man. You've been scarce. What's up?"

"I need a carry out. Lasagna, a nice mesclun salad and a small bottle of red wine."

"You taking this to a woman, I gather." Justin nodded. "Trust me, friend, I'll make it nice for you."

Meal in hand, Justin hurried back two blocks to Gina's office. "Let's see what we have here," he said, eager to see delight in her eyes. He opened the package and found a large white napkin, a heavy, white, plastic plate and transparent plastic dinnerware. So far, so good. He opened the wine, poured a glass for her, said, "*bon appetit*" and went back to his desk.

He looked up to see her rim her lips with the tip of her tongue and inhale deeply. "Justin, if it wouldn't be in poor taste, I'd walk over there and hug you," she said, and savored the first bite of what he knew was the best lasagna in town.

"You may *think* it would be in bad taste," he said under his breath. Aloud he said, "I'm glad you're enjoying it. What time are the movers going to your place tomorrow?"

"Nine o'clock. You can have the day off."

"You sure?" He needed the time because he'd done nothing on his project, and he had to sort out the information he'd collected so far. Once he did that, he'd know what he needed from Gina. He had already decided not to mention her name or the Lloyd estate.

"I'd appreciate the time," he told her. It wouldn't hurt to be away from her for at least one day, either. In the short time he'd known her, he'd already gotten used to her, and it occurred to him that her calming presence did wonders for him. The only stress she generated had to do with his libido, and he didn't have much hope of that getting better.

"How do you go home?" Justin asked her at five o'clock when they closed the office.

"I usually take the bus up to Forty-second Street and change to the Amsterdam Avenue bus. It takes me right to my door." When he stared down at her with an expression of disbelief, she felt uncomfortable, almost as if Miles were censoring her. "What is it, Justin?"

His shrug didn't fool her. "I don't know. In this traffic, it'll take you almost an hour to get home, and you may have to stand all the way." He paused and looked into the distance. "Gina, you have to get used to taking a taxi when

you're by yourself. Someone could kidnap you. You can afford a twenty-five dollar cab ride."

Without thinking, she put her hand on his arm. "I know, Justin, but it's not easy reordering my life. I'm sophisticated in many ways, and I like to be independent, but I'm used to a simple life, and I like it. I never asked for all of this money, but I'm delighted that I can use Heddy's money for the betterment of others. But you're right. I should take a taxi." A grin floated over her face. "But mainly because my shoes are too tight."

She laughed aloud at the look of amazement on his face. "See you day after tomorrow."

"Right," he said, "and don't forget we pick up the car that afternoon."

"I'll remember. You have a good day tomorrow." He hailed a cruising taxi, opened the door for her, and when she got in, he closed it and walked on up the street. "This won't do," she said aloud.

"What's that, ma'am?" the driver asked.

"Just thinking aloud." She gave him the address, sat back and mused over the day. When she got home, Gina prepared to spend her last night as a middle-class woman. She wasn't going to stress about her new neighbors or wonder about Heddy's reason for insisting that she live in the building for at least three years. After all, Heddy hadn't spent much time with those neighbors, at least not in the last six years of her life. She pinched her arm. Yes, she was alive and sane, and her new life was real.

At home, she phoned her aunt Elsa. "Auntie, I'm moving tomorrow, and here's my new address and phone number. As soon as you can, come to see me, we'll shop for some really nice fabrics."

"I wouldn't mind seeing where you live, but I can't get up there right away. I have a backlog of orders, and you know I don't turn my work in late. How you making out?" She told her aunt what she had accomplished so far.

"Looks to me as if you either got a prize in that chauffeur or you made the mistake of a lifetime."

Chills coursed through her veins. "What do you mean by that, Auntie?"

"So far, he's a blessing, and it looks as if he's a good man, though looks can be deceiving. He may be the kinda man you fall for, and if you do, you'll rue the day. Never go for a man who works under or over you, and for goodness' sake, don't go to bed with him. If you do, you gotta swing to their rhythm and play the hand that they deal."

"But, Auntie, I have this strange feeling that his role in my life was preordained. If you were around us, you'd probably think the same. We don't seem to be controlling this."

"No? Well, child, you'd better control it. Human beings are not saints, so no matter how good he is or what you think of him, remember that every cowboy wears spurs on his boots, and only one perfect man ever walked this earth. You get my meaning?"

"Yes, ma'am. I'll be careful," she said, but if she didn't stop fantasizing about the man, she wouldn't want to be careful. She still felt his arms around her and the gentle caress of his fingers when they stroked her shoulder.

She kicked the carpet until her toe ached. *If he only knew how badly I need him*, she thought. *He's the most decent man I've ever known. It would be easier if he didn't want me. But he does.*

Chapter 3

The following morning, Gina walked out of her upper Broadway apartment for the last time, took a taxi to a building on Park Avenue three blocks from the famed Guggenheim Museum, smiled at the doorman and introduced herself.

“I’m Ms. Harkness and, as you know, I’m moving into 17-G this morning. My mover should be here any minute.” Gina looked him in the eye as she spoke to him. “I assume the management has informed you.”

She couldn’t figure out whether he was looking at a tenant or a woman he liked, so she stared at him until he said, “Yes, ma’am. I’ve been informed that you were moving in today, and I must say it’s good to have the owner living here. In the past that has meant we workers get a fair shake, and the building is well managed.”

“Thank you,” she said. “I assure you that there’ll be no change in those respects. Your name is?”

“Carver, Ma’am.”

“How many vacant apartments do we have, Carver?” She wanted to know whether he connected her with Heddy Lloyd.

“Just one, but I’m told there’re five applicants. We rarely get a vacancy, and an apartment doesn’t remain empty any longer than an ad is posted.”

“Thank you, Carver.”

“You’re welcome, ma’am. I hope you’ll be happy here.”

She introduced herself to the concierge and went to her apartment. Some thoughtful person had placed a chair near the door, and she put her pocketbook and briefcase on the chair and decided to check on the work she ordered. To her delight, the walls and floors in all the rooms and the kitchen were as she requested. She looked out of the living-room window across the avenue and could hardly believe the beauty that her eyes beheld.

Green trees and the plethora of daffodils, tulips and primroses in a myriad of colors and in well-tended patches brought a gasp from her. The avenue’s parklike center sparkled in its beauty. This was a New York she’d never known. She took a deep breath and went to get her cell phone, hoping that she could capture what she saw in a photograph. She stopped. She hadn’t seen the tiniest shred of paper since she left 125th Street. Her door buzzer rang, and she found it quickly and answered.

“Your movers have arrived. May I send them up?”

“Yes. Of course. Thank you.”

“We have your floor plans, miss. So if you’ll give us some room, we’ll have everything in place shortly.”

She took the chair and her personal things into the kitchen, sat down and took out her cell phone. Her fingers itched to dial Justin’s number, and she had to work hard at

restraining them. Why should she miss him so much? At the sound of her cell phone ringing, she nearly sprang from her chair.

“Hello.”

“This is Justin. How’s it going, ma’am? Do you need any help?”

“Hello, Justin. Thanks, but I don’t think so. The movers are putting things in place, and there isn’t much. The bedroom furniture will be delivered this afternoon. I haven’t bought dining-room furnishings and additional things for the living room yet. This place is so big.”

“Do you think you’ll like it?”

“Oh, yes, the avenue is beautiful, and I have a glimpse of Central Park.”

“It’s beautiful after a snowfall, too. Well, I just wanted to know how you’re getting on. I won’t keep you. See you tomorrow at the office. ’Bye.”

“Bye, Justin, and thanks for calling.”

She hung up, pensive and wondering what her life would be like in a year. *Would Justin Whitehead still be a part of her life and, if so, would he be her chauffeur or her lover?* He’d called because he cared, and if he denied it, she wouldn’t believe him.

Justin hung up the phone and blew out a long breath. That wasn’t smart, he thought. He hadn’t had a reason for calling Gina, but he needed some contact with her. “I ought to get out of this right now,” he said to himself. He knew he could write that story from the interviews he’d collected. She was so different from all of the people he had interviewed so far. She represented an exception. If he didn’t include her, he knew his story would lose validity.

He got up from his desk and looked out toward the East River. *New York is full of women, approachable women, available women. Why the hell do I want this one?*

Unable to work, he got into his Jaguar and headed for the probate office. "I need to look at that will and any codicils to it," he told his friend who worked there. "Can you give me at least ten minutes or can you read it and tell me precisely what Miles Strags's responsibilities are as executor?"

"I just clarified it for him yesterday. The answer is none. His duties were over when he handed her the will and transferred all the property to her, including keys, stock certificates, deeds and so forth."

"What about the stipulation that she do certain things for the first three years?"

"If she doesn't, he can't force her to, because the will doesn't say what action he's to take if she ignores the terms. If he claims any rights or responsibilities, she can sue him for harassment. I can give you ten minutes."

Justin read as quickly as he could. Satisfied that Miles had no rights where Gina was concerned. Relief spread through him. He wouldn't tell Gina what he learned, unless it became necessary, for he didn't want to arouse her suspicion of him. Gina had already observed that Justin didn't seem like a chauffeur, and around her, he didn't feel like one.

Unless you want your plans to erupt in your face, you'd better start acting like one, his inner voice said.

Gina sat in her office with the builder, discussing the renovations. "We can do the job over the weekend," he said, "and you won't lose two full days from work." He agreed to put a sink in the pantry area, and to replace the

conference room with two offices, one of which would be hers. "We'll build you a very attractive place here. That reception room could use some paint."

"All right," she said. "Make it a dusty-rose, not pink. I don't like pink walls. The building superintendent will let you in Saturday and Sunday mornings," she said. "Be sure and bring some ID."

The man left, and she rushed to the rest room, refreshed her makeup and combed her hair. "I'm going bonkers," she said to herself. "The man is my chauffeur, for goodness' sake."

She made appointments with three prospective donors to the foundation and was about to go out for a cup of coffee, when Justin burst into the office carrying a bag that she knew contained two cups of coffee, if nothing else.

"Good morning, ma'am. How'd it go? I brought you some coffee." He opened the bag, unfolded a napkin and put a paper cup of coffee and a cranberry scone on it. "Sorry, it couldn't be fancier."

If life were normal, she'd hug him, but it wasn't and she had to content herself with a smile that came from her heart. "This is as fancy as I need. It's priceless. Thanks. As soon as I swallow some of this coffee, I'll tell you all about it."

"Take your time." He sat down to drink his coffee, and she noticed that he didn't have a scone. She broke off a piece of hers, put it on a napkin and gave it to him. "Well, it went like this. He'll do the work according to the plan I showed you, and when we come here Monday morning, it will be ready. I hope you can tolerate dusty-rose in the reception area. I love that color."

He seemed unusually subdued, but she decided not to dwell on it. "I didn't want you to share your scone," he

said, “but I’m enjoying it. Thanks. Would you prefer a taxi or a one-way limousine service when we go for the car? We’re picking it up in Queens.”

“If you ask a New York City taxi driver to go farther than a mile, he gets his back up. Let’s take the limousine.” He lifted the receiver, dialed a car service and made a one-o’clock appointment. “Please be on time,” he said.

“Oh dear,” she said. “We should have gone for the Town Car after we shopped for the office furniture. As it is, you won’t be able to park, and you can’t help me choose the furniture.”

As he spoke, what remained of the scone seemed to have his undivided attention. “I’m sure you can do it without me, but if you want me to help, I’ll park in a garage or somewhere. Not to worry.”

She didn’t think his diffidence could be ascribed to modesty, and certainly not to a desire to ingratiate himself with her. He glanced up then and locked his gaze on her for a fleeting second, and she sucked in her breath. She didn’t want to believe what her eyes told her, for in the speed of the moment, she wasn’t sure that it happened at all.

“Will you be able to give me a weekly schedule?” he asked her, though she knew that the question’s purpose was to cover the awkwardness of the silence.

“Of the major things, such as out of town trips, yes, I hope so.”

He looked at his watch. “The guy will be here any second.”

And then, our relationship will change for sure with you behind the wheel and me in the back.

“Will it upset you if I sit in the front seat?” she blurted out.

A frown furrowed his brow, and his skin lost its rich,

brilliant hue. "I...uh... Whatever you're comfortable with, but that's kind of irregular, isn't it?"

"Justin, in time, you will learn that the only chauffeurs I'm used to are taxi drivers. If we're going to be working together all the time, it seems silly for us to follow this ridiculous protocol."

"It's not silly, ma'am. It keeps everything between the lines."

She thought about that for a moment, and it occurred to her that if she sat in the front seat, *he* might be uncomfortable, so she said, "All right. Forget it." In her job at Hilliard and Noyes, she supervised half a dozen clerks of which two were men old enough to be her father, so why did she have this foolish reservation about giving Justin Whitehead orders?

"We'd better go. The car's probably waiting downstairs," she said.

In the car, Justin sat with the driver, and she wished she could have found a way to avoid having a chauffeur. As they took the exit from the Queensboro Bridge, she made mental comparisons between the poverty and ugliness surrounding her and the beauty and elegance observable from the window of her new Park Avenue apartment. Paper, glass, cans and debris littered the streets, and every building appeared to need attention if not repair. Living quarters shared premises with grocery stores, convenience stores and fish markets. Cars and buses wrestled for right of way and overhead trains rambled along polluting the area with their noise.

New Yorkers lived in separate worlds, and she'd wager that most of the people milling around on Queens Plaza had never set foot on Park Avenue between Forty-third and

Ninety-second Streets, the province of the rich. Nor, she suspected, had her new neighbors ever walked on the pavements of Queens Plaza. Did Justin live in such a neighborhood? She didn't think so. He looked and carried himself as if he knew nothing of poverty. But it was almost second nature to her, for she had lived next door to it most of her life, and before her mother's death, she'd lived in the midst of it.

The car stopped, and she got out before Justin could open the door for her. He stared down at her. "Are you trying to do my job?"

"Am I...what? Of course not, but I can take just so much of this." She smiled to take the bite out of her words. "Look." She pointed to the silver-gray Town Car at the front of the lot. "I wonder if that's ours." *Why did he stare at her like that?*

His expression softened when he grinned. "It's a beauty, isn't it?" His fingers clasped her arm. "Let's go inside."

Fifteen minutes later, she sat in the back seat of her new luxury limousine. "Is there any place along here that we can eat? Getting lunch in Manhattan is always such a big deal."

"There are some great Chinese and Italian restaurants a few blocks from here. Which would you prefer?"

"How about something Italian? One of these days, I'm going to Florence, Italy. I just love Italian food."

"That makes two of us."

Justin brought the car to a halt in front of an Italian restaurant favored by the locals and looked at Gina. "That's the restaurant, but there's no parking space. Perhaps you'd like to get out here. I'll find a place to park and be back in a few minutes."

"A couple of days ago when I was about to get a taxi home, you suggested that I should be more careful, that I could be kidnapped. Seems to me that's more likely here than on Madison Avenue. There must be a parking place somewhere around here, Justin. I don't know this neighborhood, so I'd prefer to go with you. We'll walk back together," she said.

If she was putting him to a test, he was having none of it. "Whatever you say, ma'am, but from where I sit, this isn't working out too well."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, people manage to live together because they have laws and rules of behavior. Even in the family, where the people love each other, there are rules and strict codes of conduct. Wherever rules don't exist or aren't followed, society breaks down, families break down. And if you and I don't have any rules or conduct codes, this chauffeur-employer relationship will crack in a hurry."

She sucked her teeth. "I can't change just because you think an individual should be subservient to the person for whom he or she works."

"I didn't mention subservience. I'm talking about guidelines. Oh, what the heck. There's a parking space." He turned to her before he cut the motor. "And would you please wait until I open your door. Even if I wasn't your chauffeur, you should expect that much of me."

He opened her door and extended his hand to assist her in getting out. Static electricity shot up to his elbow. He jerked back his hand and stared down at her, certain that his face bore an expression of awe, but she was no less amazed.

Suddenly she laughed. "Serves you right, Justin, for being so bossy."

Bossy! That didn't half describe his attitude toward her right then. *It's a good thing I don't drink hard liquor*, he thought. *If I did, I'd head for the nearest bar*. On the verge of grabbing her shoulders and shaking her, he collected his wits and closed the door. "Come on, ma'am. You must be about starved."

Her knuckles braced her hips and stayed there. "Justin Whitehead, I am not starved, and I am not *ma'am*. Would you please call me by my name?"

"You're making it hard for me, Ms. Harkness. Lighten up, will you?"

If she didn't, he was going to give her some of what they both wanted and needed. The job be damned! They didn't speak as they walked the two long blocks back to the restaurant. When they would have crossed the boulevard to the restaurant, a motorcycle sped through the red light at high speed, and his long arm jerked her back to the sidewalk a second before the vehicle would have hit her. He held on to her until he could breathe.

"That guy must be on drugs. He ignored the light, the moving cars and you." He grasped her hand and quickened his steps. "Come on."

"Are we too late for lunch?" He asked the maitre d', mainly because his nervousness from that near disaster had not subsided.

The man's right hand patted his chest. "Too late for lunch? In this restaurant, you can have lunch at ten o'clock at night."

Justin waited until she gave her order, before telling the waiter, "I'd like eggplant lasagna, please, and separate checks." He ignored the waiter's stare, which amounted to a put-down. He couldn't have his way about everything in this game, but she was not going to pay for his lunch.

She seemed crushed, but he couldn't help that. "Why did you say that, Justin? It isn't as if you weren't working. I mean—"

"I know what you mean, but let's not dwell on it. Okay? You're paying me an adequate salary, and that means I pay for my own meals."

His words had a sharp edge, but he had nearly reached his limit. After that exchange, they didn't speak until he stood and asked if she was ready to leave. If she couldn't end their torture, he would, because he couldn't sit there another second, watch her misery and not take her hand and attempt to console her. When she didn't answer, he repeated as gently as he could, "Are you ready to leave?"

She looked up at him with a sad expression that he hadn't associated with her, and, without thinking, he extended his hand. She took it and stood.

"I'm sorry if I sounded rough," he said, "but this is hard." She didn't ask what he meant, and she needn't have, because he was aware that her feelings matched his own.

"Good heavens!" she said when they stepped out of the restaurant. "It's going to rain. Just look at those clouds."

"Yeah. You wait here till I get the car."

"No. It's all right, Let's run for it," she said.

The words had barely left her mouth when lightning flashed and the roar of thunder sounded as if the earth would crack. He grabbed her hand, and sheets of rain drenched them. He pulled her to an old, abandoned store front, wrapped her in his arms and turned his back to the pelting rain to shield her from it.

"I'm so sorry, Gina. You should have let me go for the car."

"And you think I'd want to be dry while this storm drenched you?"

He held her closer, and she let him, pulling down his fences, laying wide his vulnerability. The rain pummeled his back, and he tucked her head beneath his chin, stroking her hair and her back as he did so. "Look, I... Something's happening here, and I—" She snuggled closer to him, and her arms went up to his shoulders. "Gina, my God, do you know what you're doing to me?"

Her lips glistened, and her breathing shortened as she stared into his eyes with the hottest expression of female want that he'd ever witnessed. He would regret it, but he was human, and he wanted her worse than he wanted air to breathe. He gazed down into her eyes, compliant and waiting, lowered his head and touched her sweet tender mouth. Frissons of heat plowed through him, shocking him. He raised his head and looked at her. Still, she waited. He tightened his arms around her, bent to her and seared her mouth with his own. Shaken, he would have backed away, but she parted her lips, and he plunged his tongue into her. She sucked him deep into her mouth and groans floated out of her like the sound of loving drifting from besotted mates.

He had to stop it, but he didn't want to. He'd never kissed a woman in the street, never even considered it. At last, he won the struggle. Now, what? She didn't move away from him, so he assumed she wasn't angry.

Because he had to be sure that he did nothing to hurt or embarrass her, he hugged her, kissed her cheek and took her hand. "It's slacked up a bit, and we're already wet, so let's make a run for it."

It didn't surprise him that she walked to the front passenger's door and stood beside it with an expression of such defiance on her face that he wouldn't have dared

cross her. He opened the door, waited there until she seated herself, and reached across her and fastened her seat belt.

He took the driver's seat, started the car and was about to move away from the curb when she said, "It didn't kill you, did it?"

He knew what she meant, but he asked her nonetheless. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, my sitting here isn't killing you."

"Don't be too sure of that. For all you know, I'm dying inside."

After a long while, she said, "I'm sorry, Justin. I shouldn't have been so glib."

He could see that she wasn't going to open the subject of what had just passed between them, that for her, it would be business as usual. But he wondered what she'd say and, more importantly what she'd do, if she knew that, having tasted her, he meant to have her. The only questions in his mind were when and in what circumstances.

"I don't think we'd better go shopping in these wet clothes," he said.

She looked at him. "Oh my goodness. Your suit is ruined."

"Don't worry about it. When it comes back from the cleaners, it will look like new."

"But won't it shrink?"

"Wool seems to be a hardy fabric," he said, evading her question. "Do you want me to take you home?"

"I guess so, but I was looking forward to picking out the furnishings for the office."

He looked at his watch. "If you can dress in forty minutes, we can make it."

"But you'll still be wet."

"I won't be uncomfortable." He got off the Queensboro

Bridge and headed up First Avenue to Seventy-ninth Street. He parked in front of the building into which she'd just moved, and the doorman rushed to open the car door for her. Justin looked straight ahead, so as not to be recognized, and when she got out of the car, he put on the black-rimmed glasses, leaned back and gave his mind free reign.

Standing in the drenching rain on Queens Boulevard, she'd tied him in such a knot that he'd lost the will to do the right thing. He shouldn't have put his hands on her, but he'd simply said, "The hell with it, I want her and I'm going to have her." He closed his eyes and shook his head from side to side. She was like a fine diamond, sparkling brilliantly and coolly on the outside and a blazing fire on the inside. He'd never known a woman like her. She touched him in so many places and so many ways.

"I wouldn't be so worried," he said aloud, "if I didn't have this awful need to protect her and to take care of her. But I know what that means because I've never had it before."

He resisted the urge to remove his wet jacket, because he intended to honor her as her chauffeur, even if she did insist on sitting in the front seat. He understood well her reason, though she hadn't articulated it. She respected him and she wanted him, and she didn't like their differences in status. He saw her walking out of the building with the doorman at her side, got out of the car, walked around and waited to let her choose where she would sit. She went directly to the front passenger's door, and he opened it, leaned across her and fastened her seat belt.

"Thanks, Justin," she said, "but I can fasten my seat belt."

"I know that. You can probably drive this car, too."

"You can't possibly be comfortable in those wet clothes. I don't feel right sitting here dry and fresh, when you got soaked protecting me."

"I'm fine, ma'am."

"I wish you wouldn't call me that. How can you, after... after—"

"After the way we were with each other an hour ago? Can't make yourself say it? We're going to have to deal with it one way or the other. Both of us knew that could happen, and we knew it the second I walked into your office. After we check out this furniture, I'd like us to go somewhere and talk, some place where we'll be on equal terms."

"Can it wait? I have to prepare for a talk tomorrow. It's my first, and I'm nervous about it."

"I'd make a great guinea pig. Practice on me. Where are we going tomorrow?"

"A ladies' luncheon club in South Hampton. I need board members who have money and clout, and those women have it. I have to be there at one o'clock. I promised to get you a schedule, but I haven't had time."

"I'll be at your place at nine-fifteen." He turned slightly and glanced over his right shoulder before easing into the Broadway traffic.

"I didn't know you wore glasses," she said.

"My eyes get tired, sometimes." At least, he hadn't lied. He wanted to talk with Gina, and he also wanted to be her sounding board for her lecture, but he needed to see his brother.

"They're practically a camouflage. Be grateful that you don't have to wear them all the time."

"If I were smart, I would," he said, and left the cryptic comment to her judgment.

“Perhaps I can practice my talk during the ride to South Hampton. Can you listen while you drive?”

He didn’t tell her that, while driving, he often wrote scenarios in his head and when he got to his computer, the story flowed out of him as if he’d memorized it. “I can listen,” he said, “and I’ll be glad to.” He hoped she’d come to terms with her thoughts that he didn’t fit her notion of a chauffeur. She trusted him, and he was counting on that to smooth their relationship when his day of reckoning came.

“Here we are. Fortunately, there’s plenty of parking space.”

“And let’s hope the heavens don’t open up again while we’re inside. It’s April in New York, and that spells showers.”

He grinned down at her, intentionally provoking her. “Not to worry. Besides, you should pray for rain, because then I’ll have an excuse to keep you dry.” Let her digest *that*.

To his amazement, she did. “If you need an excuse, don’t bother.”

His whistle split the air, and he bowed from the waist. “I stand corrected.” Glib, was she? And sure of herself, too. This woman had facets that he would enjoy unraveling, and he meant to decipher every one of them. He parked a few paces from the first store she’d listed and turned to her. “Sit there until I open your door.”

“Yes, sir. I wouldn’t dare disobey you.”

He ignored that, opened her door, unhooked her seat belt and extended his hand. She glanced up at him. Their gazes clung, and no matter how he tried, he couldn’t break the contact.

Heat sizzled in his loins. “Don’t play with fire, Gina. If

you do, this thing will torch both of us, and I'm not talking about a little singeing, either."

"If you have so much control over *your* feelings," she said with a frown that altered the contours of her face, "why didn't you use it back there on Queens Boulevard, instead of spinning me like a top and leaving me like that?"

He stared down at her sweet glistening lips and swallowed hard. "Because you didn't control *your* feelings, and I'm human. So I gave in to it and took what I'd wanted from the minute I first looked at you." She took his hand and got out of the car. He wondered if they could stop their tug of war and settle into employer-employee relations. Somehow, he doubted they'd ever come to terms until he lay buried deep inside of her.

Gina tried to clear her head and stop thinking about the way Justin made her feel. She was about to spend a lot of money, and she didn't want to make any major mistakes.

As they entered the store, he asked her, "Are you planning to buy carpets?"

"Why, yes. Why?"

"I see some over there." He led her to a stack of hand-made Persian carpets and began exposing the tags so that she could read them.

"They're all fine carpets," a salesman said. "What type and color would you prefer?"

She had no knowledge of Persian carpets, but she could see that they came in different colors and patterns, so she said, "I'd rather look through and see what my eye catches." She glanced at Justin, who nodded approval. "I want three and I want different colors. This one's lovely," she said, looking at a Royal Bokara. "Do you have this one

in a different color?" She stepped closer to Justin. "Do you remember the measurement for the reception room? Brown would look nice there."

"I think it would, and this Bokara would be great for your office."

"We work so well together," she said to herself. "Our tastes are complementary, and we agree on a lot of things. Why did it have to be like this?"

They shopped until six-thirty. "I think I have everything, except drapes. The two offices ought to have drapes."

"Why don't you get someone to measure for them, make them and hang them. Whoever makes them can bring you fabric samples."

"Thanks. I thought about that." He drove her back home and parked in front of the building.

"I'd better take this in for you. This sculpture is too heavy for you to carry."

The doorman could have taken it for her, but she wanted to see what he'd do if he were alone with her in her apartment. He asked the doorman to watch the car for a few minutes and accompanied her to her apartment.

"I bought a lot of new stuff because this place is three times the size of my other apartment," she told him, after he put the sculpture in a corner on the floor. "Come here and let me show you the view from my living-room window. She raised the blinds to the top of the window. "Look. Isn't it beautiful?" She gasped. "Would you look at that sunset?"

"Yes, it's beautiful. It's exquisite. Perfect. And so are you."

She couldn't look at him, because she wanted so badly to believe his words, to feel that he thought her special in

some way. In any way. "I'm not beautiful, Justin. No one has ever thought that."

He tipped up her chin with his right index finger and pierced her with the heat in his eyes. "You're beautiful to me." He stared down at her, his eyes turbulent pools of desire. Why didn't he do something? Hold her. Love her. She wanted him inside of her. Frustrated and not even realizing the import of her actions, she closed her eyes, knotted both fists and clenched them until her nails bruised her palms. So close. She breathed his breath and smelled his heat, and she thought she'd go crazy.

He lifted her from the floor and brought her breast to his chest and her belly to his belly. "Open your mouth and let me in. Let me inside of you."

He shoved his tongue into her waiting mouth, and the hot fire of desire shot through her. She grabbed his buttocks and locked him to her, pressing his bulging erection to the apex of her legs. She feasted on the sweet torture of his tongue, sucking and squeezing, out of her mind with the thrills he sent shooting through her and aggravating her libido till she thought she'd die wanting him all the way in her.

She opened her eyes when she realized that he'd broken the kiss. "I'm not sorry," she blurted out. "Not even if you are."

He set her on her feet and ran his fingers over his short curls. "What are we going to do about this, Gina? We're like nail and magnet. I'm not sure we can work together, at least not on the terms we have."

"But I need you."

He turned to the window and looked out at the dying sun. "As your chauffeur or as your man? I've boxed myself in here, and I don't like it."

She moved to his side and eased an arm around his waist. "It's late for that now, isn't it?"

"I don't know. I just don't know. It's going to be a bumpy ride. "

His words hit her like sharp darts shot into her chest. She didn't want to contemplate his leaving her. "If it'll help, I'll sit in the back seat." Laughter poured out of him like a gushing oil well, as if he had at last found relief for a long, pent-up emotion.

"Sweetheart, it won't matter where you sit. It won't even matter whether we're in the same city. This die was well cast the minute we met, and it won't fade anytime soon. I'd better get out of here before I make a difficult situation impossible. I'll be here tomorrow morning at nine-fifteen."

He took her hand and walked to the door. "I'd probably like your apartment if I could get my mind on it." Still holding her hand, he said, "Don't let what's happened between us unsettle you. Sometimes, nature has her own agenda, and we're just players in her little humorless satire."

Alone and bereft of his nearness, she made her way to her bedroom and sat on the dusty rose boudoir bench that still wore its protective plastic cover. "Lord, what have I done to myself? I'm head over heels for this man, and I don't know anything about him. Suppose he falsified his application." But he hadn't, because she'd checked his references.

She had earned two university degrees, and she knew perfect and educated English when she heard it. His manners, self-confidence...oh, yes, and his unbelievable breadth of knowledge about a variety of things—such as differences between Bokara and Kerman carpets, includ-

ing their place of origin—regularly surprised her. She wasn't about to believe that Justin Whitehead had worked as a chauffeur, unless he did that during his college days. And the man had definitely been through college. Somehow, she didn't doubt his honesty. Perhaps that was because he had foregone half a dozen opportunities to behave in an untrustworthy manner.

And, oh, the way he made her feel, as if she hadn't been alive, had existed like a tree in winter, until he had her in his arms, shattering her defenses, heating her to boiling point and loving her so tenderly that she had to fight the tears. She fell across the bed and pummeled the spread with her fist.

I may regret it, but I'm going to have him if it's the last thing I do. I want to know what I'm like and who I am with him buried deep inside of me.

Her cell phone rang, and she heaved herself up from the bed and forced herself across the room to retrieve her pocketbook. She didn't want to speak with anyone, not even Justin. "Hello."

"This is Miles Strags. You haven't been in touch with me. By now, you should have moved and you should have a car for your chauffeur to drive."

Like a streak of lightning, her temper flashed. "I've moved, bought a car, taken my vitamins and brushed my teeth regularly. I do not intend to report my behavior to you, Miles, so don't expect it and try not to harass me."

"I see you have a sharp tongue, Gina, but you should not make me a victim of it. I only want what's good for you. And speaking of that, I don't think you made the best choice when you hired that chauffeur."

Her eyebrows shot up. "He carries out his duties flaw-

lessly. I have no complaints. Have a good evening, Miles.” She closed the phone slowly. So Miles didn’t like Justin.

She searched her mind for a reason, but could find none. She recalled observing Miles in a fleeting moment when his eyes betrayed him with what was unmistakably desire. So Miles was jealous of Justin.

Well, she concluded after musing over the situation for a few minutes, I’m sure Miles is not the first man to envy Justin, and he won’t be the last.

If Gina had accommodated herself to her feelings for Justin and the emotion he stirred within her, Justin could not. Gina regretted only that Justin seemed bent on allowing their relationship to be circumscribed by their roles as employer and employee. Justin carried with him the weight of deception, a handicap with which he’d had no experience. He opened the door of his apartment, walked in and kicked it shut. The whole world seemed to hang from his shoulders, and he couldn’t shake off the load.

What had he done? Was a story worth what loomed before him? He stripped, showered and changed into dry clothing. If he hadn’t stopped, they’d be wrapped in each other’s arms that minute. He went to the kitchen, saw nothing edible that interested him and telephoned his brother.

“Justin here. I hope you don’t have a dinner engagement.”

“I do, but I wasn’t going out. I’m defrosting some chicken and dumplings Mom gave me when I was home a couple of weeks ago.”

“Are you serious? Do you have enough for both of us?”

“There’s plenty for two meals. Bring a bag of ready-to-cook spinach. I don’t want to spend the night washing it.”

“Anything else? I’m two blocks from a gourmet shop. What can we have for dessert?”

“Whatever you bring.”

He bought the spinach and a pecan praline ice cream cake, hopped into the Jaguar and headed for York Avenue. His brother rented two garage spaces in the garage beneath the building in which he lived, so that his guests could park without a struggle. Justin parked in the space beside his brother’s Lincoln and took the elevator to the twentieth floor.

He and Craig greeted each other with open arms, as they usually did. “Come on in,” Craig said. “I’ll sauté the spinach. What else did you bring?” Justin told him. “Whew. Right on, man. This is better than a restaurant.”

“Yeah,” Justin said, “provided you don’t count the fact that we have to clean up after ourselves. I wouldn’t care if I never saw another kitchen.”

Craig served the meal, opened a bottle of white burgundy wine and said the grace. “I only remember to say grace if I’m in Washington and if I’m eating with you.”

Justin inhaled the aroma of his mother’s chicken and dumplings, a scent he’d loved as long as he’d known himself. “Nobody makes this like Mom.”

“You said it. What’s it like being a chauffeur? Or have you started yet?”

Justin knew he’d sought Craig’s company because he needed to talk about his quandary, and he trusted his brother to keep his confidence. “I’ve started, and it’s hell.”

Craig stopped eating and placed his fork on the side of his plate. “She’s not what you thought, or what?”

“She’s more than I thought. More decent, more vulnerable, sweeter and more loving. More every damn thing

that's positive. Sophisticated and naive at the same time, if that's possible. I wonder how many traps she'd have fallen into if I wasn't there to shepherd her around them. And she's wonderful."

"I see. Have you made love to her?"

"How'd that question come up?"

"You're nuts about her. Does she know it?"

A half smile flashed across his face. "She's not *that* naive. Of course she knows it. I couldn't keep my hands off her, and she didn't do a damned thing to prevent it. She wants me just as badly as I want her, and she doesn't mind if I know it."

"And how do you feel about all this?"

"Guilty as hell, because I'm deceiving her, and I've never done anything like this before in my life. How was I to know that we'd be attracted to each other?"

"You can always quit, or if you can't do that for contractual reasons, don't pursue any kind of personal relationship with her. It will be difficult, but you can do it if you make up your mind."

He stared at Craig for a long minute. "You couldn't be serious. I've never wanted a woman the way I want her. I'd walk over hot coals to get her, and I'm as certain as I am of my name that I'll have her."

Chapter 4

At precisely nine-fifteen the following morning, the doorman buzzed Gina's apartment. "Your car is here, ma'am."

"Thanks, Carver. I'll be right down."

Justin stood beside the car at the passenger's door. She knew he saw her face light up when she saw him. She hadn't previously seen him wearing those dark aviator glasses, and the dangerous appearance they gave him sent streaks of excitement through her. She'd promised him that she'd sit in the back seat, but he'd said it didn't matter where she sat, so she decided to sit up front beside him just this once. Maybe she was fooling herself. So be it.

"How are you this morning?" she asked him.

"Fine, ma'am."

She stopped herself as she was about to stamp her feet.

Instead she opened the door, got in, grabbed her seat belt and hooked it. "Let's go, Justin."

He got in and, as if he wasn't the least fazed, fastened his seat belt, started the ignition and pulled away from the curb. After twenty minutes of complete silence and with Manhattan behind them, he turned off Grand Central into Van Wyck Expressway, eased up on the accelerator and said, "There is no point burying ourselves in drama, Gina. We cannot have our cake and eat it, too. It has to be one way or the other. I'm trying to be honorable about this, but I have to tell you that you're making my job very hard. I'd appreciate a little help."

"Okay. Pull over to the shoulder, and I'll get in the back seat." Bitterness dripped from every syllable that she uttered. He would have loved to shake her. Couldn't she see that a man couldn't tolerate being subservient to a woman who he cared for and wanted more than he wanted air?

His laughter had the sound of desperation. "And then I can keep my gaze on this rear view mirror rather than the traffic. There is no easy solution to this. When you're selling the foundation to those rich society ladies, please remember that I am your chauffeur. They all have chauffeurs, and they treat them as such."

Then he changed the subject. "You said you wanted to go to Italy. Is that because of the food, or do you like art and architecture, too?"

"That and the Italian culture, its history and the scenic beauty that I've heard so much about. I've never been anywhere or done anything interesting. When I was eleven, my mother introduced my father to her childhood best friend, and he apparently fell for the woman on sight, because he

went home with her and stayed all night. The next morning, my mother cleaned out the household bank accounts, closed them, changed the locks on the doors of our house and locked my father out. Then, she went into total decline. From that day, I had to take care of her, bathing and feeding her, balancing the checkbook, doing the laundry and shopping. Everything. It was awful. Finally, she died, and my aunt Elsa, mother's sister, took me to live with her. Those are days that I do not care to remember."

He didn't speak. He couldn't. Never would he have imagined that a woman with Gina's warm and loving personality had experienced such a difficult and harsh childhood. "If I wasn't driving this car, I'd take you in my arms and...and try to make up for all that ugliness. I know I couldn't erase it, but I'd do that if I could. I—"

She patted his knee. "I think I know how you feel, Justin, and I... Well, thank you."

He glanced at her, for she sounded as if she'd lost her breath. "Are you okay?"

She nodded. "I'm fine."

"Did you... Was your aunt good to you?"

"Oh, yes. I used to wonder if she and my mother grew up in the same home. She introduced me to classical music, the theater, art. We didn't have a lot of money, but we had the library, the radio and public television. Whenever we had an occasion to celebrate, she took me some place special, the Kennedy Center, the Corcoran Gallery or the National Gallery of Art. Auntie never married, and she didn't have children. We had a wonderful life together. As soon as I went to live with her, she began preparing me for college. We read the classics and discussed what we read. By the time I was a high-school senior, I was a national

honor student. There isn't anything that I wouldn't do for my auntie."

He reflected on what she'd told him, deciding that she was probably more like her aunt than either of her parents. "Does your aunt know that you're wealthy?"

"Of course. She's the only person I told, but she insists that she's a seamstress, that she loves sewing and designing and wouldn't be happy if she couldn't do the work she loves. You'd like her."

"I don't doubt it." He took the exit from Van Wyck and headed into Southern State. "It's ten-twenty, and we have another two hours to drive. Shall we stop for coffee?" She agreed, and he parked at a rest stop. She waited until he opened the door for her, and after he unbuckled her seat belt, she extended her hand to him. He lifted her bodily from the car and set her on her feet. She didn't ask why he did that, and he didn't explain it, but he'd needed to feel her in his arms, and no one had to tell him that he would one day pay the piper.

"Find a table," he said, "and I'll bring the coffee."

"Give me the bill," she said, when he put the coffee and three scones on the table. "And don't give me an argument about it, Justin. Every employee gets either per diem or an expense account when working away from the regular post."

He sat down, put some milk in his coffee and took a sip. "Which is why I'm not giving you this receipt. I *am* at my regular post. A chauffeur doesn't work in an office. He drives from place to place." The misery that she felt surfaced to her face, and he put the check on the table. "You make me feel like a heel. Here. Take the damned thing. From now on, you get your coffee, and I'll get mine." He

didn't sound like an employee, and he didn't feel like one; he was a man fighting to keep his pride.

"I've made you uncomfortable, and I'm sorry," she said, and pushed the receipt back to him. He put it in his pocket.

They arrived at the sorority house twenty-five minutes before their appointed time, and a tall, fashionable blonde greeted them in the lobby. Quickly, Gina forestalled whatever awkwardness Justin's presence might have caused.

"Ms. Gilford, I'm delighted to be here. This is Mr. Whitehead. He travels with me on these occasions."

He could almost see the woman's hormones preparing themselves for a dance to his tune, and he thanked God that he had on those dark glasses. "Welcome, Mr. Whitehead," she gushed. "We're so pleased to have you with us. This is a business occasion, so don't expect any girl talk."

"Thank you for having me, Ms. Gilford. The pleasure's mine."

Hmm. This brother can hold his own anywhere. Maybe it's because he's worked around people like Heather Gilford. Gina watched Heather from the corner of her eye as Heather collected fliers from a table in the foyer, turned to Justin and said, "You may find these interesting. If not, I'm sure I can...uh...find something else to keep you occupied. We're having crab cakes for lunch. I hope you like them." She turned to walk ahead of them.

His grin didn't reach his eyes when he said, "Thanks. I'm sure this will do it."

Oh, yes, Gina realized, Justin had indeed known women like Heather Gilford, probably plenty of them, and he had their number. She relaxed. At least she wouldn't have to

watch another woman walk off with the man she wanted as her poor mother had.

Gina said to Justin beneath her breath, "I'll be glad when this is over."

"It's just beginning. In a few months, you'll have your fill of these women," he answered quietly.

During lunch—evidently designed to ensure that none of the women gained a gram—Heather Gilford attempted to confine her conversation to Justin, but he insisted on talking about the Heddy Lloyd Foundation and its work with women and children. She wondered where he learned all that about the foundation. Perhaps he'd heard me talking about it on the phone, she thought.

At one-thirty, Heather excused herself, went to the podium and introduced Gina. "Ms. Harkness is carrying the ball for abused women and children. She deserves a hearing and she deserves our support."

Gina talked from her notes because she figured she would be more impressive if she didn't read from a text. At the conclusion, she asked for financial support and for two volunteers who would serve on the board. "Once I've established it, the board will meet three times a year. Thank you so much for your attention and for the opportunity to speak with you," Gina concluded.

She answered questions for the next forty minutes, and when she saw that Justin took notes, she directed a question to him—how much of the assistance would the foundation give directly?

"Only when we can't locate a qualified organization," he said, "but that situation is unlikely to arise often. We have a great number of operating agencies on our roster."

She thanked her hosts and left with a feeling of accom-

plishment, because she had five individual pledges and one corporate pledge. Four women expressed a willingness to serve on the board.

"I'd say it's a banner day," Justin said as they headed back to New York City. "Unfortunately, we'll run into rush-hour traffic, so you ought to get a snack if you're hungry."

"Me? Hungry? No wonder those women are so skinny. I could eat nonstop for an hour. That was the smallest crab cake I ever saw."

"Tell me about it," he said. "I thought lettuce was filling. I want a hamburger and a ton of fries."

"Me, too. Let's stop at the first place we see."

Laughter exploded from him, and his eyes glistened. He seemed happy, and she'd give anything if he stayed that way. "If I eat all that, I won't want any dinner," she said.

He drove off the highway and parked at a restaurant whose parking lot was crowded with automobiles. "Let's stop here."

After they found seats, he said, "I want to ask you something. What would you do if I called you at home one evening and asked you to have dinner with me?" His question surprised her, and she knew that her face registered that fact. "Okay. Forget I asked," he said.

"Why should I forget it? If I didn't have an engagement, I'd put on my best dress and go to dinner with you. Why wouldn't I? I've had dinner with men who weren't near your level of refinement. But I can say that of most men I've encountered."

"You flatter me," he said, but she didn't think so. Indeed, she would one day question him about himself, his background and his reason for working as a chauffeur, but not

now. Not yet. She knew enough about life to know that if she insisted on being privy to his secrets, she'd lose him. Knowing that he was honorable and that he cared sufficed for the present.

The sun set long before they reached her address. She could truthfully say that she had never been in such a traffic jam as when they crawled along on Grand Central Parkway. He'd played a half-dozen CDs and finally, when she figured he'd become bored, he asked her if she sang, and they joined in several popular songs.

He parked in front of the imposing building, walked to the elevator with her and said, "I want to see you to your door."

She didn't respond, merely pushed the button for the elevator. "Where's your key?" he asked when they reached her apartment. She handed it to him. He opened the door and walked in with her already tight in his arms.

"Kiss me," he said. His tone urgent and compelling. "I need to feel you close to me. It's wrong. I know it, but I need you."

She took him in and savored the tenderness with which he adored and cherished her. She'd lived for thirty-four years without having been loved. Maybe he didn't love her, but he cared deeply, and she needed his expressions of what he felt for her. With parted lips, she welcomed him. His fingers stroked her back, caressed her head and her cheeks. She wanted more as desire welled up in her, befuddling her brain, tormenting her vagina until she pressed him to her.

"Gina. Oh, Gina!"

She took his hand and placed it on her breast, and he stared into her eyes while he brushed and pinched her nipple. She wanted to remove her jacket and her blouse and feel his warm, moist lips tugging at her nipple.

"Oh, Lord," she said as if the words were ripped out of her. His big hand went inside of her blouse, popping a button until at last, he freed her erected nipple, bent his head and sucked it into his mouth. Screams poured out of her as he sucked. She gripped his buttocks and undulated against him as he claimed her.

Suddenly, he eased her breast back into her blouse. "I didn't mean to take it this far," he said in a voice shaken with tremors. "I only wanted to kiss you, to hold you. Gina, I want to make love with you, but I...I'd better get out of here right now. Don't...don't be put out by this. I care a lot for you." A minute later, he was out of the door. Gina grabbed a dictionary off the coffee table and pitched it across the room. Feeling only a little less frustrated, she dialed his cell-phone number.

"Hello."

"This is Gina. What did you mean when you said 'It's wrong?' Are you married?"

"I've never been married, Gina."

"Are you engaged?" When he said he wasn't, she asked him, "Then what did you mean when you said it's wrong, and why did you leave me?"

"We were nearing the point of no return. If I hadn't left, we would have made love, but I didn't have any protection for you, and feeling as I was, I didn't trust myself to use a less reliable method."

She hadn't thought of protection. "Thank you. You're a very special person, Justin. I hope you know that."

"I'm not sure I deserve your unqualified praise, but I appreciate it. By the way, why did you allow me to answer that question during your question-and-answer period? You knew the answer as well as I, and probably better."

“Because you went into that place with the intention of supporting me. You took notes, when I hadn’t remembered to do it. You were there for me, and I wanted to acknowledge that publicly. I thought your explanation was better than mine would have been.”

“I don’t know about that. You gave a very impressive talk.”

“Thanks, Justin.”

Seconds after she hung up, a loud banging on her door startled her. She put on the shoes that she kicked off while talking to Justin and went to open the door. Before she reached it, the person banged again, this time louder. She wouldn’t have expected that in such a quiet, prestigious building. She slipped the chain in place—as she would have done when she lived near the projects—and asked, “Who is it?”

“Turn your music down.”

Gina opened the door and looked down at the woman, pale as cooking flour and hair equally white. “I beg your pardon, madam. What’s gotten into you?”

“Your music is too loud. We don’t have noisy people in this building.”

Gina let a smile flash over her face. “Is that so? I don’t have a radio, a television or a record player, I wasn’t singing, and there’s no one here but me. So you’re either imagining things, or you’re being antagonistic.”

“I know what I heard.”

“You’d better have your ears examined, madam. And do not make the mistake of banging on my door again. I have a door bell. And if it’s your intention to harass me because you think I don’t belong here, you would be wise not to attempt it. Good night.” She closed the door.

So this is why Heddy wanted me to live in this build-

ing. She often referred to her narrow-minded neighbors and the fact that she detested their attitudes. However, Gina had decided that Heddy's neighbors thought Heddy strange and behaved accordingly. But this was different. That old biddy across the hall didn't want a black woman around unless she was wearing a maid's uniform.

"I ought to hire a white maid," Gina said to herself. "It would serve her right."

However, Gina knew that Heddy wanted the battle fought at a different level. She wanted those people to learn that race did not define a person, and sarcastic behavior and one-upmanship would not accomplish that. She would need the manager's help, so she phoned and asked him to call a meeting of the tenants for a date approximately a week away and to put the notice in *Housetops*, the building's weekly journal.

Whereas Gina's unfriendly neighbor's behavior helped to cool her passion and relieve the tension that had built up in her thanks to her exchange with Justin, he had not found relief. His sister's telephone call only irritated him. He loved his sister, but he didn't feel like talking, and she insisted on telling him everything that had happened since they last spoke two weeks earlier.

"Lynn, hon, this is a bad time. Can we talk in a couple of days? It isn't that I'm not interested, I am, but my plate is so full right now that I don't know what side is up."

"You do too many things. One day, you'll realize that you're human like the rest of us, and you'll slow down and lead a normal life."

"You're probably right. Have you been by to see Mom and Dad recently?"

“Sure. Dad’s already set up the barbecue grill on the deck, and if I call and say I’m coming over, that’s all the excuse he needs to turn out a feast.”

“Mom ought to make him stop eating all that stuff. It’s ruining his arteries.”

“Justin, you know as well as I do that if anything makes Dad happy, Mom’s all for it. We can thank the Lord that he’s an honorable, law-abiding citizen. ’Bye for now.”

He hung up and sat down to give serious thought to his relationship with Gina. He wanted her, but there was a lot more to it than that, and cooling his loins in her body wouldn’t end it for either of them. Indeed, he seemed to become more deeply involved, to care more for her every time he was with her. Should he level with her, leave the job and cause a problem for himself with his editor? Or should he let it ride and see what the end would be? He definitely did not favor the latter, because he didn’t want to lose Gina, at least not yet.

I think I’ll go to Washington this weekend and see my folks. It’s the surest way I know to have my principles revived and flung in my face. Sometimes I wonder why Mom chose to be a university professor rather than a preacher. She could hold her own with anybody in a pulpit.

Shortly after noon the next day, he parked his Jaguar in the driveway of his parents’ upper Sixteenth Street house. It was a modern, two-story brown brick edifice set well back from the street in a grove of oak and pine trees. He took the bag of Snickers that he’d placed in the seat beside him, got out, locked the car and went into the house. Immediately, the comfort of the familiar beige walls, his grandfather Joshua Whitehead’s portrait, the huge beige-colored marble fireplace and the Steinway grand piano resting on sumptuous carpet seeped into him.

He heard her footsteps on the stairs, and after a moment, he rushed forward to greet his mother.

Alma Whitehead enveloped her son in strong loving arms. "I didn't think you'd get here so soon." She stepped back and let her gaze roam over him. "Let me look at you. You've lost weight. It couldn't be your work, because you're always on top of that. What's her name?"

"Gina, and if I lost weight, I doubt she has anything to do with it."

"Gina, huh? What does Gina do?"

He narrowed his eyes and allowed his mother to see that she was about to trespass. "She runs a foundation for homeless and abused women and children."

"That doesn't tell me anything. Where did she go to school?"

He put his hands in the back pockets of his jeans and stepped away. "Why don't you ask me if she went to school? Isn't that more important than where she studied?" What had he expected? His mother didn't lay great store by anyone who wasn't educated, the higher up, the better.

"She has a master's degree from New York University, but I'm not going to help you dissect her. You do that every time I mention a woman. It seems to me you'd want me to find someone who is loving, loyal and supportive, as well as intelligent."

Alma sat in her favorite chair as if she carried a heavy weight. He ignored her evident distress. "I'm thirty-seven, Mom, and I've met every kind of woman that there is. Stop punishing yourself. If I ever fall in love, I'll get married."

"Are you in love with her?"

"Not that I know of. Where's Dad?"

"He's doing the grocery shopping. When I told him you'd be here this weekend, he made plans for one of his special barbecues."

"Really? Craig and I think you ought to supervise his grilling. He eats too much fat, Mom. Can't he grill fish, shrimp and chicken? All those hamburgers and steaks aren't good for him."

"He enjoys it so much that... Son, when you love someone, all you want is their happiness. How can I tell him not to do something he loves so much?"

"If you explain the risk, he'll cooperate. He's an intelligent man. If he doesn't, get Dr. Banner to tell him."

"All right. I will. Now, about Gina."

"Case closed, Mom." He knew she wouldn't probe further, but he suspected that his mother would develop an attitude about Gina, though she knew nothing about her. He bounded up the stairs to his old room, hung up his slacks and dress shirt—he didn't expect to wear them, but who knew what scenario his mother could invent?

He looked out of his bedroom window, saw his father ease the family sedan into the driveway behind his Jaguar, and raced down the stairs and out of the front door to greet him. From early childhood, he had loved the comfort and reassurance of his father's embrace, and he still did.

"You look great, Dad. How do you feel these days?"

"I can't play three sets of tennis as easily as I once did, but I can still do three laps in the pool. How about you? I'm real proud of your latest piece in *Esquire*. That was quality reporting, and great writing."

"Thanks. I was hoping you'd like it."

"I loved it. Have you talked with your mother?"

"Yes, sir. Why? Anything wrong?"

“Not that I know of. She was so excited about you coming home. You children have your own lives now, and we don’t expect to see you all the time, but when we do, it’s precious.”

They walked around the house to the deck, and Franklin jumped up on it and took his purchases to the kitchen. “I hope I’m as agile as you are when I’m sixty-five,” Justin said as he hopped up on the deck and followed his father into the kitchen.

“You’d better change, Justin,” Alma called down from some place upstairs. “One of my colleagues is joining us for the barbecue.”

Justin looked at his father. “Which colleague did she invite, and what’s her name?”

“Can’t say, but she’s been telling me that she wants you to meet one of her associate professors. I don’t remember her name.”

He was having none of it. “Dad, I am perfectly dressed for a cookout, and I am not going to change. I also don’t want to meet any of Mom’s protégés. I came home to see my parents. If I’d wanted a woman’s company, I’d have stayed in New York and enjoyed myself.”

Franklin released a sharp whistle. “Do you have a girl?”

“I don’t know, Dad. I’ve got a problem, and it’s of my own making. When I’m with her, I know she’s what I really need, that down deep she suits me, but I can’t pursue the relationship as I would like, because I’ve boxed myself into a corner.” He wanted to tell his father everything, but he didn’t want advice. He knew what he *should do*; he simply didn’t have the will to do it.

“Is she married or engaged?”

“Neither. You’d love her. I don’t know about Mom, but

frankly, I wouldn't choose a woman just to please my mother."

"Of course not. What amazes me is that she doesn't choose for you and Craig women like herself. When she leaves her office and comes home, she's a loving, tender and caring wife and mother. Those women she wants you and Craig to meet wear their PhD degrees like a banner 24/7."

Franklin busied himself marinating the meat, paring and slicing the vegetables and enjoying the company of his elder son and oldest child. "Is there any way you could manage to bring this young lady down here?" he asked Justin.

"Not yet, sir, and probably not for the next four months. If Gina and I are still friends then, I'll bring her."

"I can see that you care for her, and I'll say a few words of prayer that you get what's best for you."

"Thanks. I appreciate that. I'd better go brush my teeth. I wouldn't want to offend Dr. Perfect."

Franklin patted him on the back. "Be careful, now. Don't give your mother a hard time."

Justin went into his room, closed the door and telephoned Gina. "Hi. This is Justin. How are you?"

"I'm arranging and rearranging the furniture that just arrived."

"Gina, for goodness' sake. Can't you get some of the men who work in that house to place that furniture for you?"

"I guess so. Justin, I have to get used to the fact that there's always somebody willing to do everything, if you pay them. I'm used to counting my change twice."

"I'm with my parents in Washington. Can you wait until tomorrow night?"

"I've finished, except for the sofa, and I'll ask one of the men to move that. But if you want to come by when you get back, uh...maybe I can scrape up some supper."

"I want to see you, and you know it."

"I don't take anything for granted, Justin. I've learned the folly of that...the hard way. Call me and let me know about what time you'll get here."

"I will. 'Bye for now."

He brushed his teeth, considered changing from his yellow collared T-shirt to a dress shirt, and decided against it. He loped down the stairs minutes before the door bell rang. Justin listened to the sound of spiked heels tapping on the tiled floor in the hall and released a mild expletive.

"There you two are," his mother's voice rang out, announcing the presence of a guest. He put his glass of wine on the floor and stood.

"DeLeale, you've met my husband, Dr. Whitehead. This is my elder son, J. L. Whitehead, the journalist. Justin lives in New York City. Justin, this is Dr. Farmer.

"I'm glad to meet you, Dr. Farmer."

She extended her hand. "How are you, Justin. Please call me DeLeale. I've heard so much about you and read your work so often that I feel as if I know you." She held his hand until he extricated it from her clutch, and he looked directly into her eyes when he did it.

"It would be a mistake to confuse me with my work, Dr. Farmer, and, as you know, mothers are prone to exaggerate about their children." When she sat in the swing, he took a seat in a chair on the other side of the deck.

"Is this your wine?" DeLeale asked him.

"I'd finished with it." He was not going over there and give her a chance to invite him to sit beside her. The woman

was as aggressive as a talk-show host interviewing an A-list guest about the latest scandal. He'd been there, done that, and considered himself lucky to have escaped.

DeLeale crossed her knees, swung her long legs and said to Justin from her perch across the wide deck, "Why don't you tell me about yourself."

He glanced at his father and saw that he wore a smirk. He didn't dare look at his mother, for he wasn't used to sending her daggers. Annoyed and not caring who knew it, he said, "Dr. Farmer, I'm not auditioning today. I'm down here for a short visit with my parents, nothing more."

He looked at his mother then, saw that he'd irritated her and, for the first time in his life, he stared her down. He loved his mother, but he didn't like it when she pushed her female friends and associates on him, and he meant to see that she never did it again.

"Why, Justin," she said, "you surprise me."

He didn't back down. "Sorry, Mom, but the closer I get to forty, the more honest I am in my relations with people. I find that I'm much happier when I tell it just like it is."

His father served a delicious barbecued supper, which he devoured with relish. "I'm sorry if you're uncomfortable, son," his father said, having sat by Justin's side in a show of support.

The soft April breeze quickly cooled the corn on the cob, and Justin leaned back and enjoyed it. Spring in Washington never failed to enchant him. Dogwood blossoms in a profusion of reds, pinks and whites decorated his parents' neighborhood, and not even the odor of grilling beef, pork and onions camouflaged the smell of hyacinths and lilacs.

"I'm not uncomfortable, Dad. I know who I am and what I want. These little diversions by Mom can't derail me."

He glanced up and saw the expression of awe on his father's face. "You've really matured," Franklin said, "and not only in your work, but as a man. I tell you it gives me a great feeling."

"Thanks. Things that used to turn my head don't make me blink these days."

"That's what it means to be your own man," Franklin said.

Across the deck DeLeale stood and spoke loudly enough for all present to hear. "The food was divine, but it's getting late, and I don't drive through the park after dark, at least not when I'm alone."

Justin stood, but he was damned if he'd walk over to her and make small talk. He needn't have worried. She walked to him and extended her hand.

"J. L. Whitehead! I hope we meet again under more favorable circumstances when I'll have a fighting chance with you."

For the second time, he extracted his hand from hers, glanced at his father and saw that the man's eyebrows had shot up and stayed there. "Have a safe trip home," he said to DeLeale, refusing to lie and say he enjoyed meeting her.

"Mom must be out of her mind," Justin said to his father after the woman left.

Franklin grinned. "That's a cool one, all right, and you can bet all of it passed right over your mother's head."

"You're kidding."

Alma closed the screen door with more force than necessary. "Justin, how could you embarrass me like that. I wouldn't have dreamed you'd do such a thing."

"Sorry, Mom, but that dame rubbed me the wrong way. Why should I tell her about myself? She calculates a man's

sexual assets and then makes a play for him. I went through women like her when I was in college, and I've had enough."

Alma stared at him. "Why, Dr. Farmer wouldn't do such a thing."

"She would and did," Franklin said, "and you didn't hear what I heard when she walked over here. She's too aggressive for my taste. Let Justin and Craig choose their women. You stay out of it, baby."

He left Washington earlier than he'd planned because he wanted to go home before he saw Gina. He walked into his apartment a few minutes after four, tossed his duffel bag into the hall closet and headed for his bedroom. He decided to call Gina and let her know he was back early.

"Hi," he said when she answered. "I just walked into my place. You don't have to cook. We can go out if you'd like."

"That would be nice, but I'm already busy preparing dinner. And, Justin, I have so much to tell you. What time will you be here?"

"When do you want me to come?"

"Right now, but seven would be more practical."

His heart raced, and he told himself to remember the stakes and settle down. "Seven it is. See you then."

After a restorative shower, he stretched out on his king-size sleigh bed, locked his hands behind his head and tried to empty his mind. His gaze took in the picture of his parents seconds after they married, a picture that he kept on his night table. How had his father been so sure that he was marrying the right woman? How did a man know when he truly loved a woman?

Oh, what the hell! I may as well go for broke. She's who I want right now.

* * *

Somewhere between the time he left the doorman and the time she opened her apartment door, he backed away from his plan to make love with Gina that night. He couldn't say why, but it wasn't the right time, and he knew it. Perhaps being around his mother and listening to her discourses on dignity and honor, words with which she seemed to have a protracted love affair, may have increased his feelings of guilt about Gina. Maybe not. Maybe it was because he'd compared her to DeLeale Farmer, and appreciated her virtues more than ever.

Gina opened the door simultaneously with his touch of the bell. "Hi," she said. "You look...wonderful. Come on in."

He stepped in and looked down at her, hoping that his face bore a smile. "Hi. You look beautiful. Really lovely." He handed her the flowers, brushed her lips with his own, and immediately wished he hadn't. It was going to be hard enough keeping his libido under control without adding to his frustration by touching her. "You did a lot of work here," he said, looking around. "Who put the sofa over there?"

"I asked one of the maintenance men to do it as you suggested. Do you like what I did so far? Have a seat. Since you're not driving tonight, you can have a drink or some wine, can't you?"

"I brought you some wine." He handed her the small bag. "I'd prefer white, if you don't mind."

"Of course I don't mind."

So they'd spend the evening tiptoeing around each other, nervous and hungry for each other. They had to learn that sex wasn't the only basis for their relationship. He wanted a warm loving companion, and she had all the potential for the kind of partnership he needed.

This was their first real date, and he would treat it as such, provided she didn't sock him below the belt with the sweetness and tenderness that he seemed unable to resist.

"It seems that you like earth colors," he told her, accepting the glass of wine. "Except for the dusty-rose in the reception area, the colors in the office are basically the same as these. I like your taste."

"Thanks. I didn't realize that your family lives in Washington, Justin. That's where my auntie lives. I grew up near Howard University. It's nicer over there now than it was when I was a kid."

"Washington has changed a lot. Parts of it are hardly recognizable. I can almost get lost there. You said you had a lot to tell me." He wanted to get her off the subject of him and where his family lived.

"Maybe I'd better serve dinner first. I'll be back in a minute."

He watched her luscious hips swinging beneath that long, red chiffon skirt that exposed one leg all the way to mid thigh when she walked. She didn't show much cleavage, but what he saw was enough to remind him of the taste of her sweet nipple and how she'd screamed when he'd sucked it.

Man, get your mind on something else. Now!

"Dinner's ready." He looked up at her, and when she reached for his hand, he knew she needed contact with him, needed the closeness they'd shared when they were last together. He needed it, too, but he also had to slow down. Nobody had to tell him that, considering his hunger for her, once he made love with her, he would belong to her, and if she didn't forgive him, he will have ruined his life.

"Something smells good."

"I hope it tastes the same. Would you please say grace?"

That surprised him although, considering what he knew of her, it shouldn't have. He complied. "Cucumber soup?" he asked, after having tasted it. "If the remainder of the meal is up to this standard, you're in the wrong business."

"You like it?"

"Absolutely." She put the wine in front of him and he filled their glasses. "This is delightful."

"I forgot to ask whether you liked seafood, but that's just the second course. We can skip it if you don't like it."

"Sweetheart, I eat anything that isn't loaded with fat, and I love seafood. Just don't ever give me any fatback or chitterlings. I love soul food, but I can't hack that stuff."

"Don't worry. My auntie hated the smell of chitterlings, so we didn't eat them. As for fatback, I love my arteries."

She served the lobster with her own special sauce. "I love lobster," she told him, "and I used to treat myself to lobster on my birthday. It occurred to me that we could have lobster, and that's the first time I was really glad Heddy left me this money."

He stopped eating and looked at her. "Really? Until then, you hadn't considered that it could be enjoyable?"

"Up to now, the only good to come of this, I mean, for me personally, is knowing you. I was getting on fine. I lived comfortably...not like this, but I was comfortable. I could save a thousand dollars a month. I didn't spend a lot or take expensive vacations, but I could go to the opera, an occasional concert, the US Open tennis matches and things like that.

"And I didn't have people banging on my door and annoying me because they didn't want to live around me."

He stopped eating. "Someone did that? In this building?"

She nodded. "A woman across the hall. Now, I know why Heddy insisted that I live in this house. I bet that woman isn't the only tenant here who's intolerant."

"But you don't have to put up with that. Did you tell her you own this building?"

"No, but I warned her not to do it again or I'd sue her for harassment. I have a plan, and I want to talk with you about it."

"Uh...sure. If you think I can help, I'll be too glad to do whatever I can."

Gina brought the main course, joined Justin at the table, and looked at him for approval. "Woman, you know the way to a man's heart." He cut a slice of beef fillet, and a smile floated over his face. "Roasted to perfection." He stood and walked down to her end of the table. "You deserve a kiss for this, and I want you to have it now." She parted her lips and, for a second, he teased her with the tip of his tongue.

"You're stingy tonight," she said with the hint of a pout in her voice. "I wanted all of that."

"If we're prudent, it will be that much more awesome when we finally get it."

"You think so?" she said. "You seem subdued tonight. Is everything all right with you and me?"

"Oh, yes. While I was away, I realized how fortunate I am to know you. You are very special to me, Gina. I've never known a woman like you, and I want you to know that I cherish you. Don't forget that."

"Is that comment supposed to bolster me for the storm ahead?"

"There's no woman in my life but you. However, I have

to work things out with myself. When I left Washington, I planned for us to make love this evening if you were willing, but I realized that the time isn't right. As badly as I need you and as much as I want you, as we want each other, we'd better wait."

"I know it's hard for you working as my chauffeur and us feeling the way we do about each other. You're a man who needs to call the shots, and you're not doing that in this relationship. But I want you to know that I...I respect you more than any man I know or have known. Can we still be together?"

"Gina, I'm not fool enough to deliberately put you out of my life. You mean too much to me."

"But what if I slip up and kiss you sometime?" She grinned in that sly way of hers.

"I'll probably kiss you back and enjoy it. Providence is piloting this plane," he said, "so don't give up on me."

"Never."

Chapter 5

Justin stood at Gina's door gazing down at her, his belly full of a delicious gourmet dinner and his body hungering for her. "You're a wonderful cook, Gina, and I'm glad we had this evening together. Sure you don't mind if I attend the tenant's-association meeting you're calling? I'm not sure I should be seen there. The morning doorman knows I'm your chauffeur, and the evening doorman knows I'm a personal friend."

"I want you to be there, so come and wear your sunglasses." His right hand tapped the door almost nervously, and she knew he was debating his next move. She couldn't let him leave without kissing her. She needed to feel herself tight in his arms, to have him possess her. Her face must have mirrored her thoughts, for his nostrils suddenly flared and passion darkened his eyes.

"Kiss me," she whispered, raising her hands to his shoulders. "Kiss me and mean it. I need it."

He gripped her body tightly against him and, with her lips parted for the thrust of his tongue, she waited for an explosion of passion. But he slackened his hold on her and gathered her to him with gentleness and tender strokes of his hands. His lips brushed her forehead, her eyes, cheeks and her chin, and at last, he kissed her lips.

Shaken, she stepped back and stared up at him, trying to understand the feeling he had generated in her, an emotion that exceeded desire, need, friendship and camaraderie combined. If he had walloped her on the head, she wouldn't have been more at a loss, for he had never touched her or caressed her in that way. What did it mean?

"That's the way it is with me, Gina. Good night."

Gina wandered about her apartment for more than an hour picking up objects, replacing them and repeating the action with some other thing. She turned off the lights in her living room and turned them on again when she remembered that she hadn't taken their glasses to the kitchen and straightened up the room as she usually did before retiring. She stopped the CD, sickened by the haunting strains of Ellington's "Mood Indigo" and the need to share the music with Justin.

What on earth is happening to me?

She'd made her bedroom especially feminine and attractive with white walls, carpet and furniture, which she set off with a dusty-rose silk-taffeta spread and pillows on the bed, and a vanity bench and boudoir chair upholstered in the same fabric.

"It didn't happen tonight," she said, "but it will." Musing over their evening together, she surmised that everything she had observed about Justin suggested that he was either exceptionally well educated, had upper-middle-class

parents, or had traveled all over the world and absorbed what he saw and heard like a sponge. Maybe the answer was all three. If she asked him, he'd probably tell her, and her world would fall apart.

"Was that man trying to tell me that he loves me? I can't let myself believe that. I can't be that foolish. He can have any woman he wants. Why would he choose me?" A thought occurred to her, an ugly ominous thought, and she immediately pushed it aside. Not that. Anything but that.

Later the next week, he called his brother. "This is Justin. How'd you like to go with me to see the Knicks tonight?" He listened for a moment. "Look. I know they're lousy, but I need to wind down. How about it?"

"Okay, but let's go somewhere and eat first. I had a hell of a day. Stocks are skidding all over the board, and I don't think they'll be heading up soon. I could use a drink. You driving tonight?"

"No," Justin said, "and that means I'll stand in that line in front of the Garden for half an hour waiting for a taxi. I'd say meet me at Sardi's but that's ten blocks from the Garden."

"All right. I don't want a drink. Meet you at Lindy's. We can get a steak, some fries and a glass of red wine. That'll do it until after the game."

"Right."

"What's with Gina?" Craig asked as soon as they sat down at the table. "She must be very special if you told Mom about her."

"I didn't tell Mom anything other than her name. Mom asked, and I'm old enough to tell the truth about my behavior, no matter what it is."

“Just tell me whether you think you’re in for the long haul.”

“That may not be my call. The more I see of her, the more I want her and the deeper my feelings for her. I’m going to have to give up this charade and level with her.”

Craig raised his hand and beckoned the waiter. “We have tickets for the Garden tonight, so could you ask the chef to hurry it up, please?” He leaned back in the booth and looked at his older brother. “If I were in your shoes, I’d be scared as hell. Keep this up, and you may have to convince her that you’re not after her money.”

“That has crossed my mind a few times.”

Later, at the Garden, Justin wished he had gone home, because he couldn’t focus on the game. “Where were you, man?” Craig asked him after the game as they waited in line for taxis. “Curry dropped in thirty-five points, the Knicks won by sixteen, and you practically slept through the whole thing. If you’re so worried, give it up. You can write that story without living the life of a rich woman’s chauffeur.”

“I know that, Craig, but I have to undo the damage I’ve already done, and from where I sit, I’d have to be a magician to pull it off.”

Craig got into the next taxi that drove up. “Thanks for the company, bro. If you need her, get with it.”

Justin resisted telephoning Gina that night, but he paid for it emotionally. At three o’clock the next morning, he still wrestled with the sheets on his bed, for he hadn’t slept for one minute. So he was not in the mood for Miles Strags’s needling when he walked into Gina’s office the next morning with three cups of coffee and two scones and found Miles standing over Gina’s desk.

“Good morning,” Justin said, spread a paper napkin on Gina’s desk, opened a cup of coffee, set it on the napkin and placed a scone beside it.

“Well, well,” Miles said to Justin. “At least you found something to do.” Fuming, Justin continued to his office and was in the act of sitting down at his desk when he heard Miles say to Gina, “If you’re going to have a chauffeur, you’d better learn how to treat him. That one is already too big for his breeches.”

Justin got up and charged into Gina’s office. “I’m doing what Ms. Harkness pays me to do. You’re interfering into something that doesn’t concern you, and you had better watch your step.”

“How dare you speak to me this way! I’m an attorney and the executor of this estate, and I’m responsible for the way in which the affairs are carried out.”

“Look, buddy. Don’t fool with me. You’re not the only person who knows that you’re a cheat. You’ve got your nose up because I work as a chauffeur. Take a good look at yourself, and stay out of my way.”

Blood reddened Miles’s face, his breathing accelerated and a frown altered his facial contours. “I demand that you fire this...this chauffeur this very minute. I won’t stand for his insolence.”

“You’ve overstepped your bounds, Miles. I have no reason to relieve Justin of his duties. You tried to double-cross me at the tenants’ meeting I called, and I regard that as a very unfriendly act. Who invited you to that meeting? You had no business there and, thankfully, no one paid attention to your effort to derail the meeting. Now, if you’ll excuse me—”

“I am not ready to leave, because I have more to say to you...in private.”

“Justin will see you to the door, and if you don’t want his company, perhaps you’d rather have a policeman escort you out.”

Miles appeared to crumple, crushed like paper that was no longer useful. Justin almost felt sorry for the man, but if Miles Strags leaned on Gina too heavily, he would expose him even though it meant revealing J. L. Whitehead. He couldn’t watch the man intimidate Gina with impunity.

Justin eyed Miles straight on. “Are you leaving on your own, or do you want me to help you?”

Miles raised his chin, laid back his shoulders and took his time walking toward the door. “A man of my standing should never get mixed up with someone like you. And a woman of any social status would not consider tolerating such behavior from a...a chauffeur, whose only criteria for the job was to be over eighteen, have a license and an ability to read.”

The door closed behind Miles, and Justin went to his office. Feeling as he did, he didn’t trust himself to go into Gina’s office. An office was no place for what he needed with her.

I’d give anything if I could drop this charade. If I tell her everything right now, she’ll think Miles is right in distrusting me. She acts as if she doesn’t know that what Miles really wants is her. He uses his role as executor of the Lloyd estate as an excuse to hang around her.

He began work on what would become the third installment of his story about suddenly rich individuals and how the wealth altered their lives. He got the idea for the story after reading of a man who won a lottery for a net worth of 116 million dollars and was broke and heavily in debt

four years later. So far, over half of the people he interviewed suffered some form of adversity after winning a lottery or a windfall from casino gambling: in many cases, friendships, marriages and long-term relationships broke up; drugs and alcohol suddenly became a constant in the lives of some; in some others, promiscuity and reckless living became a way of life. He was learning that *inheriting* large sums rarely produced extremely negative outcomes, because most people who inherited a fortune had been groomed throughout their lives regarding the use of money. However, inheritors like Gina, who moved in one day from poverty or lower middle class to extreme wealth more often experienced a drastic change in character, personality and attitude, as well as behavior. Of the forty-seven cases he had interviewed or researched, Gina was an anomaly.

No one had to tell him that she had character, the sturdiness of which was, in itself, worth a story. He wanted to know more about her, how a person with her sad childhood—one who, at age eleven, took care of her mother because her father had left his family—could develop into such a warm and caring human being. Perhaps he would never know, but she reached him a level deeper than anyone he knew had, and he didn't think he could bear it if she slipped out of his life.

At about eleven-thirty, he heard a soft knock on his door. "Come in." He stood as he would have done in his own Third Avenue office.

"I'm Lorraine Williams," the woman said. "Ms. Harkness told me to introduce myself to you, and that you would interview me for the job as receptionist."

He shook hands with the woman who appeared to be

around sixty. "Have a seat, Ms. Williams." He spoke with her for a few minutes, determined that she was aptly qualified, liked her frankness and decided to probe. "How do you feel about working in an office where there are only three people? We do whatever needs to be done. And another thing, we care about each other. From time to time, you'll be here alone. Can you handle that?"

"Well, I think I'm old enough to be your mother and hers, too, so if either of you needs a shoulder to cry on, my shoulders have had plenty experience with tears. 'Course, I have a feeling you don't know a thing about crying. You're not a man to cry. I can run an office. I held my last job—at Braithwaite and Harper—for eighteen years. Mr. Braithwaite retired, and his son took over and wanted someone younger and sexier. You know the rest. People my age have to eat."

So she was perceptive. "Do you have children?" he asked her.

A shadow flashed across her face, and she blinked rapidly. "My husband and I weren't so lucky." She smiled. "But we have each other, and that's a blessing."

"It is indeed." He stood. "I hope you'll enjoy working with us."

"Oh, I really will, sir. Not many people willing to hire a receptionist my age. I'll work hard. You'll see."

Gina didn't ask herself why she sent Lorraine Williams to Justin. She had decided that he had good instincts and would judge the woman's personality well. Her references could not have been better, but in an office as small as theirs, she wouldn't be able to tolerate a crackpot. She knew that Justin was attempting to put the brakes on their

relationship, and she agreed that it had become too hot too fast. She also knew that he cared for her. If he wanted them to behave more sensibly, she couldn't quarrel with that. She looked up and saw Lorraine standing patiently at the door, evidently waiting to be recognized.

"Come in tomorrow at eight-thirty," she told Lorraine.

"Thank you, Ms. Harkness. You won't be sorry you gave me a chance."

She buzzed Justin. "When Lorraine comes in tomorrow, we may have to stop buzzing each other and use the phones. How did you like her?"

"She's not pretentious. She's down-to-earth, not afraid of work and needs a job. She's also a perceptive and caring woman. That's the best kind of person to work with."

"I liked her, too. Did you remember that we're going to Baltimore day after tomorrow?"

"I remembered, and I'd better go out right now and get a buzzer for the door. Lorraine shouldn't be here alone with the door unlocked."

"You're right. If Miles showed up, he'd drive her insane. I don't know what I'd do without you." She switched off the intercom, got up and went to his office. "I need the answer to this question."

He'd stood when she walked in. Now, he sat on the edge of his desk. "What is it?" he asked in a tone marked by wariness.

May as well go for broke, she thought. "In the last few days, you've moved away from me, and it began the night you had dinner at my apartment. It's a deliberate move. Did you need some room, or did you think you were making a mistake?"

He didn't hesitate, and she liked that. "Neither. I told

you the truth when I said I wanted us to know each other better. The physical attraction between us is so strong that if we catered to it, we'd stay in bed. I care for you, and I want our relationship to stand on more than sex. We need to get to know each other."

"If I get to know you, will I care more than I do now?" she asked him and not without a tinge of bitterness.

He lifted his right shoulder in a slight shrug. "I don't know. Maybe more. Maybe less. But at least, you'll know me."

They needed time away from their work environment, time to loll around on the grass beneath the cherry-blossom trees along the Tidal Basin in Washington, something she often did as a teenager and had longed to enjoy with a man for whom she cared. When in high school, she often studied there, had once become so engrossed in reading *The Canterbury Tales* that she didn't notice the clouds, and a downpour of rain shrunk her favorite skirt.

She didn't believe in office affairs and had always avoided them. The ones she had witnessed made her and her colleagues uncomfortable. The special looks, touches, stolen kisses and special favors stripped office lovers of the appearance of dignity. But how was she to pretend that she didn't want the man sitting on the corner of that desk right then and there? If he walked over to her and kissed her, she'd lock him in her arms and take what he offered.

And what if a client walked in and found you in that position, her conscience nagged.

She walked closer to him. "Good office decorum is admirable, but if you ignore me when we aren't working, I may cry myself to sleep one night."

He let her know that he didn't bend easily. "I just don't want us to set the house afire every time we're alone, be-

cause I know where that leads and I also know it won't last. It's deep caring, understanding, respect, the sharing of common interests, attitudes and perspectives and knowledge of the other person that kindles and preserves love."

"Have you ever been in love?" she asked, fearing his answer.

"I've never experienced what I realize now that I'm capable of feeling. What about you?"

"I thought I was in love once but now I realize that I was nowhere near it."

His eyes widened, fire seemed to leap into his gaze, and shivers of anticipation shot through her body. He gazed at her for a long minute before he said, "It's a good thing Lorraine is starting work tomorrow. Discipline is healthy, but torture is not."

Lorraine settled into her new job easily, almost as if she had worked with Gina and Justin for years. "She's capable and she fits," Gina said to Justin at the end of the working day. She walked into the reception room and sat down. "Lorraine, do you feel comfortable working here alone tomorrow? Remember that you may tell callers that I'm out of the office and will call them when I return."

"No problem, ma'am. A day alone here will give me a chance to set up a filing system, make a list of our subscribers and draft some stationery for your approval. It ought to be elegant, but not too expensive. What do you think?"

Gina couldn't keep the grin off her face. "I think you'll do just fine. Oh, yes, I'd prefer if we all use first names. If you need me tomorrow, you have my cell phone. Don't exchange any information with Miles Strags. He has no reason to come into this office."

“Yes, ma’am.”

At seven-thirty the following morning, Gina leaned back against the Town Car’s soft leather seat, closed her eyes and focused her thoughts on her plan for networking at her first major conference on fund-raising for charitable organizations. If her foundation was to stand a chance of competing with the big agencies for funds, she had to learn fast. The donors that she coveted would not want to be associated with a fledgling foundation that barely maintained its existence. She began her foundation with a healthy chunk of the money she inherited from Heddy but, even in her innocence of worthwhile charities, she knew that her total inheritance would not suffice for long.

When the car stopped, she asked Justin, “Where are we?”

“A few minutes from the Delaware Memorial Bridge. Would you like some coffee? If you don’t want to get out of the car, I can bring it to you.”

“Thanks, but I’d like to go in.” He walked around and opened the door for her. “One of these days, I am going to rebel against your rules, Justin. I know how to open a door, and I can sit in the front seat of *my* car if I want to.”

His white teeth glistened against his handsome brown face. “I see your yin is raising hell with your yang again. And to think, I’ve been telling myself that we’d get down to Baltimore and back without you bringing up those subjects. Shows how naive I am.”

“You’re laughing at me.”

“Am not.”

“Are, too.”

He took her arms and stood looking down at her. “My paternal grandfather used to sing a song that began with

these words, ‘Yield not to temptation, for yielding is sin.’ There was much more to it, but I only remember those particular words. In view of what Grandpa said would happen if you sinned, that song kept me out of Grandma’s jar of ginger cookies. I can’t even describe how much I loved those cookies.”

Her hand reached up and stroked his cheek. “You poor baby. My maternal grandpa would probably say you’d sinned in your heart, so you may as well have put your fingers in that jar and enjoyed the cookies.”

He stared at her for a second. “What a philosophy! It’s a license to do whatever pleases you. And you definitely please *me*. I think we’d better go get that coffee.” She slapped her hand over her mouth when he frowned. “So you realize what you said. Come on,” he commanded, took her hand and walked with her into the restaurant. “Find a seat. Would you like something to eat?”

“A scone or a muffin.”

“Be with you shortly.”

“This is his real personality,” she told herself. “One day, he’ll tell me why he’s working as a chauffeur, and when he does, I hope I continue to feel this way about him.”

Chapter 6

Justin looked down at the little girl who stood in line in front of him and held his breath. She'd dropped some coins and he could almost see the workings of her mind. Should she pick up the coins and drop the contents of her paper cup. If she couldn't retrieve her money, how would she pay for the purchase that she had already begun to consume?

"I can hold that for you," he said to her, "or I can pick up the coins for you."

She blessed him with a smile that transformed her face into a thing of beauty. So great was the transformation, that he stared at her. "Would you pick up my money, please?" He picked up the coins, handed them to her, and she thanked him.

"How old are you?" he asked her.

"Six. That's my daddy over there." She pointed toward the seating area. "He's tall, too," she said.

And he's crazy about you, Justin thought. He put two blueberry muffins on the tray along with napkins and plastic knives. If she were my little girl, I wouldn't let her out of my sight in this crowd of strangers. A person could walk out of here with this child, and her father wouldn't have a clue as to what happened. *If she were his little girl... Did Gina want a family?* He shook his head as if to clear it. That was something he shouldn't be thinking about. He reached the coffee service, got two cups of coffee and reached in his pocket for his wallet.

"But that's all I have. That was a dollar," the little girl said.

"It's on me," Justin said to the cashier. The child looked up at him, her face aglow with a smile that touched his heart. He wanted to hug her.

"Thank you," she said. "Thanks a lot, mister."

"You're pensive," Gina said when he sat down at the table she chose. "What happened?"

He told her about the little girl. "She was so charming. She really got to me."

He saw the little girl coming toward them and holding the hand of a man who he assumed was her father. He stood and extended his hand to the man, who appeared to be a blue-collar worker.

"My daughter wanted me to thank you, and I do. You made her day," the man said.

"Well, she certainly made mine. I don't know when I've met anybody of any age more charming than she is. You must be proud of her."

"You bet I am. She's all I got, and she's smart, too. Makes nothing but As in school." He looked down at his daughter and smiled. "She's the delight of her daddy's life."

"I'm Justin Whitehead, and this is Gina Harkness. You live around here, or you just passing through?"

"I'm Jack Logan. This is my daughter, Cheryl, and we live in Edgemoor. Not too far from here. This is my route. I drive I-95 taking care of the company's truck drivers who're in trouble. I'm off today because I had to take Cheryl to something for her school. Good to meet you, and thanks again."

"Goodbye, Mr. Whitehead," Cheryl said.

He bade them goodbye and sat down to finish his coffee. He disliked cool coffee, but what he'd just experienced so absorbed him that he barely tasted it. "Can you imagine? That man's raising his little girl by himself," he said to Gina. "She needs a mother."

"I was thinking the same thing." She drained the coffee cup and put it on the tray, slowly as if she were killing time. "I'm glad we stopped here. I just learned a lot about you."

"What?"

"You are a genuinely sweet man. You care about people."

He didn't want her to continue thinking like that, because she would surely begin to add two and two, and then more, so he sought to minimize the importance of her words. "Of course I'm sweet," he said. "Everybody knows it."

"Is that so? What else is there about you that everybody knows?"

He'd walked right into that one. It never paid to be a smart-ass with Gina, because she'd choose that moment to be serious and say or do something to remind him how vulnerable he was. "I was kidding. You're not supposed to take comments like that seriously."

"Right. I should know better," she said sarcastically.

Suddenly, he was at his wit's end. He had tried everything—short of confessing—to prevent their relationship from becoming a pool of passion, cheating them both of what they deserved and what they could have with each other. He knew himself, and knew that if he enjoyed her body once—and he would—he'd knock down every wall she erected to get her again and again. And if he didn't show greater prudence, if he made love with her without telling her who he was, she would hate him forever. Worst of all, he'd hate himself.

"I'm trying to do what's right," he said, his words so soft that he reached out and grasped her wrist to be certain that she heard him. "You know how badly I want you, so don't exploit it. A waterfall may be dry in winter, but in spring when the snow melts, ice thaws and rivers swell to their level, water gushes down the fall, and it's beautiful to see." He stood, lifted the tray and looked at her with a smile that came from his heart. "Life is like that, Gina. Let's make sure we get our rightful share."

She stood up and locked her gaze on him, staring into his eyes. He thought he was about to get a tongue lashing, until her demeanor softened, and a smile formed around her lips. Relieved, he began to relax. But at once, her eyes glittered with the fire of passion, and when she wet her lips with the tip of her tongue, absentmindedly, as though she didn't know she stood in a crowded restaurant, he could feel his blood heating his loins. Startled at what he knew he could not avoid, he sat down, but she leaned over and stroked his face.

"If we had privacy right now, I'd be inside of you quicker than I could snap my fingers. You can't know how I want you. Right here. This minute."

“You’re not alone, Justin.”

He remained seated until he controlled his libido. “Can we leave now?” he asked her, aware that changing the subject and the venue afforded him the best chance of recovering his aplomb.

“Yes, and I’m sitting in the front seat.”

“It’s your call, ma’am. I only drive the car.” He knew that, by referring to her as ma’am, he’d crushed her, but he couldn’t help it. He had to straighten out his head and do it quickly, and it would help if she got mad at him and showed it.

She rushed ahead to get in the car without his help. On a better day, seeing her yank the handle of that locked door might have amused him. Instead, he found himself wishing he hadn’t chosen investigative journalism as a profession. He wondered if he’d ever been so miserable. He inserted the key into the lock, opened the door and held it for her. When she managed to get in without looking at him or touching him, reached down and fastened her seat belt and folded her arms tightly across her middle, he knew that she was hurt, as well as angry. He drove the remaining one hundred miles without one word passing between them.

When they reached the university club house where the conference was being convened, he parked and turned to her. “We’re both out of sorts right now because this tension is getting to us. But let’s remember what we’re here for and put up a good front. Good luck with your talk. I know you’ll do a great job.”

He got out of the car and opened the door for her. As he did so, he gazed down at her with raised eyebrows. “Are you all right?” he asked her.

“I’m fine. Just...please don’t call me ma’am. I hate it coming from you.”

"All right," he said, and stared deeply into her eyes, hoping to communicate to her without words what lived for her in his heart. "I know I hurt you and I...I'd take it back if I could."

"I know you would. Come on. If we don't hurry, we'll be late. It's twelve-thirty." He put on his black-rimmed glasses and prayed that there were no journalists present. If he ever got out of the corner into which he'd pinned himself, he'd find other ways to carry out his research.

They collected the bag, program, badge and information packet, and the woman on the registration desk greeted Gina with more enthusiasm than he would have expected. "We've been looking forward to your workshop."

So that's it, he thought when the woman asked him if he'd pose for her photographer. "Thank you," he said, "but I work for Ms. Harkness, and my role here is to take notes during her workshop." He winked at the woman. "You wouldn't want me to get fired for not doing my job, would you?" Her fading smile was as cold a rejection as he'd ever experienced.

"You overdid that," Gina said, as they headed to the room in which she would lecture.

"When I want to play games, I select my playmates. I don't let them select me." Her eyebrows shot up. "That's right. She was on the make. The last advice I received when I left home at age eighteen was to choose my own poison and never let anybody choose it for me."

In the conference room, approximately seventy-five women and men waited for Gina's lecture. "Let me know when you want me to distribute these handouts," Justin said, and she told him that he could do it then.

"Or," she began as if in afterthought, "you may put them on the table in the back."

"But won't that mean they'll be walking around while you're speaking? It's better if I distribute them now." After doing that, he sat on the aisle in the middle of the room and began to take notes. When she finished to strong applause, the attendees gathered around her, and he pushed back his irritation at being prevented from telling her what a wonderful job she did and the progress she'd made as a speaker.

He hated being an appendage to her; if they could work as equals and he could call upon some of his wealthy acquaintances, her foundation would expand much more rapidly. A long sigh escaped him, and he told himself not to lose sight of his reason for being in Gina Harkness's life.

"You were great," he told her.

"Thanks. I had a feeling that it was going well. I want to go to the session on a foundation's goals. You haven't had any lunch, so you could eat and we'll meet here in an hour and ten minutes."

"I can eat later. That muffin will hold me a little longer. We're in this together. Let's go."

"I learned a lot today," Gina said to Justin as he headed the car away from the conference site. "I'm starved, but I'm glad we attended those two sessions."

"So am I. We have to compare notes. I get the impression that charities don't always mean the same to the donors as they do to the people who run them and work in them."

"You're right," she said. "When Hodges was speaking, he made it clear that most people give to charities in order to lower their taxes. But I really want to help these people, because I feel for them and I'm glad I'm in a position to do something concrete."

“He also said you’ll raise more money if you don’t bring these suffering people around the rich but simply describe their condition.”

“I know,” Gina said. “I guess I can see their point. Hey, let’s eat somewhere.”

“I want a decent meal,” he said. “And that means we should wait until we get to New York. I imagine we’ll get there around seven-thirty. How does that sound to you?”

“Okay. By that time, I’ll be ready to eat a ton, but how about a cup of coffee.”

He parked in front of a delicatessen. “Wait here. I’ll be right back.”

“Coffee never tasted so good,” she said after taking a few sips and sniffing the rich fragrance. “Justin, I am going to risk irritating you and dissipating this pleasant moment we’re having. Could I please have the receipts for your purchases today?”

He turned to face her and stretched out his right arm on the back of the seat. “Can I bribe you into forgetting about what amounts to less than twenty dollars?”

“How would you bribe me?”

He reached into his pocket and dropped a Snickers bar in her lap. “Well?”

She looked at him with eyes that sparkled. “I could hug you for this. How’d you know I have a weakness for Snickers?”

“I’ve seen the candy wrappers in your wastebasket,” he said.

“Okay. Consider me bribed.” She bit into the candy and looked toward heaven. “Hmm.” She glanced at the expression of awe on his face. “What’s the matter? What are you thinking?”

Justin moved his head at a snail's pace from side to side. "You definitely do not want to go there. Sweetheart, you don't want to know." He flipped on the radio to an easy-listening station, and she closed her eyes as soft music filled the car.

More content than she'd been since news of Heddy's will rocked her life, she dozed off to sleep. The absence of movement brought her awake. "Where are we?"

"At the tunnel. We're almost home. I called for a dinner reservation at that Italian restaurant you like, but couldn't get one. We can get a good meal at a place I used to know on upper Broadway. That suit you?"

"I'll go any place you take me, if you promise I'll find food when I get there."

"Woman after my own heart." Half an hour later, he stopped at a little known, family-style Italian restaurant, parked and gave the car keys to the porter who stood there. He spoke so quietly to the man that she didn't hear what he said, and it seemed as if he pressed a bill into his hand. She'd bribed some restaurant help in her day, so she didn't let it faze her. She meant to enjoy the evening with him, because he'd made them rare of late.

"Feel like walking up the steps?" Justin asked Gina. "The upstairs dining room is more attractive and quieter."

"If there's food up there," she said, enjoying the fact that he thought he was putting something over on her.

He held her hand as they climbed the stairs. "This way, sir." She couldn't help noticing the ease with which Justin switched from driver to gentleman, and she didn't doubt that he was more familiar with the latter role. Yet, what could have been a dilemma for her, had never become that. She

trusted Justin because he had proved himself worthy of it. In the small but intimate room and inviting ambiance, the waiter led them to a table adorned with a vase of yellow roses.

“Could we sit over there?” Justin asked him. “The lady is fond of that color.” He pointed to a vase of roses in a deep pink, almost lavender shade.

“Of course, sir.” After they took their seats, the waiter asked Justin, “Would you like to see the wine menu?”

He looked at her. “I’m driving. So I won’t drink. What about you?”

“Me, neither. We can have something to drink later at my place.” She pretended not to notice the fire that suddenly flashed in his gaze. The waiter brought the menus, and she could hardly hold it. She pressed her upper and lower teeth together to prevent their chattering and had to resist holding her middle when what seemed as if marbles began rattling around in her stomach.

“What’s the matter?” he asked her. “Are you okay?”

“I don’t know h-how I am. Why don’t they bring the food?”

“Madam hasn’t ordered,” the waiter said.

“I want something that I haven’t seen on a menu since the last time I was in Switzerland,” he said. “*Malakoff*. This is the first time I’ve seen it in this country. I’m going to have it as an appetizer, and I strongly suggest that you do likewise. Even if it’s not made correctly, it’s bound to be good.”

“This is fantastic,” he said as soon as he tasted it. “What do you think?”

She wondered if her taste buds were fooling her. “Unbelievable. If I’d known it would be this good, I wouldn’t

have ordered anything else. Ask the waiter if they serve this at lunch?"

He beckoned for the waiter. "Do you serve *malakoff* at lunch?" The waiter said that they served it every meal, including breakfast. "May I speak with this chef?"

As they toyed with the main course—too full to eat more, the chef came to their table, and she watched as Justin stood and shook hands with the man. "I haven't had *malakoff* since I was in Switzerland, and finding it here precisely as I remembered it has made me a happy man."

Had he pressed a bill into the chef's hand? Yes, she decided Justin had. "I don't suppose you give out the recipe, so I could try it at home," Justin said.

Clearly delighted with the attention, the chef's broad smiled exposed teeth that had chewed many a *malakoff*. "I bring you the recipe. In English, you want it?"

Justin glanced at her. "Yes, please. Where did you live in Switzerland?"

"I live in Nyon, but I am chef at Au Fin Bec, just beside *Genève*. I am chef there twenty-three years till I come here six years ago."

A grin spread over Justin's face, and she couldn't help thinking that his exquisite handsomeness became mesmerizing when he smiled with his whole face, his eyes and cheeks, as well as his mouth.

"No wonder this *malakoff* tastes the same as in Switzerland. So you were at Au Fin Bec when I was bumming around there. I ate in that restaurant as often as I could afford it. I will definitely be back here soon."

"Thanks. I welcome you to come back. You stay, and I bring the recipe." The chef looked at her. "You like the *malakoff*, too, miss?"

"I loved it. I hadn't tasted it before, and I wished I hadn't ordered anything but that."

"Next time I make it special, and you order that and green salad. Is plenty."

"Isn't it strange how little experiences like that can elevate an occasion out of the ordinary?" she asked Justin as they walked down the stairs with him clutching the recipe for *malakoff*.

"Tell me about it. Being with that little girl and her father this morning made the short rest stop something I won't forget, and I've thought several times since about the chance that I might never have met that child. You should have seen her making up her mind to trust me to pick up her change. And when she smiled that angelic smile, it was as if she transported me to another world."

"Considering that, I'm surprised you don't have a family."

"Gina, in this life, we take what we can get," he said.

"I don't want to die without knowing what it means to be a mother," she said. "That would be heartbreaking."

"I feel the same way about fatherhood, but I don't hold the trump cards in that game."

She wanted to tell him that she'd give him children. What had come over her?

Later, when he turned onto Park Avenue, she said, "Put the car in the garage, and come on up for a drink. You can get a taxi home. It's been a long day." She didn't even glance at him because she didn't want to know his reaction. It sounded like a command to her, and he may have perceived it that way. She crossed her fingers, smiled at the doorman and headed for the elevator.

She had time only to brush her teeth, dab some perfume behind her ears, brush her hair and kick off her shoes when

the doorbell rang. She opened the door, looked up at him and said, "I was wondering if you were going to give me my comeuppance and go on home."

He didn't smile. "Some other time, maybe, but not tonight. In what capacity did you order me to come up here?"

"I didn't order you. I phrased it so as not to get an argument. I figured you'd come, if only to tell me what for. I wanted to unwind...I mean to relax, and I...I needed to be with you. Would you like wine or...or something stronger?"

He pushed his hands into his pockets and walked from one end of the living room to the other and back to her. "I very rarely drink hard liquor. If you have any white wine, I'll drink a glass of it with you."

"Will white burgundy do?" He nodded. "Please have a seat, Justin. I'll be right back." She remembered that she wasn't wearing shoes, shrugged and prayed that she'd shed even more before he left. Walking through the dining room, she remembered that she'd never before lived in a place that had a dining room or, for that matter, a pantry, guest bedroom and guest bathroom. *Maybe if I live long enough, I'll be comfortable in this place. It's big enough for a family of six.*

Gina leaned against the gray-and-blue marble-top counter and looked around at the matching wallpaper and the gray tiled floor. Most people would envy her, and she appreciated what she had, but she longed to have the emptiness in her filled with the warmth and love of one man, a man who cared for her but wouldn't share his body with her.

She put the wine, two stem glasses, a bottle opener and two thin slices of cheesecake on a tray along with napkins

and forks and went back to Justin. She noticed that he sat on the sofa, so she put the tray on the coffee table and sat beside him.

"Would you open the wine, please?"

"Of course." He picked up the bottle opener and paused. "What's that? It can't be cheesecake."

"But it is. I made it yesterday. There's more in the refrigerator if you decide you like it."

His right eyebrow moved up slowly. "You may as well get it now. I can never get enough cheesecake."

By the time she returned with the remainder of the cheesecake, he had opened the wine and poured a glass for each of them. "Here's to you," he said, before taking a sip.

"Here's to you and to us."

"Where are your shoes?"

"I kicked them off as soon as I walked in here. I always do that. I forgot I wasn't wearing any. Excuse me." She attempted to get up, but he restrained her.

"Your feet are as beautiful as the rest of you. This cheesecake is wonderful." She thanked him. "Why did you invite me up here tonight knowing what kind of mood I've been in all day?"

Her auntie always said there were times when nothing works but honesty and brutal frankness. This was one of those times. She didn't speak, knowing that he would search her face for his answer. When he faced her, she looked into his eyes.

"Because I need you. I told you that I would only beg once, and this is it. You hurt me today, so badly that I wouldn't strike back for fear of making you feel as badly as I did. I know you care for me, but if you don't want anything more meaningful to happen between us, I'll accept

that. However, I don't want you ever to look at me the way you did this morning. I can't handle that."

"I feel like accusing you of hitting below the belt," he said, drained his glass and refilled it. "I care a lot for you, and I've been trying to do what I think is right. I don't want you to slip away, out of my life, and I'm scared that you will. I know you will."

"You aren't blind. Can't you see what's going on with me? I see how you help me in every way that you can. You even try to help without my realizing it. You're protective of me, and you go far beyond your job description. But that only endears you to me. The real thing happened the minute you walked into that office. We both knew it. If you're going to leave, I want you to go now."

"Run that past me again. You commanded me to come in here, and now you're ordering me to leave. That it?"

"You're not being fair."

"Are you? Run your mind back over everything that's happened today, Gina. Everything. Then tell me what you want from me and what you need from me. I guarantee that it will be no different from what I need from you. But I'm trying to look at the future, and you're looking at the present."

"I may not be alive in the future, but I'm alive here and now." She poured more wine into her glass. "What do you do when you're home by yourself? Scratch that. Maybe you're not by yourself when you leave me."

"What do you mean by that crack?" he asked her.

"You don't have to be Einstein to figure that out. I meant just what I said."

He grabbed her shoulders. "Are you accusing me of being a—"

She interrupted him. "A celibate? Definitely not. It would never cross my mind." He stared into her eyes, but she didn't allow her expression to waver. "I've known you how long? Two months? Three? That would be an admirable record for a man like you, wouldn't it?" she said, gazing into his eyes.

"What kind of man am I?" he asked her, his voice a low growl.

"Virile." Maybe if she made him mad enough, he'd take what she wanted him to have. She put her hands behind her head, leaned away from him and rested her head on the back of the sofa. His gaze strayed from her face to breast that she knew pushed against the tank top that served as a blouse beneath her short-sleeved linen jacket.

"It's warm in here," she said. "Maybe it's the wine." She sat up, removed the jacket and put it on the sofa beside her.

He swallowed several times as she crossed her knee, leaned back with her head near his shoulder and said, "I wish you weren't so sweet."

"You're trying to drive me crazy."

"Am I making any progress?"

His gaze took in the woman who lounged beside him and he rubbed his hands up and down his thighs. His common sense screamed, *Don't touch her*, but he needed her the way he needed air. He stared at her firm, round breasts and nipples that were already hard with desire for him as they pressed against her white tank top, and his mouth watered for a taste of them. She swung her long shapely legs, and he couldn't stand it. The stirrings in his groin warned him to leave or he would know the consequences of staying. She pulled on his ear and traced his

cheek with the back of a finger. The scent of her women's perfume teased his nostrils, and tremors shot through him. It was too much.

"Come here to me," he said in a voice that he didn't recognize. "Come to me. I need you. I need to love you."

He had her in his arms at last, and her hands slid around his neck as she opened her mouth for his tongue. He went into her and she took him, sucking him deeper into her mouth, as moans of pleasure seeped from her throat. He stroked her back, arms and thighs while his tongue twirled around in her mouth. She grabbed his hand and rubbed it across her left breast while she moaned. He squeezed, rubbed and pinched her nipple until she broke the kiss.

"Take this thing off me. I want to feel your mouth on me." He threw the tank top across the room, pushed up her bra cup and sucked her nipple into his mouth.

"Yes," she cried out. "Yes. Yes."

He went at her then, sucking vigorously while he rubbed her belly and her thighs. Fully erected, he knew that unless she stopped him, he would have her that night. "If you don't want me, if you're not going to make love with me, say so this minute."

Her answer was a tug at his belt and a grip on the hand sliding down her body from her belly. She moved his hand faster to its target.

"Slow down, baby. Don't let it get away from us." Giving her no respite, he sucked her other nipple into his mouth, eased his fingers beneath her panties and stroked her. "Justin, oh, my," she moaned. "I can't stand it."

"Tell me you want me," he whispered, pressing her clitoris between his thumb and index finger. "Tell me you belong to me."

"I do. I do." Frantic for relief, she reached out and stroked him.

"Stop it," he yelled.

"Take me to bed," she whispered.

"Are you absolutely sure? I don't want to make a mistake with you."

"Justin, love me. I want to...to be with you. I want you inside of me."

He picked her up, carried her into her bedroom, kicked the door shut and placed her on her bed. "I've wanted you so badly and so long that this may not work the first time, but it will before I leave you."

She pulled off her skirt and, at the sight of her body clothed only in her bikini panties, his whistle split the air. In a hurry to kiss every inch of her, he was out of his clothes in seconds. Gina stared up at him. Mesmerized, she stood and ran her hands up and down his washboardlike middle, and over his hard biceps, then walked around him staring at his muscular shoulders and corded neck. Forgetting her nudity, she stopped before him and stroked his erect penis.

"For goodness' sake, you'll finish me before we start," he rasped, and gripped her to his naked body and held her there, pressing her to him with his hands on her buttocks and moving from side to side as his chest rubbed her nipples. She lowered her head and licked his left pectoral, then sucked his small, hard left nipple.

"Don't do that, sweetheart."

"Then do something to me. I'm going out of my mind."

"That's the way I want you."

He placed her in bed, gazed down at her for a minute, as he bared his teeth and fell trembling into her outstretched arms. She had to get him into her, so she reached

for his penis. But he grabbed her hands and held them above her head, sucked her nipple into his mouth and feasted on it. When she thought she'd go insane with desire, he eased up, kissing her eyes, cheeks and then, he went at her again, licking his way down her belly.

"Justin, I need relief. Please."

"You'll get it. I'll give you everything you want."

"Oh, Justin," she said when his fingers skimmed the inside of her left thigh while his tongue traced the other. At the moment when she thought he would get on her, he lifted her knees, hooked them over his shoulder, opened her folds and shoved his tongue into her hot vagina. Her screams pierced the silence as he nipped, sucked and licked.

"Honey, I need to explode. I'm so full. Please let me have it."

"All right," he said, and moved up her body. "Are you on the pill?"

"No. Just get in me."

He slipped on a condom, looked down at her and smiled. "Take me in your hands, and look at me."

She did, and when he pressed against her, her eyes widened and her bottom lip dropped. "Relax, baby."

"It's been a real long time."

"Don't worry." He pushed slowly, and then he was moving from side to side in a screwing motion, and a tension began to build up in her. "Let me know the second I touch the spot I'm after."

"Which spot?"

"You'll know it when I touch it." He shifted his hips, quickened his pace and shifted again.

"Right there," she yelled, and he unleashed his power, driving hard and then slackening. Driving hard again.

Heat flushed the bottom of her feet and spiraled up her legs, until her thighs trembled. "Concentrate, sweetheart," he said. "Think about what I'm doing to you."

"I am. I am. Can't you do something? I'm so full. I want to burst. *Justin!*" She screamed his name. The pumping and squeezing shook her, and then the walls of her vagina gripped his penis, and screams tore out of her.

"I love you. Oh, Justin. I love you so much."

He held her closer, accelerated his rhythm and splintered in her arms. "You're mine. You'll always be mine. And I'm yours. Only yours."

He kissed her shoulder and rested his head there. They didn't speak for a long while, and she wondered if he regretted it. He said he was hers, but did he mean it. She knew without a doubt that she belonged to him.

After a long time, he raised his head and gazed down into her eyes. "I was almost asleep." His lips brushed hers, and then his tongue traced the seams of her lips as he wrapped her in his arms. "Open your mouth."

With his tongue darting around in her mouth, contractions began in her vagina, he hardened within her, and she knew that her face bore a startled expression.

"Don't be so surprised," he said. "We fit perfectly together."

"But we just—"

He swallowed the words in a kiss, hooked her legs around his hips and took her on a wild ride until she convulsed around him, and he flung his arms wide and gave her the essence of himself. His body shuddered with his release.

He looked down at her. "Are you okay? I mean, did you have an orgasm just now?"

"Indeed, I did."

"I thought so, but I wasn't in good enough shape to make sure. I don't know when I've been so out of control." The contours of his face shifted into a frown. "You're so quiet, and you look so sober." He rose up and braced himself on the palms of his hands. "Don't tell me you're sorry. I don't want to hear a word of that."

She smiled then. "How could I be sorry? It was the most wonderful experience of my life."

But something was not right. She had a problem. He would never be hers. Oh, he said he belonged to her, but that was at the height of passion, she thought. How could she dare dream that such a man would be hers for all time?

"No," she repeated. "I could never be sorry for having loved you."

Chapter 7

At two o'clock that morning, Justin lay awake in his bed trying to come to terms with what he'd done. Trying to understand not only why he did precisely what he told himself not to do, but how he could deal with it. He couldn't have made a bigger mess of things.

He opened the drawer of his night table, remembered that he hadn't smoked a cigarette in fifteen years and closed the drawer. *It would be bad enough if I had only my work to consider, he thought, but I love her, and she loves me. What's more, we're good for each other in every way, and I can't bear to lose her. He shook his head in wonder. I thought I knew what it was to be complete with a woman, but I realize now that, until tonight, I didn't have the slightest idea.*

At daybreak, he dragged himself out of bed, got a cup of instant coffee and sat down at the kitchen table. "I have to level with her, and I have to do it now. I can't go on pre-

tending. Not after the way she trusted me, giving herself to me without reservation. Even if she tells me she never wants to see me again, I owe her the truth.”

He showered and dressed, dreading the moment when he'd see her and not be able to look at her with a clean heart. The telephone rang and he answered the phone in his den.

“Hi, Craig. What's up?”

“When are you leaving for Washington? I take it you're driving.”

“Washington? I forgot. Friday is Daddy's sixty-fifth birthday. I don't know. I'll call you later this morning and let you know.”

“What's going on with you, man? You never forget anything. Couldn't be Gina, could it?”

“That and more. We'll talk.”

“There's no reason why both of us should drive down there unless you've got something in the works. Call me before noon.”

“I will.” He hung up and leaned against the wall.

As usual, he stopped at the coffee shop a few doors from the foundation's office and bought coffee and scones for Gina and himself, and this time he bought enough for Lorraine.

“I thank you a lot, but you shouldn't be the one getting the coffee, Justin,” Lorraine told him. “I'll bring it from now on, and Gina put a petty-cash box here on my desk, so take out what you spent.”

He didn't feel like dealing with that mentality. Women would be equals when they treated themselves as equals and insisted that men do the same. He'd never known a male clerk or page who considered himself the proper person to

bring coffee to other employees. He took the remainder of the coffee and scones and knocked on Gina's door.

"Come in."

"Hi." He didn't close the door, because he didn't want to kiss her and start his libidinous juices flowing. "How are you this morning? I brought you some coffee."

As if his fingers knew that he should cherish this woman, they trailed gently over her cheek. Not satisfied, he stroked her face with the back of his hand and then tugged at her ear.

Her smile had never been more radiant, and he knew he was looking at a happy, sated woman. In spite of the problems that the source of her smile portended for him, it made him feel bulletproof and ten feet tall.

"I've never felt so great," she said. "Thanks for remembering the coffee."

"Lorraine said she's going to bring it in the future. She has a stupid notion that I shouldn't be carrying coffee. That's absolutely ridiculous. I drink it, don't I?"

She put the coffee cup on her desk and looked at him so intently that she seemed to be peering into his soul. "You seem on edge. Can I help?"

"I need to go to Washington. My family is celebrating my dad's sixty-fifth birthday this weekend. I'm his oldest child, and I should be there. I'd almost forgotten it, until my brother called me this morning and reminded me. The problem is that you have an engagement in Charlottesville, Virginia, this weekend."

"That's true. We were to leave here at dawn Friday morning. Which day is your father's birthday?"

"Friday. This is very awkward for me. I hate causing you such inconvenience, but I can't neglect my duty to my father."

“Ease up, Justin. Are you close to your father? I mean, did he always love you and care for you?”

He didn’t want her to ask questions about his family, at least not before he told her who he was. “Why, yes. We love and respect each other. My dad is the traditional father. His family is everything to him.”

She nodded. “That’s wonderful. You don’t know how fortunate you are. I can’t say as much about my father. I don’t know where he is, and I don’t care. Tell you what. I’ll fly to Charlottesville and back. You take the weekend to be with your family. By the way, what’s your father’s name and address? I’d like to send him a card.”

He gave her the minimum information, using his father’s initials and omitting the title of professor. He also gave the address as Chevy Chase, and not Washington, an error, that he knew the post office would correct. When he arrived at his parents’ house he was taken aback when his father showed him the large, gourmet basket containing assorted fruits, nuts, chocolates and two bottles of Moët & Chandon champagne. She signed the accompanying note, “Gina Harkness, one of Justin’s friends.” Now, he’d have to deal with his mother about Gina. Not that he minded, but he simply wasn’t ready to tell the truth.

“It’s a lovely basket, Dad. She told me she wanted to send you a birthday card. I guess she saw this and changed her mind.”

“I appreciate it and I’d like to thank her. She thinks a lot of you.”

Here it comes, Justin thought. “Why do you say that?”
“Because this basket is very expensive.”

“She can afford it. But, anyhow, she’s a gracious and

generous person. I'll tell her you appreciated receiving it. Where's Mom?"

Franklin Whitehead was no stranger to Justin's polite way of telling people to mind their business. He was also the only person who could stare Justin down and get away with it, and he did just that.

"Your mother's upstairs. If you don't want to talk about this woman, and if you don't want your family to know anything about her, perhaps you shouldn't have given her my name and address. I noticed you didn't tell her that your father is a university professor, because she addressed me as mister."

"No, sir. I didn't. Gina doesn't know who I really am, and it's something I have to straighten out when I get back to New York."

"What do you mean, she doesn't know who you are? Half the country knows who you are."

At the sound of his mother's voice, Justin whirled around and went to greet her. "Look," he began, after hugging Alma, "you two come over here and sit down. Talking about this is really premature, but the cat's out of the bag, so to speak, and if I don't tell you, you'll arrive at the wrong conclusion.

"I'm doing a story on people who suddenly become rich by winning jackpots, gambling at a casino or inheriting a large sum that they didn't anticipate. I've interviewed a large number of women and men but, as you know, I usually take the role of participant observer when I do an investigative report. Gina Harkness inherited a lot of money, and I was lucky enough to get a job as her chauffeur."

Alma Whitehead sprang out of her chair. "You're doing what? You're working as somebody's chauffeur?"

Franklin walked over to his wife, took her hand and guided her back to her chair. "Let's hear what he has to say."

Justin began with his entrance into Gina's office and omitted only their intimacies. "My problem is that she doesn't know I'm J. L. Whitehead. She probably thinks I work as a chauffeur because I've fluffed other opportunities. She's hinted her suspicions, but things are happening between us now—things we both knew were inevitable when we first looked at each other—and if I don't tell her everything, she'll be right in thinking I'm a cad."

"If she reads the newspaper, she should have seen your by-line. If not, she should at least have heard of you," Alma said. "I don't like this."

"You're right in wanting to straighten things out with her," Franklin said, "because you've got a mammoth problem. What will you do if she decides you're only after her money?"

"Oh, Franklin," Alma said, "he's involved with this woman, and we don't know anything about her."

Franklin narrowed his eyes. "That's the least of my concerns. I trust my son's judgment. And even if I didn't, when it comes to his mate, he has to please himself, not me and not you."

"Sorry I took so long, but I've got a lot hanging on that stock. I... Why are you all so somber?" Craig asked them, walking into the room. He looked at Justin. "Oh, oh. You're talking about what I think you're talking about?"

"You knew about this woman, Craig, and you didn't mention it?" Alma asked.

Craig dropped himself into a big leather chair suitable to his long frame. "Mom, it's not my place to tell you and Dad about Justin's business. That's for him to do. I'm just

there if he wants to talk. I certainly wouldn't appreciate his breaking my trust and broadcasting my affairs to you or anybody else." He pressed his elbows to his thighs and propped his chin up with both hands. "Mom, Justin's a grown man. If he likes a woman, I know two things about her before I meet her, and I suspect a third. She'll be intelligent. She will possess grace and poise, and she'll probably be good-looking."

"Thanks, Craig. Anyhow, I'd like to close this conversation for now." He looked at his father. "Thanks for your support, Dad. I've always hoped that when I finally choose a woman for my life, that you and Mom will love her, so that my children will enjoy the love and support of their grandparents. I hope my wife—whoever she turns out to be—will never have problems with her in-laws."

"She won't have to worry about me," Craig said. "I enjoy the company of good-looking women."

Alma meant to have her say. "The least you can do, Justin, is bring her to meet us."

Justin walked over to his mother and draped an arm around her shoulders. "Gina and I don't yet have an understanding about our relationship. When I tell her what I've just told you and Dad, she may not want a relationship with me. It will be a test for both of us."

"Then there's nothing settled between you two? Good, because I thought I'd ask Dr. Farmer to come to Dad's birthday dinner tomorrow night. I know you two didn't hit it off, but I think she deserves another chance."

He couldn't believe he'd heard her correctly. He didn't remember ever having lost his temper with his mother, indeed, he hardly remembered having been angry with her, but he was on the verge of it. He took a few deep

breaths, glanced at Craig and turned to his father. "Did you marry Mom because your mother shoved her down your throat?"

Franklin Whitehead's eyes rounded to almost twice their normal size, and then a smile played around his lips. "As a matter of fact, my mom wasn't crazy about your mother at first. She didn't think a career woman would make a warm and loving wife and mother. She had a little bimbo from her church that she thought the sun rose and set on." He rubbed his chin, leaned back in his chair and got comfortable and into storytelling mode. "That girl hadn't read a book since she graduated from kindergarten. You never saw such a nitwit," Franklin said.

Justin released the tension building up in him by joining his father in a laugh, though he didn't feel like it. He looked at his mother. "Mom, the minute that woman walks into this door tomorrow night, I'm leaving and heading back to New York. She may have brains, but the rest of her is as empty as a hollow log. I'd appreciate it if you found some other man for your friend."

"Come on, Mom. Let it rest. No man wants his mother to find women for him. That's a no-no," Craig said.

"All right. All right, you two. I'll tell her Justin has other plans."

Justin took the stair steps two at a time, went into his room and closed the door. "Whew!" He hadn't enjoyed telling his parents about Gina. His father would give any woman he brought to them a chance to prove herself, but he wasn't certain his mother would. And he doubted that his sister, Lynn, the baby of the family would make a pretense of liking Gina. Lynn's values centered on personal success and the recognition that one received for it.

He telephoned Gina and was connected to her voice mail. "So much for that." He kicked off his shoes and fell across the bed. "Come in," he said in answer to the knock on his door. "What's up?" he asked Craig.

His brother sat on the edge of the bed. "I told Mom to drop it, and that if she started bringing women to meet *me*, she wouldn't see much of me in the future. She's remorseful, so don't be annoyed. You know she can't help being a mother. She's got three grown children and nobody to rock."

"I'm not concerned about Mom. It's Gina that I'm worried about. When I tell her everything, she's more likely than not to fire me and refuse to ever see me again."

Craig's frown didn't comfort Justin, and when he said, "Don't tell me you made love with her."

"Guilty as charged!"

Craig stood, walked over to the window and, with his back to his brother, spoke in a comforting manner. "What is done is done, Justin. The thing to do is work on getting this straightened out. You know I'll be there for you, take me to meet her." He turned around and grinned. "I know my charm falls short of yours, but I'll lay it on thick."

"Thanks. I know I can count on you. I'm not afraid of facing her with this. I never intended to be devious, and I'll stand up to anything I've done, but I'm scared of *losing* her. She means a lot to me."

"I know that, so do Mom and Dad. They only had to look at you when you talked about her."

On Saturday night, when the last guest had left his paternal home, Justin let himself relax. His father couldn't have had a more beautiful celebration of his sixty-fifth birthday. They walked arm in arm from the living room to the kitchen.

"I want to say a few words to you before you leave, son. I can see that Gina means a lot to you. Talk to her as soon as you can, but be sure you find the right time, a time when you can take her in your arms and show her what she means to you. Don't worry about your mother. You're the apple of her eye, and she'll never do a thing to hurt you. If you've been with Gina for two months, you can write a great story, even if you leave that job now."

"I could have written it without taking the job, but what I've learned working for her will give the article depth. Thanks for your understanding. It's something I've always been able to depend on."

Back in New York, Justin walked into his West End Avenue apartment a few minutes before midnight and switched on the light. After a weekend with his family and their friends in a celebratory environment, he found the silence that surrounded him deafening. He walked into the kitchen, and it was there, too. Suddenly, the refrigerator thermostat turned on the ice maker, and he whirled around, surprised. He wanted to call Gina, but in his present anxiety, he knew he would tell her everything and spoil any chance that he could preserve their relationship.

"Oh, hell! I made my bed hard, and I'll lie in it." He got a can of beer, a half box of crackers, flipped on the television set and sat down to unwind. He looked at his calendar and grimaced. It was his turn to serve Monday supper at the homeless shelter.

"Well, I can't tell her tomorrow, and that's one more day that I have to live with this."

Gina didn't fly directly home to New York from Charlottesville, but stopped in Washington to see her aunt Elsa.

She knew Justin was in Washington that weekend, and she knew where he was, but barging in on his family's celebration of his father's birthday didn't occur to her.

Elsa met Gina at the door with arms stretched wide and enveloped her in a loving hug. "Child, you give me a heart attack surprising me like this. What you doing home?"

Gina hugged her beloved auntie, enjoying the comforting warmth that Elsa always gave her. "I was in Virginia, so I thought I'd drop by to see you on my way home. You're looking wonderful."

"Fat, huh? If I don't quit eating corn and fried chicken, I won't be able to sit at that sewing machine. Come here and let me look at you." Elsa's eagle-like gaze swept over Gina from head to foot, and then locked on her face.

"You look good, but you're different. It ain't the money, that don't show yet. You still sensible. But you got some new pride, and I don't think it's that foundation you told me about. What's his name?"

Gina followed her aunt into the room where she designed and sewed clothes for women and girls, the room that had once been Gina's bedroom.

"I'll make us some tea," Elsa said.

Gina knew that if she told her aunt everything, or all that she could relate, she would get Elsa's candid opinion about Justin and about her relationship with him.

"Well. Well," Elsa said when Gina finished talking. "Well, now, child, that's a lot to digest. If he's everything he looks like he is, you got a gold mine, but he don't have to be none of that. 'Course there's some things you just can't fake, and good manners is one of them. You feel like he loves you, but he ain't never told you. Hmm."

“Yes, I feel it. If he told me he didn’t love me, I wouldn’t believe it. No man could be such a great actor that consistently. He always thinks of me before he thinks of himself, and he’s helped me in so many ways, Auntie.”

Elsa chewed a forkful of coconut cake and sipped her tea. “You say he’s polished, huh? Didn’t it occur to you that a polished man who knows so much about the things you mentioned, who knows more about them than you—and you have two degrees—ain’t got no business working as somebody’s chauffeur?”

“Many times.”

“What answer did you give yourself?”

“I’m sure he’s had other jobs and that he’s down on his luck.”

“What do you want with a man who’s down on his luck, but who was smart enough to get himself a woman who just came into millions of dollars. That kind of smartness wouldn’t appeal to me.”

Gina nearly bounced out of the chair. “Are you suggesting—”

“I ain’t suggesting nothing that you shouldn’t already have considered. He’s so handsome that you fell for him when you first laid eyes on him. How come you haven’t found out more about this man? I’ll tell you why. You’re scared of what you’ll discover.”

Elsa refilled their teacups, but Gina didn’t want more tea. She wanted to see Justin, wanted the assurance that he was what she thought him to be. “Before you make up your mind that I’ve fallen for a scoundrel, Auntie, could you come up one weekend? I’ll make sure that you meet him, and let’s see what you think then.”

“It’ll be two weeks before I can do that, but if you want

me to, I'll come. I want to see your new apartment, too. I hear Jackie Onassis lived on Park Avenue. Ain't that something! My little Gina living on the same street that Jackie used to live on." She drank the remainder of the tea. "You be careful, and don't you do nothing serious before I meet that fellow."

Gina wouldn't say she was sorry she visited her aunt, but having her confidence in Justin and in her feelings for him challenged and, yes, shaken, made her uncomfortable and a little sad. She knew her carefully displayed smile of confidence didn't fool Elsa Bowen, but she kept the mask in place.

"Auntie, I will be down here in a few days to help you look for a house. In the meantime, if you have a few minutes to spare, call this agency and let one of their agents show you some houses. But don't commit yourself."

"What price range should I look at?"

"Whatever you want. If I were you, I'd look for a quiet and beautiful neighborhood. Be sure the place is unattached, has plenty of space between houses and sits well back from the street."

Elsa's eyes blinked rapidly. "Child, that'll cost money."

"I know."

Gina walked into her office twenty minutes after nine the next morning, and not until she seated herself at her desk and saw the container of cold coffee waiting for her did she admit to herself that she had dreaded seeing Justin. She answered her cell phone.

"Good morning. I was beginning to worry about you. Aren't we supposed to be in Stamford, Connecticut, at noon today?"

“Oh my goodness! How could I have forgotten that? Gosh, I’ll have to give the same talk I gave in Philadelphia. Do I have time to go home and change?” What had she been thinking? She never forgot appointments, because she always checked her appointment book before going to bed.

“Are you feeling all right? If not, maybe you should postpone it.”

“I’m fine. A little preoccupied maybe, but otherwise okay. I guess this suit will do. I’ll be ready in ten minutes.”

“I’ll get the car and meet you downstairs. You can drink your coffee between here and there.”

“No. Will we have time to stop for coffee? I haven’t had a drop of anything in my stomach today.”

“Not to worry. I’ll have the coffee when I bring the car. I’d better hurry.”

She was not going to start questioning his motives merely because her aunt raised some ugly questions. Gina had always trusted her judgment about people, and not once had she been wrong. Miles was a perfect example of her intuitiveness.

I’m going to give Justin the benefit of the doubt until he proves unworthy of it.

She walked out of the building just as he drove up.

To her amazement, he got out of the car walked around to her and stood looking down at her with eyes that were unreadable. “Do you want to sit in the front or the back?”

She gazed into his eyes, saw the gentle softness, the sweetness in them, and a giddiness overcame her as she swayed toward him. He gripped her arm. “What’s the matter? Are you all right?”

Her heart answered him with a smile that said she cared deeply for him. “Where’d you put my coffee?” she asked him.

"In the front rack."

"Then I'll sit in the front with you."

She could be wrong, but it seemed to her that he relaxed when she said that. She had been so caught up in assessing and unraveling her own emotions that she hadn't thought of his feelings and how he would react the first time he had to chauffeur her after making love to her.

He opened the front passenger's door for her and she let him hook her seat belt, because she knew he wanted to do it. Inside the car, he took the coffee from the bag, removed the lid from one cup and gave it to her. She watched as he methodically wrapped a scone in a napkin and placed it in her lap.

"You're so sweet to me," she said, and meant it.

He opened his own coffee, took a sip, put the cup in the rack and pulled away from the curb. "I don't have many means of showing you how I feel. That's a small thing."

"You could begin by telling me," she said, stunned.

"Yes, I could, but words are about the cheapest commodity around."

"But they're all we have," she replied. Suddenly she felt uncomfortable with the philosophical turn of the conversation. What she needed was down-to-earth, she thought, cut-and-dried assurance.

"If you don't mind, I'd like us to talk, but not now. This is not the time or the place, because it's important, and I don't want to have to concentrate on driving while I discuss something that means this much to me."

Justin parked in front of the elegant country house and didn't doubt that he was looking at old money. He'd risk exposure going into such a place, so he put on his tinted,

black-framed glasses and prayed for the best. A maid opened the door for them. He took in the woman's black dress, white lace apron, collar, cuffs and cap on her head and thought, *Yes. Very old money.*

"Mrs. Fine is in the great room. Please come with me," the maid said. They followed the maid and, in the great room, he counted fifteen women who looked as if they'd come to play bridge.

Mrs. Fine, tall stately and gray-haired, came to meet them, and when Gina introduced him simply as Mr. Whitehead, as she usually did, he wanted to hug her. Mrs. Fine looked the epitome of snobbery, and he'd bet she wouldn't permit a chauffeur to sit down in her great room. He thought Gina began her talk with a slight show of nerves, and when she glanced at him, he smiled, nodded his head and gave her the thumbs-up sign.

"I need two board members," she told them, adding that she had five, and identified them.

He marveled that Gina managed to make people experience a desire to help the underprivileged without suggesting that they should feel guilty if they didn't. She spoke with warmth and apparent understanding of the needs of others, and he wondered if, like him, other people wanted to give themselves over to her loving care.

He jerked himself to attention when she asked him the number of organizations with which the foundation currently had ties. "Eleven, but we have fourteen applications, and we are expecting more," he said.

"Well," Mrs. Fine said, "I'll be delighted to serve on the board." She looked over the group. "Surely one of you younger ladies can do this. It's only a three-year commitment to start." Several hands went up. "There you are,"

Mrs. Fine said. "We'll plan a real fund-raiser for you. And if you need some volunteers, let me know."

To his immense relief, Mrs. Fine didn't offer lunch. As much as he appreciated her help, he couldn't wait to get out of her house. Conspicuous consumption left a sour taste in his mouth, for it always reminded him of the poverty and suffering that he'd seen throughout the world and about which he frequently wrote.

One of the women stopped in front of him. "For a minute, I thought I recognized you," she said to him, "but the person I had in mind wouldn't be working with a foundation. I'm hoping to join the board, so we'll probably see each other again. I wish you much success with the fund-raising."

He thanked her, careful to disguise his voice, for she was one of the people he interviewed for his story about the ways sudden wealth affects people. He couldn't help appreciating Gina's raised eyebrow when he walked away from the woman.

"We did well today, don't you think?" she said as they drove away from the Fine estate.

"We did, but I thought I'd suffocate in there."

"You did? Funny. I had the same feeling. I knew the number of organizations in our network. I asked you because I needed to link up with you somehow. I felt so lonely looking down at those women. Justin, except for Mrs. Fine, they all had blond hair, blue eyes, perfectly arched eyebrows and they all probably wore size 28-A braziers."

For the first time that day, he enjoyed a good belly laugh and he let it pour out of him. "Don't forget that they're all probably five feet nine inches tall in their stockings. Say, I once happened upon a nice little restaurant off the highway somewhere near the next exit. Are you willing to chance it?"

From his peripheral vision, he saw her lean back and close her eyes. "Yes, indeed. I could use a shot of something down-to-earth."

"I liked your style today. Your presentation was great, and maybe if you say the same thing all the time, you won't need notes. What I especially liked was your focus, and the way you emphasized certain things not by raising your voice, as most people do, but by lowering it. Very impressive. Are you sure you want Mrs. Fine on the board?"

"Thanks for the compliment," she said, and smiled. "No, I am not certain that I want Marnie Fine on the board, but she will bring the others in line. I think she needs a cause. And if this group does a fund-raiser for us, we'll get a windfall."

"Agreed. They'll call on their rich friends. But how are you going to control Fine?" he asked her.

"She wouldn't dare try to walk over you."

Her words didn't comfort him, for if she lost faith in him, they would separate, and she'd be on her own. "We have to write a constitution for this foundation that makes clear the role of volunteers, including board members, as well as their entitlements and limitations. We need a corporate lawyer for that," he said. He'd stopped short of telling her that he'd ask for help from his brother, who had both a law degree and an MBA.

He drove off the highway and followed an old road until he crossed a major street. "I know where I am now. We're about two city blocks from it." They found the little restaurant nestled in a grove of pine and white birch trees, and he drove around the back and parked.

"This is enchanting," Gina said as she looked out the car window.

He'd been there once years earlier with a woman who

said she loved him two days before he found her making love with another man. He rushed around the car, opened Gina's door, unhooked her seat belt and lifted her into his arms and flush against his body.

"I need to hold you, Gina. Just for one minute."

She reached up and caressed his face. "You could have held me earlier."

He drew her tightly to his body. "You call the shots. Don't forget that."

An old woman greeted them at the door of the restaurant. "Would you rather sit inside or under the trees? It's lovely and shaded out there."

"Outside, ma'am," he said, and she led them through the back door where two tables sat beneath shade trees that overlooked a pond.

He'd forgotten that the place was so idyllic, but he remembered that, the night after sitting there with Connie, a weight settled around his heart when he surprised her in the embrace of a close male friend. Four years had passed, and he considered it his good fortune that Connie showed her stripes.

Gina's hand covered his, bringing him back to the present. "Where are you right now, Justin? Did you come here with someone you loved?"

"Yes." He'd misled her, but he had never told her a lie, and he didn't intend to. "But I haven't thought of her since I can't remember when."

"I wish it was evening and the moon was shining," she said. "We could see our reflections in the pond. What's that?" she asked at the sound of a splash. "Was that a fish?"

"No. A frog," Justin said. Just then the old woman returned and took their order.

"I made some real good crepes today, and put fresh raspberry sauce and homemade ice cream in 'em," the older woman said. They ordered Caesar salads and the recommended dessert.

"I'd planned to head back to the office and work on our list of network organizations," Gina said, "but this food and this environment have sucked me into a stupor. You aren't helping, either."

"Let's walk through those woods back there," he said. "I want you to see the wildflowers and the squirrels and chipmunks darting around the trees." He stood and extended his hand to her, knowing that he was digging his grave deeper by the minute, but he needed to share with her his love of nature. She took his hand, and with his arm around her waist, they headed down the little path leading into the woods.

"I wonder where this leads," she said. "Did you...walk through here with...with *her*?"

"No. I've never had my feet on this path before. Look. There's a slight clearing."

"It's a river," she whispered, as if in awe.

"Yes, it is," he said. "Must be the Rippowam."

"Oh, Justin, this is so beautiful. I've... I'll never forget this. Just look." Her eyes sparkled with delight, and her face shone with the sun's warmth. She turned to him, her face aglow with happiness, as if he'd given her the river and the goldenrods, black-eyed Susans, reeds and dandelions that lived along its banks. He promised himself that he'd keep his hands off her until he told her everything about himself, but the passion in her eyes begged for his response. He loved her, and he couldn't deny her. His arms brought her to him, and when she parted her lips for his

kiss, he thrust into her, helplessly overcome with need for her.

Suppose Craig was right, and no matter what he told her, Gina decided he was after her money. The thought sent shivers plowing through him and he held her closer, but that only emphasized to him his vulnerability.

Chapter 8

Of course Justin had been in love, Gina told herself, riding beside him relaxed and with her eyes closed as they continued to New York City. Every so often, he gave her another little glimpse of heaven, but she wanted to experience its wonder. She sighed softly. Who was Connie and what did she look like? Was she beautiful and elegant? A man who looked like him and who had his smooth manners and bearing would have had access to any kind of women he wanted and a lot of those he didn't want. She knew when a man wanted her, and Justin Whitehead wanted her badly. What she couldn't understand was his reluctance to accept what he wanted. She tried to minimize the differences in their status, but almost as often as she did, he made an issue of it. Yet, he would occasionally take control of their relationship and even of their work as if he forgot his role as chauffeur.

"Are you asleep?" he asked her. "You're unusually quiet."

"I'm still basking in the glow of that brief idyll. It was a beautiful calming oasis in the midst at the hustle and bustle that my life has become. I try to hang on to the relaxed and contented person I used to be, going to church and museums on Sundays, paying my bills the first of the month, shopping at Macy's and buying my groceries at the supermarket. But the temptation to indulge in excesses is great. I refuse to be like those women at Marnie Fine's house, skeletons of humanity. I still wonder why Heddy insisted that I live among the rich."

"I've thought about that, and I've decided that she was a wise woman. You can't get the backing you need to make the foundation a fixture in the community if the people who can fund it don't consider you one of them."

Her hand rested on Justin's knee, and she suddenly gripped it in what he recognized as a plea. "Justin, I want to be myself, to love and be loved, to have children and to do my damned laundry. I'm the only person in that building I live in who does her laundry, and when I go to the laundry room, the people who see me there think I'm somebody's maid."

"Put a washer and dryer in your kitchen. It's certainly big enough. You do have a cleaning woman, don't you?"

"I just found one. If that apartment wasn't so big, I wouldn't need anybody to do the cleaning."

"Look at it this way." He slowed down to exit the expressway. "You will be giving a job to someone who needs it."

"Yeah. I guess. How long will it take us to drive to New Haven tomorrow morning?"

"Long enough. Let's give it two hours in case we encounter problems. If it's all right with you, I'll take the car for gas, and oil change and a check of the tires, and I'll be

here at ten for you tomorrow morning." He parked in front of the building. "Did you want to go by the office?"

"It's almost four, so I hadn't planned to go, but it's not a bad idea." He drove over to Lexington and, a few minutes later, parked in front of the building that housed her foundation. "You take the car," she said. "I'll get a taxi home and I'll see you in the morning."

He looked at her for a long while, and she wondered what she'd said or done to displease him. After nearly a minute, he leaned toward her and kissed her cheek. "That's not what I need, but it's all I can expect right now. Till tomorrow." He almost whispered it.

He disconcerted her. She looked at his mouth and the sweetness that was there for her if she dared demand it, but he was entitled to his limits. She unhooked her seat belt and got out of the car. "Bye," she said in a halfhearted way.

She walked into her office, saw Lorraine putting a large calendar in the pantry room and stopped. How did that refrigerator and microwave oven get there? "Did you buy these, Lorraine?" she asked her receptionist.

"No, ma'am. If you didn't, I guess Justin bought 'em. They came today, so I hooked 'em up, and let me tell you it's good to have a real kitchen here. I suppose he bought the coffee and stuff, too."

"Probably. We'll be in New Haven tomorrow morning. Take some money from the petty-cash box and buy whatever food you want to put in the refrigerator. I like the calendar and the fact that you put it where the public won't see it. Any urgent calls?"

"I put four important ones on your desk. If they had been urgent, I would have phoned you. The rest are in a log I'm keeping for you."

"Thanks. You're doing well, Lorraine."

Gina answered one call, but that office had closed for the day. "Pack up, Lorraine," she said. "I'm leaving." She walked into the reception room and looked around. In a short time, she had transformed herself into a person she barely knew—from a hardworking and modestly paid accountant to a woman who negotiated with the titans of industry and their rich wives and daughters on behalf of the abused and oppressed.

She walked out and hailed a taxi. Maybe she'd wake up in her old apartment on Broadway at 125th Street and in her comfortable old job, where her biggest concern was her habit of reversing numbers so that *three-forty-three* became *four-thirty-four*. She'd learned that when she got two different sums for a column, if the difference was divisible by nine she should look for her usual error. That little game kept her from getting bored, and she didn't mind it. But her new life was far more complex, and Justin was at the heart of the complexity.

If Gina had moments of personal reckoning, Justin, too, had begun to experience them with increasing frequency. After servicing the car and putting it in the garage, he walked around to Madison Avenue, hailed a taxi and went home. It had taken every bit of willpower he possessed to resist getting on that elevator, going up to the seventeenth floor, ringing her door bell and sinking himself into her warm and loving body.

He walked into his West End Avenue apartment—another thing that would give her a shock if she ever entered it—and closed the door. His cell phone rang and he considered not opening it. "Hello." He'd stopped an-

swering by saying his last name, because Gina wouldn't expect that of a chauffeur.

"Justin, this is Gina."

He sat down and prepared himself to deal with his accelerated heartbeats. "Hi. What's up? Everything all right at the office?" he asked as casually as he could.

"Oh, yes. Lorraine's taking care of everything. She's a prize. I'm calling to thank you for getting the refrigerator, microwave, coffee, coffee cups and other supplies. Apparently they all came today, and Lorraine has hooked them up and made a very nice little kitchen. I want you to take the money for—"

"Gina, please learn not to insult me. I wanted to do that. If I had needed money for it, I would have asked you." For reasons he didn't bother to fathom, annoyance hit him and he gave in to it. "Can't I do anything for you without your letting me know that you have the money with which to pay for it?"

Her silence may have been meant to suggest that he was out of line, but he didn't plan to heel. "Oh, Justin. I'm so sorry. I wouldn't hurt you for anything. I'd...I'd rather hurt myself."

"Look. I'm...I guess you caught me at a bad moment," he said, mollified by her obvious contrition. "I wouldn't hurt you, either. Never." But he knew that he would, and probably very soon. "We'll see each other tomorrow morning. Good night, love." He hadn't addressed her that way previously, but it was the way he felt, and she could deal with the message as best she could. He was in a mood to be truthful.

They left the faculty club in good spirits following her talk there, for she had received not only pledges in grants

but also the gift of a small speakers' group, who would take over much of the travel and speaking that she had scheduled for herself. What's more, it pleased her that her new volunteers had the prestige of notable family ties and names, as well as the title of distinguished retired professors.

"You're on your way now," Justin told her. "You only have to ask, and they will be glad to do it and bear their expenses. Imagine the level at which those men and women operate. It's mind-blowing!"

"Yes," she said. "And what I liked most about them was their willingness to structure their talk from the notes I gave them. This is so gratifying." For the first time in a long while, she wished for her mother, for she believed that, in spite of her mother's self-centeredness, she would have been proud of her only child.

They stopped at a restaurant and ate a lunch of hamburgers and canned lemonade. "Why are you so somber, Justin?"

He sipped the drink through a plastic straw. "'I didn't know I was. Let's have a look at the ocean. Do you mind?'" She shook her head. He was like a cauldron of electric energy with the positive and negative impulses striking at and exploding against each other. And she was at the center of it.

"I don't mind." If the ocean, river and lakes soothed him as they did her, she could not begrudge him a few minutes of peace. *If only I wasn't his boss, he would be mine.*

Justin took an exit that led to Woodmont, parked, took Gina's hand and walked half a block to the ocean. If only I could tell her now, he thought. But remembering his father's advice, he held back. It was the wrong place and the wrong time. He stared out at the waves as they played

havoc with each other and a few buoys that bobbed in their midst. A battleship-gray met his gaze all the way to where the ocean joined the sky.

"Let's sit over here," he said, and led her to a boulder bleached white from its eternity in the sun, sat there with her, holding her hand, and when she leaned against his chest, he cradled her in his arms. "What is it?" he whispered to her.

"Nothing and...everything. You and I have so much in common that I once made a list. Now, I have to add moving water, trees, the woods...and... Do you think Providence is laughing at us, or is it nurturing us?"

"I hadn't thought about it, but right now, I feel as if it's having one hell of a laugh."

She sat up straight. "My auntie always says that behind every cloud there's a silver lining, and she really believes it."

"Yeah. People have to believe something. Right now, I'd like to believe that. Say, I think we ought to get back to the car. That's a cloud over there, and it's getting darker by the second. Come on."

Hearing the roll of thunder, he jumped up, grasped her hand and headed back to the car. He'd never forgive himself if, because of his lapse in judgment, she was injured in an electrical storm. The wind rose and seemed to push them along, and sand whirled around their feet and legs. "This promises to be a real storm," he said. "I hope it doesn't reach New York."

"Me, too."

However, as they left the George Washington Bridge, they heard what seemed like rocks falling on the roof of the car while lightning flashed around them. "Good grief, a hailstorm. Let's hope it doesn't get any worse, or it could damage the car," he said.

Justin took the West Side Highway well beyond the city's thirty-mile-an-hour speed limit and reached Gina's building as a torrent of ice pounded the streets. He drove into the garage.

"Come with me," Gina said to him. "This hailstorm is dangerous." They took the elevator from the garage level up to the seventeenth floor. "Make yourself comfortable. Who knows how long it will last. You can't walk or drive on those streets now," she said. "Would you like coffee, wine or lemonade?"

"Lemonade will be fine."

She went to her bathroom and checked her appearance, brushed some sand out of her hair, cleaned her teeth and went back to him.

"We're in for some very bad weather," he said, sipping lemonade, "so I'd better get on home." He'd had as much temptation as he could handle.

"I... The wind is shaking these window frames, Justin, and the hail has slackened, but the wind is stronger and it's still thundering and lightning. Why can't you stay here? I have a guest room."

She couldn't be serious. No way was he going to spend the night in her apartment in a room other than the one in which she slept, and he wasn't going to do that, either. He had to live with his conscience, and that was becoming more difficult with the passing days. "Thanks, but no thanks. I appreciate the offer, but I'd better go home."

"Why?" she asked, and although the pain in that one word screamed at him, tearing at his insides, he knew he would leave. Knew he couldn't force himself to stay, that he'd trampled his principles to the limit of his tolerance.

"I can't, Gina. As much as I—"

She jumped to her feet and interrupted. "Okay. Then leave. I refuse to give a damn. Why did you take me to that lovers' lane by the Rippowam River yesterday and make me feel as if I were the only person in the world who meant something to you? And this afternoon." Her hands went to his hips and she started to breathe heavily. "At the ocean, why'd you hold me like that?" She threw up her hands and balled up her fists. "Why are you in my life? Damn you. Don't you care if I hurt?"

"You can't know how much pain this is causing me."

"Maybe you're fooling. Maybe you're laughing at me. How do I know? I want you to leave. I can't handle any more of this on again, off again. I want you. I don't want you. Just leave me alone."

He thanked God that he didn't have to pass her on his way to the door. He didn't need to smell her perfume or her woman's scent now heightened by her anger. He didn't need to be so close to her that his arms would automatically reach for her and bring her into his embrace and close to his body, a body that hungered to mate with her.

At the door, he stopped and turned, although he knew that she still stood with her back to him. "Don't ever believe that you're not precious to me," he said. He left and closed the door softly. At the elevator, he paused. She hadn't asked him for the car keys, and he wished she had. He took the elevator to the garage, signed out and left by the entrance used for automobiles. Rain pelted him and at times he thought the wind would shove him into a tree or a building. He knew it was useless to look for a taxi, so he hurried to Lexington Avenue, dashed into a coffee shop, ordered coffee and dialed a limousine service on his cell phone. An hour later, wet and uncomfortable, he walked

into his apartment. He'd learned plenty about himself that day, the most important being that he treasured the principles instilled in him from childhood and wouldn't violate them again.

He didn't want to hurt Gina more, and that meant he had to change their relationship one step at a time. He'd been concerned with his own vulnerability, and hadn't counted on the extent to which he'd wound her when he told her the truth.

To say that he slept would stretch the facts, for he awakened on and off all night. Gina was always within his grasp, but eluded him each time he reached out to her. Never before in his memory had a dream recurred throughout the night. He rolled to the edge of the bed and sat up. Had he slept? Maybe, but he didn't believe it, for it seemed that every one of his muscles ached, and he couldn't have been more exhausted if he had wrestled with a mammoth. He dragged himself up, struggled to the kitchen and made a cup of instant coffee, drank it and took a shower. Refreshed and intent upon taking the first step toward straightening out his life, he checked his schedule, verified that Gina had no trips that day and headed for her office.

"Good morning," he greeted Lorraine with a smile and as much jubilation as he could muster. "I hope you didn't get caught in that storm last night."

"Good morning. I stayed here till it was over. Must have been around eight when I walked out of here. That was frightening. You won't believe how scared I am of thunderstorms. Thanks for the kitchen equipment and this fantastic coffee. I left some for you, and I made those muffins in there. I hope you like them."

"Thanks. I'm sure I will. I don't get home cooked *any-*

thing often.” He got a cranberry muffin and a cup of coffee and went to his office. To his surprise, a cloud of nostalgia settled over him as he remembered the good times that he and Gina had planning the office suite and making it an elegant homey abode.

Using his cell phone, he dialed Gina on hers, because he wanted to keep their conversation private. “Hi. This is Justin. May I see you for a minute?”

“Sure.”

Maybe she was still angry. He hoped not, because he didn’t expect her to welcome what he had to say. He took his coffee and knocked on her office door. *It was so unlike her to close her door. I hope she’s not having a hard time because of me.* She answered, and he went in and closed the door behind him.

He sat down without being invited to do so. “How are you this morning, Gina?”

She flexed her right shoulder in a quick shrug. “Fine.”

“I wish I could say the same. I fought for sleep all night, and I’m exhausted. But I didn’t come in here to talk about my demons.” There was nothing to do but say it. He leaned forward. “I’ve loved being here with you more than I know how to say, Gina, but I...I have to resign, and I’m doing so now.”

She stared at him, her mouth a gaping hole. “Why?” she finally asked. “Why are you doing this?”

“I can’t bear this situation any longer, Gina. My position here, in your life, is untenable. These two roles are getting to me. Scratch that. They have gotten to me, and I want out.”

She looked away from him, focusing her gaze on the building visible through her window, but her whole demeanor communicated to him the pain, the angst that she

felt. He longed to hold her, to reassure her, to tell her what she meant to him, but he knew she wouldn't appreciate it. Finally, she looked at him with eyes that glistened, her tears held in check by her pride.

"You came to me less than two weeks after I opened these doors. We did everything together. I need you, and I trust you. How am I going to replace you? I hate the thought of looking for someone else."

"Will it help if I interview the person for you? If you really need me, you know I'll come." He hadn't planned to say that, but so what. He'd only told the truth. If she needed him, he'd be there for her.

Her tremulous smile had the effect of a dagger to his heart. "I guess it was all too good to be true. Thanks for the offer. If I need you, I'll take you up on it." She put her left elbow on her desk and cupped her chin with the palm of her hand. "I hope you realize what a terrible blow this is."

"Of course I do, but I'm hoping that, in the long run, it will be for the best. I don't want this to be the end of our relationship, and I...I hope you'll be receptive when I phone you and ask if we can spend some time together."

She seemed skeptical, and he didn't blame her.

The following week, Lorraine answered the telephone. "Heddy Lloyd Foundation. How may I help you? Just one moment." She buzzed Gina. "There's a woman who says she belongs to a service club, Altrusa International, and they want you to speak to them at their meeting tomorrow night. Can you take it?"

"This is Gina Harkness."

"Ms. Harkness, this is Ann Malloy." She explained that the club would like to add the Heddy Lloyd Foundation to

the organizations that it funded. "I know it's short notice, but can you meet with our board either tonight or tomorrow night? We have to make a report to the membership day after tomorrow."

"Thanks for your interest, Ms. Malloy. I have to call you back in, say, half an hour?" She took the number and address.

Gina hung up, called Justin and told him what Ann Malloy told her. "I'll need to make travel arrangements."

"I'll take you," he said, "provided you're willing to go this evening. Could we leave before rush hour? If we're too early, that's a region for great seafood. I don't suppose you have to go home and dress."

"Why not?"

"Because you always go to the office looking like you're keeping a date with the president."

"That's because I was." Let him digest *that*.

"Frisky, aren't you. I'll get back to you on that. What do you say I have the car in front of your office building at two-thirty. It'll take us a couple of hours to get out there."

"Thanks. I hope it proves worth it."

"It isn't like you to be pessimistic. Don't forget the power of positive thinking. I'm looking forward to seeing you."

"Me, too."

It seemed strange sitting beside him and not chatting as they once did, and she said as much. "The only thing that's changed," he said, "is that I am no longer your chauffeur. Was that the only condition under which you're willing to be more than casual friends with me?"

"That was natural, Justin. This isn't."

"We had a lovers' disagreement, and we'll patch it up."

"I don't know. Are you saying you won't take the job back?"

"No, I won't. You'll eventually see that this way is best. Trust me."

"I meant to tell you that my auntie will be here this weekend, and she wants to meet you. I can't tell her that this man I told her so much about refuses to meet her. You won't be obligated in any way."

"When do you want me to meet her?"

"Either Saturday or Sunday. She's arriving Friday evening and going back Sunday night."

"How about dinner and a Broadway show?"

"She'd love that."

"What about you? Would you enjoy that? I can get tickets to *Chicago*, or *Phantom of the Opera*.

"I'd love to see *Phantom*, and dinner would be very nice, too."

"Good. That's what we'll do. I'll be at your apartment Saturday at six, and we are not using your car."

"You won some strong support tonight," he told her on the trip back to New York City. "That organization has clubs in different cities and abroad. I'm glad we came."

"So am I."

When he reached her building, he made another decision. "I'm going to park in your garage, and I'll give your car keys to your doorman."

"Then you're really serious about quitting?"

"I have to be, Gina. It's important for both of us." He gazed into her eyes, seeing the pain that she struggled to hide even as her lips trembled. "If I did what I want to do, I'd take you in my arms and drown myself in your warmth

and affection, but if I do that, I'll ruin everything." He let his fingers trail down her cheek because he needed that much. He had to caress her.

"I'll be here Saturday at six. Good night, love." Without giving her a chance to answer, he got out of the car and opened her door, but didn't unhook her seat belt.

"Good night," she said, and got out without looking at him. All right. He could handle that. It was nothing compared to the pain of wanting her and not having her. He parked the car, put the keys into an envelope that he'd brought along for that purpose, and gave them to the doorman. End of chapter one.

Saturday afternoon, he dressed in a navy-blue suit, white shirt with blue and gray stripes and red tie, bought two dozen red roses and went to get Gina and her aunt. He didn't drive, because he hadn't yet told Gina who he was. He nearly whistled when she opened the door wearing a sleeveless dusty-rose chiffon dress that emphasized all of her assets, from her beautiful breasts to the most perfect legs he'd ever seen.

When she looked at him, her eyes rounded and her eyebrows shot up. "Hi," she said. "You look scrumptious."

"And you look good enough to steal," he said, feeling as if he needed to clear his head.

"Well, do tell. Now, this is what I call a man," Elsa Bowen said, her face blooming in a wide grin. "Thank you for coming to see me, Justin. This is a real treat."

He felt like hugging her, so he put his arms around her and did precisely that. "I appreciate your warm welcome," he told her. "I didn't know what to expect." He handed her the flowers.

Elsa Bowen looked him in the eye. "Thank you. It's

been years since a man gave me red roses. You're a man with class, and if you tell me you're a chauffeur, I'm gon' laugh. You look and act like a CEO."

He'd better watch his step; this woman had a knowing eye. He let a grin take over his face, partly because she amused him and partly because she'd nail him for sure if he appeared to get serious.

"I wouldn't think of getting into trouble with you," he said, in as light a tone as he could summon. "An argument is not something you're used to or care for."

"Now, wait a minute," she said, obviously flattered. "You been spying on me."

His answer was an elaborate shrug, after which he said, "If I've lived for thirty-eight years, I ought to recognize an honest, straight-from-the-shoulder woman when I see one."

Gina came back into the living room where he stood talking with her aunt, raised an eyebrow and said, "Justin, I see you've met my auntie, Elsa Bowen." She took the flowers from her aunt and went to the kitchen.

When she returned, he said, "Shouldn't you carry a wrap of some kind? Both the restaurant and the theater will be air-conditioned."

"Thanks. I was about to forget my stole. Don't you want one, Auntie?"

"I sure do, 'cause me and freezin' don't mix. I've been known to walk out of Duke Ellington and Leontyne Price concerts, even those Mozart concerts, rather than freeze." She smiled at Justin. "'Course, such a nice gentleman would probably offer me his jacket."

He smiled right back at her. Testing him, was she? "I'd gladly give you my jacket in the theater, but if I pulled it

off in the restaurant we're going to this evening, I'd be asked to leave."

"I see you're not afraid to jostle," she said.

He liked her better with each passing minute. "Definitely not, and it's a good thing, because you revel in it." He looked at Gina. "May we leave now?"

He took them in a taxi to a little West Side restaurant four blocks from the theater. "This is both cozy and elegant," Gina said. "I wouldn't have thought there was such a place."

"You like candles," Elsa said to Gina. "You loved them when you were a little child."

"She loves beautiful things," Justin said, "and for me, that's a mark of femininity, although she's gracious to people who don't agree with her taste."

"When did you disagree with my taste?" Gina asked Justin. "I thought we agreed on just about everything."

"Accept that you wanted gray walls in the corridor of your offices. Remember?"

"Oh, I forgot that."

"Who won? Whose taste is on that wall?" Elsa asked.

"The wall is a dusty-rose to match the color in the reception room," Gina said. "Justin claimed it made more sense than gray."

"Hmm. Do you always get your way?" Elsa asked him.

"If I did, I'd be a lot happier than I am right now." He was sorry the minute he heard the words that slipped out of his mouth. He'd told the truth, but he wished he hadn't.

"Well, you're going to explain that. Now, aren't you?"

The waiter arrived to take their order, and Gina's probing stare did not escape him. He gave the waiter their orders. "What kind of wine would you prefer?" he asked Gina.

“White burgundy.”

He looked at Elsa. “Whatever you order is fine with me,” she said. He ordered white burgundy, although he would have preferred a robust red wine.

Elsa’s gaze seemed to pierce him, and he wondered at her thoughts. She had no qualms about sharing them. “If you’d been sitting here by yourself, would you have ordered wine, and what kind?”

As if the question were not important, and he knew it was, he said, “If I ordered any, it would have been red, a Rhône such as Châteauneuf du Pape.”

She nodded. “That’s like telling me how to drive from Anchorage to Cuba and not giving me a map. You know a lot about a lot of things, Justin. I’m impressed.”

He didn’t have to show off, but he wanted her to stop pressing him. She’d figured out that, if he was a chauffeur then, he hadn’t always been, and she’d probably fill Gina’s ears with her thoughts about it the minute the two of them were alone. It didn’t bother him, because Gina already had her suspicions about him, and he would soon put them all to rest.

He looked Elsa Bowen in the eye. “Thanks. I appreciate your support.” Maybe she meant it, and maybe she didn’t. He had no way of knowing, but he knew Gina would want her aunt to approve of him. “We can come back here for dessert after the show,” he told them, “or we can go to a jazz club. I like the Vanguard.”

“We’ll see whether I’m sleepy,” Elsa said. “I don’t go out much at night, so this is a real treat.”

As they walked the block and a half to the theater, he telephoned the Village Vanguard and asked who would be performing that night. “The group playing there tonight is

not my favorite," he told them, "but we can go so Elsa will experience the New York jazz scene."

"Let's skip it," Elsa said. "I don't believe in spending money for anything that ain't first-class, and I taught my niece here the same thing. A good sweater will last me ten years or more, but a cheap one will go to pieces soon as I wash it. So which cost me more, the good one or the cheap one?"

"We'll return for dessert after the show," he told the waiter. To Elsa, he said, "That's the kind of advice I got at home, and I live by it."

"I've never known Auntie to enjoy herself so much as she enjoyed the show," Gina told him as they left the theater. "This is the first time she's been to see me in two years, and I wanted her to have a good time. I don't know how to thank you."

"If I've made you happy, that's all the thanks I need."

"I wish I could figure you out," she said. "Are we going to...to drift away from each other?"

"Not if I can help it, and I want you to believe that."

"I'll make us some coffee," Gina said when they returned to her apartment. He didn't doubt that she wanted to give him and Elsa a chance to talk alone, and Elsa did not waste the opportunity.

"I'm glad I met you, Justin," she began. "I hope you don't hurt Gina. She's smart as a whip and tough when she sets her mind to it, but she's fragile, too. And she's had a hard life. No child should have to live through what she did before she was twelve years old. She thinks a lot of you, and she believes in you. If you aren't serious, leave her alone."

"Don't worry. She means a lot to me, and if she'll be patient, it will work out."

“You’re not married?” He stared at her with all the furor he felt. “Sorry,” she said. “I didn’t think so, but men do as they please these days. You got secrets, though. I just hope they don’t destroy what you feel for each other.”

He looked straight into her eyes and saw her blanch when he said, “So do I.”

Chapter 9

When Gina returned from the kitchen with the coffee, she knew from the silence and the weight of the atmosphere that either her aunt or Justin was less than pleased with the tenor of their conversation or, at best, with the sound of the truth. She placed the tray on the coffee table and sat on the sofa, putting Justin between her and her aunt.

“Feels kind of icy in here,” she said for his ears alone.

“I wouldn’t say that. Clearing the air can bring people closer,” he said, “at least in the long run.”

Elsa took a few sips of coffee and stood, as did Justin. “You a man with class, Justin, and not too many of the brothers can walk in your shoes. I wish you luck.” She reached up and kissed his cheek. “If you in Washington, you come to see me. You hear?” She looked at Gina. “It’s hours past my bedtime. Good night.”

Justin drank the remainder of his coffee standing. “I

think I'll be going, too. It's after midnight." He reached down for her hand. "Walk with me to the door."

She stood, but she didn't feel like it. Did he dare leave without any gesture of endearment? She would have given anything to know what transpired in his mind. "One of these days, he'll be back," she said to herself, "but I won't be."

At the door he brushed her cheek with the back of his hand, and the longing in his darkened eyes told her that he didn't want to leave. Nor did she want him to go. With the heat of desire dancing and crackling between them with such furor, she reeled toward him, but quickly got herself under control. The scent of his cologne heightened as his body heat rose, but his male scent suddenly overpowered it and images of him lying on top of her and driving inside of her, unleashing the power of his loins, came back to her with such force that perspiration dampened her forehead, and strands of hair stuck to the side of her face.

He swallowed so heavily that his Adam's apple bobbed and, for a second, his eyes closed and his breathing deepened. Then he looked at her and said, "The theater down the street is showing an old Swedish movie that I've wanted to see for a long time. Will you go with me?"

She wanted to say no, but her mouth said, "When?"

"Friday evening." She nodded, and the hands she loved reached out to her and brought her close to his body.

"Let me hold you," he whispered. "Let me... Oh, Gina. Sweetheart." His lips trembled as the words tumbled out of them. Yet, he merely stared down at her, his face a pallet of yearning and desire.

Shaken by the longing he communicated to her, she

opened to him, parted her lips, and with a harsh groan he plunged into her. Tears cascaded from her eyes when, at last, she had him inside of her. Many times her heart had pounded for him, but not even when they made love did she experience the weakness, the total submissiveness, that overcame her now.

"It's all right, sweetheart," he said in a voice that she knew could not even have convinced him.

He squeezed her to him. "I'll pick you up Friday at seven."

She wanted to ask him what he was doing, if he'd found another job, and how he spent his days. But she had decided that it was his call, that he had something to tell her and that, as much as she loved him, he had better not wait too long. If her aunt's visit had accomplished nothing else, it had convinced her that she had no idea who Justin Whitehead was.

She reached up, brushed her lips over his and opened the door. Watching him walk down the hall, she wondered if any chauffeur had ever walked with that much poise and self-possession. Yes, he had a lot to tell her. Three eighty-five-dollar tickets to a Broadway show; dinner for three that, by her calculations, cost around two hundred dollars plus tip; and taxi fare to and from her home. Furthermore, if that suit he wore wasn't custom-made, her name was not Gina Harkness.

"I probably ruined it with Gina tonight," Justin said to himself as the elevator took him to the street floor. Throughout the evening, starting with the two dozen long-stem roses he gave her aunt, he had behaved as J. L. Whitehead, the successful and famous journalist. To his way of thinking, he hadn't had a choice. He was damned if he'd lead

her aunt to believe he lacked the basic social graces expected of an educated and reasonably successful man. Elsa Bowen didn't have university degrees, but she was no fool, and he didn't try to mislead her. By now, Gina probably had a list of questions for him, based either on her own misgivings and speculations, her aunt's observations and guesses or both. Well, he'd deal with that when the time was right. At the moment, he had a sense of relief that for once he'd been his true self with Gina, and she'd liked the person he was.

He got home to find the message light on his phone blinking, checked and saw that Craig had called him three times. He phoned his brother the next morning as soon as he could get a sip of the instant coffee that he detested.

"Sorry," he told Craig, "I got in too late to call you. What's urgent?"

"Nothing, really. I read that you're master of ceremonies for the Delta Phi Omega Honor Society awards ceremony. Congratulations. You know, of course, that after that ceremony, all your business will be in the street. When the media finishes with you, Gina won't only know who you are, she'll even know how many teeth you've had filled. I hope you're ready for it."

"I've resigned as her chauffeur, but I haven't laid it all out for her yet. Man, she was so hurt when I quit that... Hell, she said she needs me, and I know she does."

"And another thing. Mom and Dad will be there, and you know Mom."

"Mom won't embarrass me, nor herself, for that matter. Just pray that she doesn't drag along one of those teachers or grad students that she's so fond of parading in front of you and me. I'm sick of it."

"Not to worry. Dad won't let her do that."

* * *

One week later, sitting in a movie theater holding hands with his girl and eating buttered popcorn, something he barely remembered doing as a teenager, the images on the screen failed to capture his interest. Thoughts of losing her flitted through his mind, and he released her hand and put his arm around her shoulder. She glanced up at him, smiled and warmed him all over.

Is she the one? he asked himself for the first time. *I know how I feel about her, but is she the woman for my life?* As if in answer to himself, his fingers tightened on her shoulder and, to his amazement, he suddenly relaxed as a feeling of contentment stole over him.

Gina had her aunt's blessings, but they came with reservations. "Never let yourself fall for a man till you know his roots," she had admonished, "but I can see it's too late for you. Be careful."

Wasn't that advice tantamount to locking the barn after the horse got out, as her mother used to say? She sat at her desk assessing the foundation's accomplishments up to that point. In its short existence, she had assembled a board of directors, a coterie of six retired businessmen and businesswomen who would speak for the organization when she couldn't, and assembled a network of organizations that reached out to abused women and children. And with the help of her board members, especially Marnie Fine, she had raised fourteen million dollars. She had no doubt that the individuals on her speakers' list would raise far more, and in a shorter time.

Gina looked heavenward. "I'm doing my best, Heddy,

and if you have any clout up there, send me a little help with Justin. He's got me totally confused."

Lorraine walked into Gina's office and stood with her back to the closed door. "Gina, that lawyer, Miles, is here. He tried to brush past me and just barge right in on you. I had to stand up to him."

"Thanks. It doesn't surprise me. Miles would like to be a lot more important than he is. Tell him to come in."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Good morning, Miles," Gina said, leaning back in her desk chair and twirling the pen with which she had been writing. "What may I do for you?"

"Well, we haven't seen each other for a while. I see you're all set up here now." She nodded, but said nothing, letting him know that whatever they talked about would begin with him. "You must have received my invitation, since it wasn't returned to me. Naturally, I sent it first-class mail." She had received the invitation, but she hadn't opened it. At the time, she felt that she couldn't tolerate more of Miles's company.

"You did receive it?" he asked, scrutinizing her as if to detect the tiniest incriminating gesture or action.

"To what was I being invited?" she asked, aware that, unless he resorted to petty nagging, she had robbed him of an opportunity to cast aspersions on her social status.

When he smiled, he reminded her of a big worm slithering to a dark spot. "It's the anniversary of my business, and I've invited all of my clients to a formal reception. I'd be devastated if you couldn't attend." When she didn't ask when and where, he supplied the information. "Thank you. I knew I could count on you. I'll have a car at your place at twenty minutes of six."

Just like that. She snapped her finger. She'd let the man railroad her into going to his party. *I didn't think fast, so I deserve to go.*

"My dear, I see you are very busy, so I'll leave now."

She watched, stunned, as he took her right hand and kissed the back of it. When he held it, she jerked it from him. "I'm sorry, Miles, but I have to work. I also have to set a good example for my staff. Goodbye, Miles."

After he left, she swung around in her swivel chair and stared out the window. She could call him and cancel the date, or she could keep it and decline all of his future overtures, and she knew there would be many.

When she arrived at the private suite at The Pierre in which Miles had arranged to have his party, Miles Scraggs awaited her at the door. It was a really nice gesture, but she suspected that it came with a price. And it did.

She noted that Miles sent a Mercedes for her and enjoyed a good laugh, for he probably considered it superior to her Lincoln. Minutes after Miles greeted her at the entrance to the reception, she realized that she had made a mistake in going there. He slipped an arm around her waist and strolled into the midst of his other guests. "This is Gina Harkness," he told each one. "I don't have to tell you that she's very dear to me," he said to the most handsome man in the room.

"Cut it out," she said, gritting her teeth. "I'm not dear to you, and move your hands. I don't know what you hope to prove with this charade, but you won't have my complicity." She whirled around and stalked out.

"You've embarrassed me," he hissed, following her, "and you will pay for it. I'll bet you're consorting with your chauffeur. He's your level. You've no class, and if Heddy Lloyd had had any, she wouldn't have left you all of her

money.” She walked away and, as she stepped into the elevator, he said, “I’ll get you if it’s the last thing I do.” Gina had no way of knowing that, in seeking revenge, Miles would attempt to destroy Justin.

On the way to his personal office, which he opened when he decided to work as a syndicated journalist, Justin took his tuxedo to his favorite dry-cleaning establishment, and left his patent leather shoes at the shoe-repair shop next door. He could barely remember when he last wore that tux, but it still fit perfectly and looked as if he’d just purchased it. However, he figured he’d need a new shirt and accessories.

“Who’re you escorting to the awards dinner?” Craig asked Justin when they met for lunch.

“I’d like to take Gina with me, but she and I haven’t had our talk, and I don’t want her to get a shock in public.”

“Seems to me you’re settling with her. When did you last see a woman other than Gina?”

“I know what you’re saying. I don’t want to see any other women. The problem is taking Gina will mean a hell of a lot of explaining. I don’t dread discussing it with her, but I’m trying to wait for a time when we have privacy, when what we feel for each other will outweigh everything else, including our pride. Dad cautioned me about choosing the right time and place, and he was right.”

“She lives alone,” Craig said with his usual logic, “so why can’t you find the time?”

“Things cooled off between us, then her aunt came to visit, and I went away. I don’t want to go alone, but if I took someone else, you can bet Gina would watch the telecast and I’d be as dead as a rose in a Colorado winter.”

“So what are you going to do?”

“Hell, man. I want to show her that I’m proud to be with her and happy that she cares for me. And I’m itching to show her who I am and what I’ve accomplished. You know, I never laid much store by the awards and acclaim that I’ve received, but...well, I want her to know about them.”

“Gotcha. You’re in love with her, and you want her to admire you for something other than the way you drive a car. You want her to look up to you. Can’t say that I blame you. Go for it, man. If you get into trouble, introduce her to me, and I’ll give her a sample of my charm.”

Justin cocked an eyebrow at his brother. “If charm would do it, I don’t suppose I’d have a problem. Still, I may need all the help I can get.”

When he got home that night, he closed the door, went into his den and telephoned Gina.

Gina was still smarting for having allowed herself to be sucked into Miles’s transparent scheme. Because she answered the phone without checking caller ID, she didn’t greet Justin with the sweetness that she reserved for him alone. Consequently, Justin seemed to speak in guarded tones.

“I want to ask something of you, and I don’t want you to jump to any conclusions. Can you promise me that?” he said after their greetings.

“I’ll try my best.”

“I have to attend an awards dinner and ceremony. It’s formal, and I want to take you with me.”

And don’t ask any questions, such as why you’re going and what you’ll be doing. Will you be somebody else’s chauffeur? She didn’t ask him any of those questions. But she had

a suspicion that if she went with him, she would leave there knowing far more about him than she did at present.

"I'd love to attend a formal dinner with you, Justin."

"There's one thing I hope you won't mind. We have to sit on the dais."

"Oh, I don't mind," she said, hoping that he hadn't detected her shock, for he had indeed stunned her. He'd said she shouldn't jump to any conclusions, and she'd keep her promise and try not to. But why didn't he ask her to swim across the Atlantic? That would be just as simple.

Gina had been a multimillionaire for months now and still hadn't put her foot into Bergdorf Goodman's store. Nor had she shopped in any of the couture designers whose stores lined Madison Avenue, and Fifty-seventh Street between Fifth and Madison. She behaved as a working girl entrusted with the care of Heddy Lloyd's estate. However, as she prepared to dash over to Macy's to look for an evening dress, she recalled some of Miles's scathing observations of ways in which her behavior differed from that of other rich women.

I wonder what would happen if I made an appointment to shop at Armani or Dior. She warmed up to the thought. Or Fendi. Or maybe Chanel. Oh, Lord. I wouldn't dare go in one of those places. Oh, yes, I would! It would do their souls good to see a sister stroll in there, sit down, cross her legs, and ask to see a perfect size twelve model in some strapless evening dresses. Yes, sirree!

The next morning, she strolled into an Italian designer's Fifty-seventh Street boutique and was ushered into one of the private lounges. A uniformed maid asked if she would like coffee or tea. She ordered coffee, and noted that it arrived without milk or sugar and with a bowl of fresh berries

instead of a scone or muffin. She thanked the maid, and when the woman's eyebrows shot up, Gina put a five dollar tip on the tray. She left an hour later with the promised delivery of a perfect-fitting designer evening gown, along with the shoes and bag to go with it, and some lessons in how the other half lived.

She also had a receipt for an enormous bill, and she couldn't help thinking how much comfort the amount she spent would give to some of the homeless children for which she advocated. She got on the Fifth Avenue bus for a ride down to Thirty-eighth Street, a block from the foundation's offices, and realized that she had neither a transit card nor two dollars in change. She backed off the bus and hailed a taxi.

"You gotta be this or that. You gotta be one way or the other," a youthful male voice sang on the radio. She was about to ask the driver to turn it off when she realized its appropriateness in her case and couldn't help laughing at herself. *You could get the folks out of the Bronx, but you couldn't get the Bronx out of the folks.*

"I'm not about to get schizoid," she said to herself. "From now on, I'm going to be me, and if I feel more comfortable getting my dress at Macy's, that's what I'll do. If the store's good enough for some big-shot American designers, it's good enough for me."

"How's it going, Gina?" Lorraine asked her when she got to the office. "The coffee's still hot, and I bought some more scones this morning."

"Thanks, Lorraine. I can't wait to get my teeth in one of those scones." To herself she said, "Berries, indeed!"

She left work early that afternoon to prepare for a tenants' meeting in her building. Some tenants wanted a

change of management, but while she had no complaints against the current management, she wanted to know the tenants' concerns. She collected her mail, greeted the concierge and went up to her apartment. In her mail, she found a legal-size letter from Miles, shrugged her shoulder and tossed it along with her other mail into the tray that contained unread mail. What could Miles have to say to her? She wished he'd fade out of her life. The blinking red light on her answering machine drew her attention away from the mail.

She dialed her aunt's number. "Hi, Auntie. You called me?"

"I sure did. My nose been itching all day. You watch out somebody don't throw you a curve. You hear?"

Gina was used to her aunt's premonitions and hunches, and she had learned not to ignore them. "Thanks, Auntie. I'm not sure I needed that right now. Have you seen a house you want?"

"Honey, I don't have time to look for no house. It's graduation time, my busiest part of the year. I'm just finishing with the high-school graduates, and now I got to start on things for these college graduates, and all of them want something fancy. Half of them need to lose some weight. You can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear."

"But you always manage that, and it's why you're so busy. Gotta go."

She hung up, but she didn't move. What if her evening with Justin flopped, or the tenants' meeting became explosive, or... Good gracious! She rushed to the foyer, picked up the letter from Miles, opened it and sat down. She read:

Dear Mr. Strags, following is the result of our investigation.

Justin Whitehead is J. L. Whitehead, the journalist and writer. He has never before held a job as chauffeur. He is thirty-seven years old, was born and raised in Washington, D.C., has a degree from Yale University. He has won many awards as a journalist, too many to list here, and supports himself as a freelance writer and investigative journalist. His work has been published in many major newspapers and magazines. If you need additional details, I should be glad to provide them.

Yours faithfully,

Peter Rawlings, Private Investigator

She pulled up her lower lip and closed the letter. That explained everything, except why he chose to make a fool of her. It would serve him right if she let him come there Saturday night all decked out in his fancy tux, and she met him at the door wearing her old chenille housecoat and rollers in her hair and with grease all over her face, she thought.

The phone rang and Gina padded over to it with heavy feet. "Hello. Oh, Auntie. What is it?" she asked when she remembered to look at her caller ID.

"Child, I forgot to tell you why I called you yesterday. It wasn't my nose itching. It was a dream I had. I prayed for you like I always do before I go to bed, and then I saw this in my dream as clear as sunlight. You were running down the street fast as you could with a hand full of dollar bills, and Justin was chasing you. I kept stretching my neck to see if he was gonna catch you. I declare, I don't know why I dreamed that, except maybe it was a message."

“Well,” Gina said, “that’s two of your hunches I have to deal with. Please don’t give me any more of them today.” She told her aunt goodbye and hung up. One thing was certain: she was not going to allow Miles Strags to have the last laugh. She wrote:

My dear Miles,

Thank you for the information you sent about Justin. I hope this little “victory” is a comfort to you. However, I’m sorry to say that it’s too bad you wasted all that money for nothing. That private investigator must have cost you a small fortune. I’ll bet all he did was interview Justin. Why didn’t you send him to me? Incidentally, I don’t want anything else to do with you. A principled person wouldn’t do that.
Gina Harkness

She addressed and stamped the letter and gave it to the building’s concierge for mailing. That done, both her anger and her frustration began to subside. Hadn’t Justin told her that they had to talk, and had she insisted on it, or even encouraged him to initiate that talk? She had not. He had asked that she not jump to conclusions about whatever would take place at the awards dinner and ceremony, and she’d promised. From the outset, she suspected that he brought more to the table than a chauffeur was expected to have, and the longer she knew him the more certain she was that he had much more to offer. Many times, she’d been on the verge of confronting him, but hadn’t, and she now realized that she knew he’d tell her the truth, and she hadn’t wanted to know it.

She jumped up and made an appointment with her hair-

dresser. Damned if that fancy dress was going to hang, unworn, in her closet. Besides, he hadn't faked how he felt about her. She was not a total innocent, and when that man was buried deep inside of her, she had owned him. He'd had no will of his own; he was totally hers. He still was, and by damn, he was going to remain hers. Nobody could get her money if she didn't let them. She made a cup of tea—she didn't drink coffee in the afternoon—and began preparing herself for the tenants' meeting.

A few minutes before she was to leave for the meeting, the telephone rang, and the sight of Justin's name in the caller ID window of her phone warned her to straighten out her emotions.

"Hi, Justin, I was just about to leave. We're having a tenants' meeting."

"Then I'm glad I caught you. How are you?"

"Everything's going smoothly at the foundation, and I'll soon find out if it's all right here."

"I certainly hope it is. Gina, do you know yet what color dress you'll wear Saturday night? I want to be sure my cummerbund doesn't clash with it."

"Oh, Justin. That is... Are you always so considerate?"

"If you recall a time when I wasn't, I apologize." There it was again. His home training. His polish. He wore it as a robin wears the red on its breast.

"You have me there," she said. "Not a single instance. On the contrary. Do you recall the color in the reception room at the foundation?" He said he did. "My dress is precisely that color."

"I'd guessed it would be either that or red. Have you spoken with your aunt since she left?"

"I spoke with her today. She had nice things to say

about you after you left that night, but I don't suppose that surprises you."

"I thought we got on fine, and I'm glad to have it confirmed. I liked her."

They talked about many things, but not about themselves. At last seeing that she was about to miss the opening of the meeting, she asked him, "Are you going to kiss me good-bye?"

"No," he said, sending her reeling from shock. "I need you so badly that I am not going to tease myself by blowing kisses through a telephone wire. I'll kiss you Saturday night, and I intend to do a first-class job of it. See you then." He hung up, and she stared at the receiver. Speechless. If this was the real Justin Whitehead, she liked his style.

She understood now why Justin resigned; he had become tired of playing that role. What she needed to know was why he donned it in the first place. She left the meeting satisfied that ninety percent of her neighbors wanted what was best for the building in which they lived, while the other ten percent merely enjoyed complaining. She would not dismiss the building-management company because a woman waited a week for a new microwave oven, her second new one in a year. Nor would she order the doormen to force chauffeurs, maids and other service people to enter through the basement delivery entrance, because one woman didn't think it seemly for them to use the front door. If they had used it for fifty-two years—the life of the building—they could keep on using it.

It's time I let them know who owns this building, she thought. Although she feared that, by disclosing that, she could become the victim of a mugging or another kind of robbery. To her knowledge, the tenants didn't know she

had inherited Heddy's property and, along with it, the building in which they all lived. She wrote a directive stating that the present management would remain, and signed it Gina Harkness, building owner.

That Saturday evening, she put on her first couture dress and shoes, added her favorite perfume and, after considering that she didn't own any jewelry that would compliment her gown, decided not to wear any. She combed her hair down and let it swing around her neck as her hairdresser suggested, crossed her fingers, picked up her designer bag and walked out of her bedroom just as the door bell rang. She had known that he would be right on time.

"I'm not telling him anything that I read in Miles's letter," she told herself. "Now that I know who he is, I'll just be myself and see how he takes it."

She needn't have worried, for Justin had decided to do the same. He didn't whistle at people, and especially not at women, but when she opened the door, looked at him and smiled, his whistle split the air, long and sharp.

"I'm sorry, sweetheart, but you look so beautiful and so elegant. You take my breath away." He imagined that his eyes shone with the happiness he felt as he handed her a bouquet of flowers. "That's such a beautiful dress, and it's you. Does that lipstick smudge?"

Her laughter poured out, joyous as if propelled not by amusement, but by happiness and a song in her heart.

She stepped back and looked at him. "Good grief. How did you...th-that's the precise color as my dress," she sputtered, pointing to his silk cummerbund.

"I still had the color swatches we used to select the paint for your offices. The rest was simple. You like it?"

"It's wonderful."

"You know, of course, that it means we're together and not accidentally." He didn't smile when he said it, and his facial expression demanded that she confirm or deny it.

"I'm proud to be with you, Justin. Every woman there will envy me."

"I don't know about that," he said, "but I expect the men to crowd me for sure. Shall we go?"

He wasn't nervous and he wasn't anxious, but he knew his parents would attend the ceremony, and he couldn't count on his mother to keep her nose out of the air. If she would only see Gina as he did, a lovely, capable and caring woman, but he suspected that his mother would settle only for a daughter-in-law with a doctorate and an ambition to become chairwoman of a university department. He held out his hand for Gina's door key.

"As soon as I put these in a... Gosh, they're in a vase, and it's a beautiful crystal vase." She removed the wrapping, put the vase on a nearby table, reached up and kissed the side of his mouth.

His hand gripped her arm, and he stared down at her, his eyes ablaze with something she couldn't define, but certainly didn't fear. "We'd better get out of here, Gina."

He locked the door and took her hand. In the elevator, she didn't speak, but the smile on her face had the glow of sunshine and, at the moment, that was all he needed. When he headed them to the stretched out Mercedes in front of the building, she gasped.

"Lady, do you think I'd offer my best girl anything less on an evening like this?" The chauffeur opened the door for them, and he settled with her in the back seat.

"I wish our destination were miles and miles away," she

said when he began to pour champagne in the crystal flutes. I don't want to get tipsy, Justin. You said I have to sit on the dais."

He opened the refrigerator and removed a tray of finger sandwiches. "Eat a couple of these. I only gave you half a glass of champagne. You'll be fine. I'd better tell you because you'll find out in a couple of minutes. I'm the master of ceremonies tonight."

"You're *what*?"

"I'm the MC tonight. And another thing, my parents will probably attend the ceremony."

"Good Lord, Justin. This is a lot to digest in a couple of minutes. Maybe you should give me that bottle over there. You're going to break this down for me later, I hope."

"I have to. If I don't have an opportunity to do it tonight, I have to do it very soon. Your head must be spinning, but believe me, I'm an honest, law-abiding man, Gina. And whatever else you think, remember that no one anywhere is as precious to me as you are. Until we talk, I want you to remember that every time you begin to doubt me."

She reached for his hand. "You're talking holes in my head, and I feel as if I'm headed out of my mind." She put the glass aside. "Cork the champagne, and we can drink the rest on the way home. Right now, I need to be cold sober. Did I imagine what you said a minute ago?"

"That you're more precious to me than anybody else on this earth? That's exactly what I said."

She leaned back and closed her eyes. He longed to hold her and kiss her, but he needed his wits and, furthermore, he wasn't certain of her mood. She'd once told him that she loved him but, since then, much had happened and some of that would destroy a weak relationship.

He leaned over her. "Open your eyes and look at me. I need to know what you're feeling." Her eyelids lifted slowly to reveal her large, dark brown, sleepy eyes, eyes that had captured him for all time the minute he'd first gazed into them. "Do you care?" he whispered, and his heart skidded in his chest while he awaited her answer.

She pointed to her chest. "You're deep in here. Solid. Fixed. Permanent. Yes, I care." And then she closed her eyes.

He wanted so badly to kiss her, to hold her and love her. "I...need to hold you, Gina."

She raised her arms to him, but at that moment the limousine came to a halt, and the light flicked on in the back of the car, a signal that they had reached The Pierre. He didn't think he'd ever been so proud as when he walked into the guest room where those scheduled to sit on the dais waited and, among the women there, his Gina stood out like a rose in a patch of thorns.

Shortly after they took their seats, he spotted his parents seated at a table below the dais and waved to them. His father gave him the thumbs-up, and he knew his dad liked what he saw of Gina. He introduced himself, the others on the dais, and announced that dinner would be served. He'd had better food, and he suspected that everyone else could say the same.

The award went to an eighty-nine-year-old woman who, for the past twenty-four years since her retirement from public-school teaching, had served as a "big sister" to wayward girls and had changed the lives of many. Her most notable charge, a newly elected member of the State Assembly, recommended the woman for the award. After introducing several other, less noteworthy awards, he closed the meeting.

As he had envisioned earlier, at least half a dozen of his male friends wanted to meet Gina, but he brushed them off. With his left arm around Gina's waist in what he knew was an act of possessiveness, he made his way to his parents.

"Mom, this is Gina Harkness. Gina this is my mother, Alma Bates Whitehead." He watched his mother carefully. She had her nose in the air, all right. "How do you do, Miss Harkness."

To Gina's credit, she didn't gush. "I'm well, thank you, Mrs. Whitehead. How do you do?" she said. And when his mother blanched at that, a half smile crept around his lips. Alma Whitehead had met her match. He turned to his father. "Dad, this is Gina. Gina, this is my dad, Franklin Whitehead."

"I've been looking forward to meeting you, Gina," he said. "Justin didn't tell us that you are so beautiful and so elegant. You make him look good."

A smile bloomed on Gina's face as she extended her hand and shook hands with his father. "Thank you, sir. I'm happy to meet you."

"I'd suggest we all stop somewhere for coffee or a glass of wine," Franklin said, "but we're leaving as soon as we get out of this hotel. We're going to New Haven." Justin didn't probe, because he'd dropped enough on Gina for one evening. "I expect you'll bring Gina to see us very soon, so that we can get to know her," his father said. "She's a lovely lady."

Justin leaned down and kissed his mother. "You could have been nicer," he said, and then hugged his father. "Thanks for being so gracious to Gina," he said for his father's ears alone.

“She deserves a man’s graciousness. You get things straightened out with her before it’s too late and you lose her. I’d hate to see that.”

Chapter 10

Justin Whitehead was an accomplished, polished and self-assured man, Gina mused, as they settled into the limousine, and that was all the more reason why she should watch her step with him. She resisted the desire to inch closer to him, but she knew she owed him her assessment of the evening and of his performance at the ceremony.

She patted his hand. "You made a wonderful master of ceremonies, Justin, and you looked the part. Elegance personified. After meeting your father, I'd say you come by it naturally. And you're warm and loving just like he is."

He turned so that he could see her face. "Thanks for the compliment. My mother disappointed me, and I told her as much."

"She was rather cool. Had you told her anything about me?"

"Some, but she could see that you're nothing like those

women she brings home for me to meet, and I suppose that ticked her off. She's usually less transparent."

"Your dad... After that cold blast I got from your mother, your father was so sweet that I wanted to hug him."

"I guess a father is happy if his son finds a beautiful and elegant woman who suits him in other, important ways. Damned if I know what mothers want. Let's have the rest of that champagne." He filled their glasses.

"I'd like a couple of those sandwiches," she said. "I hardly ate a bite. Trying to eat, look ladylike and keep my dress clean with everybody looking at me was a stretch, so I let the food stay on the plate."

The limousine stopped, and she realized that they had reached her building. "Is the driver going to wait for you?" she whispered to Justin.

"Should he?" Looking into his dark and hopeful eyes, she had no doubt as to the meaning of his question.

"No matter what I'm feeling tonight, Justin, Mother Nature is calling the shots."

He wrapped her hand in his and, as they walked through the lobby, they received appreciative glances from neighbors that they met. Her immense pride didn't spring from her ego, but from the joy of knowing that everything was in its proper place, that she had a man who commanded that you take notice of him. He opened her apartment door with her key and walked in with her.

"Thank you for making this evening special for me from beginning to end, Gina." His hand tightened on her waist and brought her closer to his body. "Kiss me, sweetheart, but don't lay it on too heavily."

Her hands slid up to his shoulders and, oh, the wonderful feel of his arms around her. She parted her lips and

sucked him into her, but almost immediately images of Miles's letter floated through her mind's eye, and she broke the kiss.

"What is it, Gina?"

"You said I shouldn't pour it on, and you're right. Thanks for a delightful evening."

"The pleasure was mine," he said. "And remember that my father wants you to come with me to Washington very soon."

"I don't think your mother will be glad to see me."

She couldn't believe he'd laugh at something so serious, but he did. He looked at his watch. "By now, my mother has been made aware of the error of her ways for, although her husband worships her, he does not indulge discourtesy. It will surprise her that her behavior toward you appeared that way to us."

His arms tightened around her, and he kissed her eyes, cheeks and the corner of her mouth. "There's so much I'm longing to do with you and to you. Our day will come, and I hope, very soon. Sleep well."

She let her right hand caress the side of his face as her heart and head battled with each other. Her heart won, and she kissed him hard on the mouth. "You're a very special man. Especially to me."

A week later, as New York City baked in the season's first heat wave, Gina prowled from room to room in her comfortably air-conditioned apartment tired of having her life on hold, which meant being without Justin. His frequent calls left her hungry for more of him and, although she'd considered going out with other men, she wanted Justin, and she didn't want to play games with men.

"I'll give him one more chance to come clean and tell all. If he doesn't, I'm out of it for good."

* * *

Justin drained his coffee cup, leaned back and looked Craig in the eye. "I know Mom behaved badly toward Gina, and I told her so. Actually, her coolness surprised me. There wasn't a more elegant woman than Gina in that room full of elegance. What did Dad say?"

"He's taken with her. He told me right in front of Mom that she's perfect for you. Tell me something. Did she really put Mom in her place?"

"I'm not sure I'd say that, but trust me she didn't bend a knee. Sort of like...if you want it cold, I'll give it to you very cold. Mom got the message, too."

Craig strummed his fingers along the edge of the table. "Did that little exchange make you uncomfortable?"

"No. I don't want an obsequious woman. Mom was out of line. Gina wasn't disrespectful, just real chilly. I already knew she could give as good as she got. Look, I'd better head out. I'm putting the finishing touches on that story, and I need to call a couple of the people I interviewed. Next time, dinner's on me."

He walked into his apartment half an hour later, saw his answering machine blinking, checked and sat down to return Gina's call. "This is Justin. How's my girl?"

"Fine. Sort of. The foundation is growing. A couple of corporate giants have signed on, and one will support school children with clothing, tutoring, and books and lunch where needed. Their funds will be dispersed beyond the city. In some respects, I'm happy, but I miss you terribly. I don't get...I need that feeling of oneness, like something you and I accomplished together and took pride in. I miss you a lot. I...I need you."

His mind retraced his life from the time he first saw her,

and his heart began to pound so badly that he stood and took deep breaths in an attempt to get it under control. "I just had dinner with my brother. If you want to see me, I'll come over."

"I want to see you."

"I'll be right there."

He could no longer postpone it, and he needn't; his heart couldn't ache any more, nor could he be lonelier or more unhappy if she walked away from him than he was as things stood.

She answered her door with a smile that seemed forced and gazed up at him, rubbing her arms, clearly undecided about how she would greet him. He leaned forward, brushed her lips with his own and, with an arm around her shoulder, walked with her into the apartment. No one had to tell him that she'd nearly reached her limits.

"Have a seat. I'll get us a glass of wine," she said. If she needed to stall, he didn't mind. He'd come to terms with what he had to do. She came back with the wine and a plate of petits fours and put the tray on the coffee table.

"Sit over here beside me," he said. "I told you we had to talk, and I guess this is it. I resigned as your chauffeur because I could no longer continue to deceive you. I'm a well-known reporter, and that's why I was asked to MC that awards dinner and ceremony."

"I know that," she said, her voice tinged with bitterness.

"I have an office on Third Avenue, and I live on West End Avenue at Eighty-eighth Street. I—"

She interrupted him. "Why did you take the job as my chauffeur when you weren't a chauffeur?" Her voice reflected her irritation, and he didn't blame her for being annoyed.

"Gina, I'm known for research as a participant-observer. If I'm writing about cooks, I work with chefs. If it's baseball, I join a baseball team, and so on. It's the reason why I've reached the level of prominence that I have. My current story is about the way in which becoming suddenly rich affects a person's life."

She jumped up and faced him. "You wouldn't dare. How could you?"

"I asked you not to jump to conclusions, and you promised you wouldn't," he said. "Please hear me out." She sat down, and he continued.

"I saw your ad in the *News*. I knew that the rich don't put ads in the paper for help, they use their contacts. I guessed right. If you and I hadn't developed this relationship, I wouldn't have a reason to feel guilt. I don't mention any names in my story, and I don't expose anyone.

"I had promised myself that I wouldn't make love with you until we had the talk we're having now, but things didn't work that way, and you will remember the reason. And if I hadn't fallen in love with you, I wouldn't feel the way I do right now."

She moved away from him. "Don't mention love to me. I trusted you, and I would have bet my life that you were absolutely straight."

He stared at her, disbelieving the charge. "What do you mean by suggesting that I'm crooked?" he asked her. "If you're so outraged, why didn't you ask me about the incongruities you saw in me? You're an educated professional woman, and every day you saw something about me that made you suspicious, that didn't fit with my being a chauffeur, but not once did you question me."

"I didn't want to seem to be an overbearing boss...I—"

"Don't give me that. I took you and your aunt out on the town. Did you wonder how I afforded it, or how I managed to get tickets to a top Broadway show with a day's notice? How I managed to get your car in so short a time? And did you wonder why I was knowledgeable about oriental carpets? Did you ask where I live, where I went to school and how far I went? No. And I gave you good reason to ask those and other questions. You didn't want to know."

"This is terrible. All I am to you is a case study."

"How can you say that?" he asked her, stunned and horrified as he sensed her slipping away from him. "Don't you know when a man loves you?"

In an abnormally low voice and in pronounced syllables, she said, "How could I? I am not sure I ever experienced it. I want you to leave." With her back turned and her arms folded, she patted her foot as if she were a musician beating time.

He stood there for a long time, before he said, "I believed we could weather this, but what we had wasn't as strong as I thought. All right, if this is what you want. I never chase a train that has pulled out of the station. I make myself comfortable and wait for the next one."

As he reached for the doorknob, he heard her say, "Miles warned me, and I should have listened to him." He stood there for a second. Yes, she had said it. He had excellent hearing.

Furor stung him like a bee stings a honey poacher, and he swung around, strode back into the living room and faced her. "Is that so?" he asked her between clenched teeth. "You should have listened to Miles? That charlatan? Well, let me tell you about Miles. He has no authority over your inheritance. He can't demand that you do one damned thing,

and he knows it. You can check that at the office of the Probate Department of the Surrogate Court just as I did and as Miles did. From the minute Miles transferred keys and estate documents to you, he had no legal basis ever again to say one word to you. If you think I'm lying, call this man at this office on this phone number. Be seeing you."

He stumbled blindly into the elevator, raised a hand in greeting to the doorman as he passed him, walked to the corner and hailed a taxi. For a minute, he wasn't certain of his own address. *I was wrong, but after all that's gone down between us, I deserved more than a knee-jerk reaction. She didn't give it any thought.* The fifteen-minute ride to his address seemed to take years. He stepped into his apartment, feeling as if he'd done a day of hard labor, kicked off his shoes, hung up his jacket and flung himself into the big leather chair facing the television.

"It hurts like hell, but it won't kill me. I need to get my shaver and a few other personal items out of my desk in her office, and then I'll relegate her to my past."

At around eleven o'clock in the morning, two days later, Gina sat in her office with the door closed reliving her last evening with Justin and wondering if she'd done the right thing. He had erred seriously in letting their relationship go on so long without telling her the truth, but he was right in saying that she hadn't questioned him when he behaved in ways that a chauffeur would not have dared. She hadn't wanted an abortive parting with Justin; indeed, she hadn't wanted it to end. With her elbows on her desk and her hands folded beneath her chin, she thought about how much she missed him and in so many ways.

She hadn't phoned the Probate Department as Justin

had challenged, because she knew he wouldn't tell her a lie. She got up and went to the kitchen for a glass of water.

"Justin! You sure are a sight for sore eyes," Gina heard Lorraine say. "How're things. I don't mind telling you that I miss you terribly. Nothing like the presence of a gentleman to make a woman's engine run smoothly."

His laughter wrapped around Gina like a fine sable coat on an icy-cold day. "You flatter me, Lorraine. How are you? I miss you, too." She watched as he walked over to Lorraine and kissed her cheek. "I came to clean out my desk. I left a few things in it."

"It's just as you left it. Can I get you some coffee?"

A smile played around his lips. "Thanks, but I can get it."

Gina knew that he'd headed for the kitchen, and she couldn't get back to her office unless he saw her. With her back to the hallway, she busied herself pouring coffee into a mug.

"Hello, Gina."

At the sound of his voice, deep and vibrant, she thought she floated out of her body. She tried to return the greeting, but no words passed between her lips. What point was he trying to make?

"Mind if I have some coffee?"

She turned and faced him. "Help yourself. Lorraine made it a few minutes ago. Everything is where it always was." Since she couldn't remember why she was there, she put milk and sugar in the mug of coffee and was about to leave the kitchen when his eyebrows shot up, and she realized what she'd done.

"You want to give that to me, and you take this?" he asked with a knowing look. "I haven't put anything in this coffee yet."

"Thanks."

"I'm here to clean out my desk," he said, as if to make certain she knew the precise reason for his presence. "Thanks for the coffee." He started out of the kitchen and stopped. "Is it all right if I go in there?"

If he intended to solder his intention to put their relationship behind him, he couldn't have done a better job of it. She laid back her shoulders, lifted her chin and looked at him with more coolness than she would have thought she could muster.

"Certainly, you may."

He showed his teeth in a grin that she knew he didn't mean, saluted her as a private would a general, and left the kitchen.

"I wish you would stop this silly stuff. I knew her when she didn't have a penny and now she has a secretary who says I can't see her unless I have an appointment. Ridiculous," the man said, obviously outraged.

"I don't care if you knew her when she was in her mother's womb," Lorraine said. "You're not going in there. Period. If there's anything I can't stand, it's an overbearing man who thinks rules are for everybody but him."

Gina got up and strode into the reception room. She had a few things to say to Miles Strags, and now was as good a time as any. "What are you doing here?" she asked Miles. "Can't you read? I wrote you that I don't want anything further to do with you, and I mean it."

"I am executor of Heddy Lloyd's estate, and I have a right to be here."

Both of her hands went to her hips, and she let them stay there. "You're lying. According to the Probate Department, your legal responsibility ended when you turned over the estate documents to me."

"Exactly," Justin said. She hadn't realized that he'd come into the reception room. "And furthermore," Justin continued, "you knew it, because you telephoned there and checked on your rights and responsibilities in regard to the estate. The man you called was my college classmate."

"You and I both know why you're hanging around here," Miles said to Justin with an expression of contempt. "You're no more than a rootless fortune hunter."

"Oh, really!" Gina said. "That isn't what your private investigator's report to you said. You know, the P.I. report you sent me hoping to upset me."

Justin grabbed her arm. "He sent you a private eye's report on me?" She nodded. "When?"

"I received it a while ago."

"And you didn't say a word?"

She let her shrug show him how little that matter meant to them now that he'd severed their relationship. "I wanted to hear it from you. Until it came from your lips, I knew nothing about it. Besides, everything in the report was commendable."

Fire crackled between them as Justin stared into her eyes, his own two pools of blazing desire. She tried to tear her glance from his, but he held her spellbound. Lorraine cleared her throat several times, and Gina finally managed to shift her gaze to Miles. She vented her frustration on him.

"I'm telling you in the presence of two witnesses, Miles Strags, that if you ever contact me again by phone, letter, e-mail, or voice, I will indict you for harassment. And don't invite me to any more of your party hoaxes. Now, would you please find your way out of here?"

"Good riddance," Justin said when the door closed. "I'm glad you called the number I gave you. Strags would have pestered you forever."

"I didn't call that office. I knew you wouldn't mislead me."

He shoved his hands into his trouser pockets and seemed to concentrate on the wall beyond. Then he whirled around and went back into the office that he once occupied.

"Was that what it looked like to me?" Lorraine asked Gina.

"I don't know what it looked like to you, Lorraine, but I know what it looks like to me, and it's nothing to spend time thinking about."

She went back into her office, but she didn't close the door. If he wanted to talk, she was there to listen. It was he who terminated the relationship and, although she suspected that she'd been too hasty in her judgment, she didn't think she would ever make the first move.

About to sign a voucher, she looked up just as he leaned against the doorjamb of the open door. "I'd better be getting on. Take good care of yourself."

He appeared to move toward her, but she knew it was only a sensation, that what she sensed had no basis in fact. He gazed at her so intensely that the pen fell from her fingers and the ends of her nerves seemed to burn until she thought her whole body would burst into flame. Why didn't he do something, say something? Oh, Lord, why didn't he take her and love her?

"Be seeing you, Gina," he said at last, turned and walked away, though his steps lacked their usual jauntiness and purposefulness.

Gina resisted cradling her head with her hands, sucked in her bottom lip, picked up the pen and signed the

voucher. "Please mail this, Lorraine?" she said, speaking into the intercom.

Lorraine came into the office and took the letter. "I've got three applications for chauffeur," she told Gina. "Maybe we need a clerk more than we need a chauffeur, though I don't know how you're going to get around."

"I've had a driver's license since I was seventeen," she told Lorraine. "I'll drive."

It concerned Gina only mildly that she had never driven a car as big as the Lincoln, but she shrugged it off. Hadn't Justin said it handled easily? She headed out of New York City in a downpour of rain on her way to meet a group of authors in Somerville, New Jersey, who wanted to raise money for the foundation and, at the same time, get some publicity for themselves and their books. She paid the toll in the Lincoln Tunnel, put the map in the seat beside her, looked at her watch and put her mind on the business at hand. Driving herself around wasn't unusual; it was sitting in the back seat while someone else did the driving that she didn't think she'd ever get used to. And she felt like pinching herself to be sure she really was driving a custom-built Lincoln Town Car.

"Heddy, old girl," she said aloud, "I sure hope you haven't screwed up my life. You got me running a multi-million dollar foundation, owning stocks and bonds, living in one of the richest blocks of Park Avenue, and in love with a man who let me know he hops for nobody. Honey, if you've got any influence up there, please give me a hand. I need it."

She found Somerville and the restaurant in which the authors held their monthly meeting. After a lunch of

southern fried chicken, biscuits, string beans, hash-brown potatoes and apple pie, she sat back to hear what the seven African-American women proposed. She didn't know when she had enjoyed the company of seven strangers so much. She imagined that the women were her age, plus or minus three or four years, and she understood the problems they encountered seeking radio, television and major print-media coverage for their novels. It didn't surprise her that they received only token support from their publishers.

"You order the books, and we'll give readings and sign them," Corey Gains, the group's president said. "We can have a literary cabaret or a literary luncheon with entertainment and charge for entrance."

"You get the publicity and all the profit, and we get publicity and sales reflected in our royalty rates," one woman added.

"What do you say?"

She looked at their eager faces and recalled how Heddy loved books and reading. "The foundation is a memorial to a woman who spent most of her days in the New York Public Library. I think she would love this, and we're going to do it. However, we're going to plan it very carefully because I'd like it to travel to different cities. That means I have to hire a first-rate promoter. Give me the dates and titles of your next books.

"You know, I've been promoting the foundation to people and asking them for support, but you're the first to come to me with a fund-raising plan, and I'm happy to work with you." She hoped to find among them a lasting friend, too. She'd worked so hard so long that she hadn't taken the time to make friends, and now she often longed for just one.

Corey walked with her to the car. "This is some nice baby," Corey said, sliding her hand along the sides.

Gina's wan smile bespoke her feelings about the compliment. She hadn't done anything to earn the car, so she didn't say thanks. She snapped her fingers. "Corey, would you agree to serving on the foundation's board? It's a volunteer position, but you will make some phenomenal contacts. The foundation will pay the cost of attending the tri-monthly meeting."

"I'll bet everybody on the board is blond and blue-eyed. Right?"

"Some have hazel eyes, and you'll see gray hair, as well as dark hair. You can handle it. Each term is for three years. Say yes. I need you."

"All right. A good challenge always gives me a big shot of adrenaline."

They said goodbye and promised to be in touch soon. Gina got into the car, feeling good and enormously excited about the prospect of working with those authors. They could bring to the foundation's community of volunteers what none of its other supporters could: true empathy and an understanding of the problems that the foundation sought to alleviate.

She had been driving for nearly forty minutes when she slowed down. "Where the devil *am* I?" she said aloud. It dawned on her that she had taken a wrong turn somewhere, so she pulled over to the shoulder and checked the map. However, without a marker of any kind, the map was useless. She drove along for about four miles and discovered that she was headed south, and a few miles later, she saw a sign that said Stelton Road. She drove on to it, parked and checked her map. She couldn't find Stelton

Road on the map and, in desperation, she telephoned Justin's office.

"Whitehead."

"This is Gina." The long silence told her that she'd surprised him. "I'm...I'm lost."

"You're lost? What do you mean, you're lost?"

"I mean, I'm in Jersey somewhere, and I made a wrong turn, and I can't find the place on the map, and I...I've been driving for ages, and I want to go home."

"Hold it. You're driving?"

"Yes. I have a driver's license."

"Do you know what road or highway you're on?"

"I know I was going south, and I saw an exit that said Stelton Road and I took it. I guess I'm on Stelton Road."

"All right. Give me a couple of minutes."

She checked the doors, making certain that she'd locked them and rolled up the window when a big eighteen wheeler pulled up and stopped just ahead of her. The man walked back to her and she cracked the window.

"Do you need help?" he asked her.

She shook her head. "Thanks. I'm just getting my bearings."

"Where you headed?"

"New York."

He removed his baseball cap and scratched his nearly bald head. "You're way off. Swing around at the next exit and follow the sign that says North. Good luck."

She thanked the man and after a few minutes, he drove off, but she waited for Justin's instructions, aware that she trusted him more than she trusted the truck driver who probably drove that route every day. At last, he came back on the line.

“Sorry it took so long, but Stelton Road isn’t the Jersey Turnpike. Drive until you reach Hadley Road, turn left, drive to the next street and turn left again. You’ll be heading north. Stay on that route until you see the sign that says New Jersey Turnpike North. Take that exit and head straight for New York.”

“I don’t know how to thank you, Justin. I know you’re busy, and I...I really appreciate your help.”

“I’m glad I could help. Have you been driving that car regularly?”

“No. This is the first time. I had to go to Somerville, and I—”

“How on earth did you get from Somerville to where you are if you were headed to New York?”

“I don’t know, and it got worse and worse. I couldn’t find a street or a road marker, so I finally pulled to the shoulder here and called you.”

“It’s dangerous for you to park on the side of a back-road highway, so you’d better move off. Do you remember the instructions?” She repeated them. “Good. Pull into the first truck stop on the turnpike and call me. You understand?”

“Okay. I will. And thanks. I... Thanks.”

“I’m glad you called me. Don’t forget to let me know when you’re on the turnpike.”

“He cares,” she said to herself as she drove off. “He cares a lot. I wish I knew how we can straighten this out. We hurt each other, and he didn’t intend to hurt me, but I deliberately stabbed him where I knew it would do the most damage.”

Very soon, she reached the Jersey Turnpike, and a few minutes later, drove into a truck stop and parked. “Hi.”

"Hi," he said. "That was a long twenty-five minutes. If you stay on the turnpike and take the exit that says Lincoln Tunnel, you should be home in an hour. Check the gas before you leave there. Those big cars guzzle gas the way drunks lap up alcohol. Hurry home."

"I will. Oh, Justin, I... Thanks." She wanted to tell him that she was sorry and that she loved him and needed him so badly, but the words wouldn't come. She hung up, checked the fuel gage and, with a tank half-full of gas, she headed for New York. First her mother and then her auntie warned her that her stubbornness would be her undoing.

"I'll cry tomorrow," she said, quoting the title of an old song. "As much as I love him, I'm not going to scrape my kneecaps to get him back."

"Pride goes before destruction the way a stumble goes before a fall." Gina glanced around expecting to see her mother who, in her days of good health and mental stability, frequently reminded her daughter of the pitfalls created by pride and stubbornness.

Moderately chastised by that reminder, Gina parked in her building's garage about an hour later and took the elevator directly to the seventeenth floor. She walked a few yards down the hall and stopped. She couldn't have taken a step if she'd been facing a fire.

"Justin!"

He didn't move, but stood there, leaning against the wall beside the door. When at last she reached him, he only said, "Where's your key?"

She fumbled around in her pocketbook until she found it. He took it, opened the door and carried her into the apartment. He pushed the door shut and trapped her between the wall and his body. She didn't care what he did

or how he did it, only that he didn't leave her and she could continue to feel his heat, smell his man's scent and drown in his aura.

"Kiss me," she whispered.

He stared down into her eyes, but he refused to move. "I still hurt, Gina, and it's just as painful as it was when you told me you didn't believe in me and ordered me out of your home." He grabbed her shoulders. "Do you care if you hurt me?"

She tried to move into the comfort of his arms, but he held her at arm's length and gazed wordlessly at her. Her lips trembled, and she couldn't control them. "I... Oh, Justin, I hated myself for that. Yes, I'm sorry. I was sorry that night before you reached the first floor. I've replayed that scene a thousand times in my mind, wishing each time that I had followed my heart instead of my pride. I...I wanted to ask your forgiveness today when I was sitting in the car on that road, but the words wouldn't come out. I've been so lonely for you."

His hands stroked her face, and she could see him making up his mind, struggling with a decision. "I need to hear the words."

It was then or never, and she knew she'd better take advantage of the opportunity. "I love you, and I'm sorry I hurt you. Do you...do you love me?"

"Do I love you? You're my whole life." A groan poured out of him, as his mouth came down on hers and he crushed her to him, his body trembling as he held her. He picked her up and took her to her bed.

Chapter 11

The automatic lock clicked on the door, and Gina sat up in bed and stared into the darkness. They loved each other and they needed each other. But what had they solved in that raw and blistering coming together? She hadn't felt that sweet oneness with him that she knew in their previous lovemaking, and she didn't know whether to attribute the difference to him or to her. This time, she hadn't felt that he belonged to her.

Unable to sleep, Gina rolled out of bed. She wanted coffee, but if she drank it, she could forget about sleeping. What she wanted most was to talk with Justin but, for the time being, that was out of the question. She looked out at the dark stillness and wondered if she were the only woman in her building who stood at a window, lonely and gazing down at Park Avenue. She and Justin hadn't talked, but had gone at each other like a pride of starved lions after

a herd of antelope. At seven o'clock, she dialed his number, hung up and told herself to use some common sense.

A shower failed to erase her mental and physical lethargy, and she promised herself that she'd be in bed before ten o'clock that night. As her first act at work that morning, she checked the mail that had arrived the previous day while she was in Somerville. Why would Miles write her after she told him she never wanted to hear from him again? She opened the letter with caution as if she feared a booby trap.

Miles wrote:

I suppose you know, that your precious Justin wouldn't settle for the likes of you if you didn't have that inheritance. He's lied all the way around. He's not just a reporter, he's famous.

She read the list of Justin's degrees, awards and achievements.

Ask yourself if such a man would settle for you if you were still a little mousy accountant.

She hadn't known that Justin had received such wide acclaim, so she sent Miles a short reply:

Thank you, Miles, for confirming what Justin told me. And, Miles, if you're ever in serious financial need, I'll be glad to help you. Other than that, please leave me alone.

Feeling uplifted, she wrote the board members a short

note informing them that Corey Gains would complete the board's roster.

"Either Justin should call me or I should call him," Gina said to herself. "After what went on between us last night, one of us ought to make a move."

She made a note to give Lorraine a raise, wrote checks to two affiliate organizations and threw up her hands. *All right! She'd call him.*

"Hello, Gina. If you'd waited another minute, I'd have called you. I just sat down here with that in mind." His voice deepened. "How are you?"

She didn't feel like easy, comfortable talk. "I don't know how I am, Justin, I... What happened to us last night? I didn't sleep a wink."

"Neither did I, and I don't know what happened. I've been over and over it in my mind ever since I left you. I feel as if I've been dismembered. You weren't there. I missed the way I felt with you before. I...something was lacking, as if you didn't trust me. I mean...that sweetness I always get from you wasn't there."

She bristled at that. "How can you...?" The air seeped out of her, and she closed her eyes. Resigned. "Perhaps you're right. I have the same sense about you. Maybe we should've talked first."

"Talk won't do it, Gina. The problem is what we feel. You're still not certain, and because of that, I'm... Look. Nothing's changed."

"No," she said in barely audible tones. "I guess not."

Justin hung up, but he couldn't force himself to move. Something hung between them, and it hadn't been there when he took her to the awards ceremony. He searched the

archives of his mind, but couldn't come up with a satisfactory answer.

Thinking fast, he called her back.

"Let's give ourselves a chance. I can't let what we could have slip through my fingers. It's...worth fighting for, Gina. Believe me. I know."

Her answer didn't soothe him. "It seems hopeless," she said. "It looks as if we take one step forward and two backward."

"Give me two months, and promise me you'll trust me even when you don't want to. Can you do that?" he asked her.

It seemed as if she waited forever to answer. When she finally spoke, she hardly sounded convincing. "I'll try, Justin, but that's not in my nature. What do you want us to do?" she asked.

"Have you ever been boating in Central Park?" She said she hadn't and that she'd never dreamed of doing it.

"Then, let's go Saturday morning. Can you ride a bike?"

"I used to love bike riding," she said, "but I haven't done it in years. Want me to bring something?"

"Leave all that to me. I'll be at your place Saturday morning at seven. Let's plan to spend the day together."

When he knocked at her apartment door that Saturday morning, he was not prepared for the sight of Gina in white shorts, yellow T-shirt and socks and white sneakers, with her hair hanging down to her shoulders and gold hoops in her earlobes. He suspected that he gaped, but he figured that she asked for it. How could you tell a woman that the sight of her long gorgeous legs knocked you off balance? And how could you keep that to yourself?

“Hi,” he managed to say, or thought he did. “You look... Gosh, you look great.”

“Thanks. There’re no flies on you, either. Come in. I know you haven’t had any decent coffee, so I made you some.”

He dropped the picnic cooler beside the door, leaned down and brushed her lips with his own. When he felt her warm breath, he flicked his tongue over her parted lips and then plunged into her. At that moment, with his libido rearing up, he only wanted her. Coffee be damned. Heat roared through him, and when she eased her arms around him and locked her body to his, he fought to control the tremors that raced through his body, shaking him.

“Ease up, baby,” he said, “or you won’t see that lake today.”

Gina took his hand and led him to the kitchen, as if he didn’t know where it was. She had set the kitchen table, and when he sat down, she stood behind him. With her hands on his shoulders, she leaned over and kissed his cheek. He turned his head quickly, but not fast enough to capture her mouth. She slipped from his grasp, returned and filled his coffee cup. He closed his eyes and inhaled the aroma of the steaming coffee, and told his libido to give it a rest.

“What? What’s this?” he asked her when he opened his eyes and his gaze landed on the waffles, bacon and orange juice in front of him.

“Come here, woman. I have to hug you,” he said. “And if you don’t come to me, I’ll get up and get you.” She didn’t smile when she walked over to him, but she put her arms around him and rested his head against her belly.

“We’re good together, Gina.”

“I know. I wish we could always be like this.”

He kissed her belly and hugged her tight to him. "We can be this way always, and we should be. Thanks for breakfast, sweetheart. I only get a home-cooked breakfast when I'm at my parents' home, and my mother makes me either pancakes or waffles. This is one of my favorite breakfasts."

She sat down with a cup of coffee and a glass of orange juice. "How's your story coming, Justin?" His raised eyebrow sent her the wrong message, for she was immediately apologetic. "I'm not asking about what you're writing, only whether you're satisfied with what you've done so far."

He wanted her to show an interest in his work, and he hoped that his smile would encourage her to take a greater interest in what he did. "Thanks for asking," he said. "It means a lot to me that you care whether I'm successful at what I do. I'd say I'm about three-quarters of the way through it. I've classified the material, sorted out my examples, outlined the text, and written the introductory paragraphs. If I'm not careful, I'll write a book, because I have enough for one, but I have to limit it to about two full pages in a newspaper."

"Why can't you write a book? Would your editor object? If you're not using the names of the people you interviewed, and if they can't be identified, surely you wouldn't let a lot of fascinating information lie in a file unused."

"Thanks for the suggestion. I'll definitely think about it. Naturally, I camouflaged the interviewees. I've even given them pseudonyms, and changed their place of residence. If I didn't, both my paper and I would get sued into financial oblivion."

"I thought we'd go boating for a while, have some

lunch and then go biking for a bit, since we both love the outdoors,” he said, “but if that’s too much for you this morning—”

“Oh, it’s not too much. I’ve always wanted to do things like that, but I never had the chance.”

He drained the cup and declined her offer of more. “Come on before the sun gets high. On a hot day, that lake can seem like the desert.”

“Don’t I need an oar, too?” she asked him as they settled into a canoe.

“All I want you to do is enjoy the morning breeze.”

“It’s wonderful,” she said, “and just imagine I never did this before.”

“Do I deserve a kiss for the idea?” he asked her.

“You deserve kisses for a lot of things,” she said. “You’re very busy. I know it. Why are you spending time like this—”

He interrupted her. “Thank you for not saying that I’m wasting my time. Time spent with you is precious to me. I’m here with you because you’re more important to me than anyone or anything else in my life, and I need you to understand that.”

He waited for a reply, but she lowered her long-lashed eyelids over her sleepy eyes and said nothing. Impatient with her silence, he asked her, “Do you have any idea how much you mean to me?”

“I know you care, but—”

“But what?” It came out as a growl, and he hadn’t meant to be harsh. “Have you forgotten what it was like to have me buried to the hilt in your body? Have you? Don’t you remember how we climbed over that hill together? Woman, you went wild beneath me, and you were not faking.”

"I know that. Neither were you. It was...it was the most wonderful thing that ever happened to me."

He paddled to the bank, dropped anchor and let the boat idle. "Do you want me to believe that the only time you can respond to me as a woman or that you can love me is when you're the boss and you think I'm inferior to you?"

She jumped up and set the boat to rocking. "What do you mean by that? How dare you!"

He'd rung her bell, all right, and he could almost see her temperature rising. "Calm down, Gina. And please sit down, or we'll be swimming to shore."

She sat down. "When you were my driver, you treated me as if I was special, but after we made love, and you knew how I felt about you, you didn't seem to care as much, or that's the way it appeared to me."

"That's not quite the way it went. You changed when I resigned. Then, first your aunt and then Miles planted seeds of doubt in you."

Gina looked toward heaven and rolled her eyes. "You were the first person to plant those seeds. I had some idea as to a chauffeur's level of education and knowledge of paintings, carpets, conferences and the other things you excelled at, as well as personal finesse and taste. And I pretty soon came to the conclusion that the average chauffeur did not wear hand tailored suits, nor would he have your self assurance among people such as Marnie Fine. I'm not stupid, Justin, and none of that prevented me from trusting you and loving you. So get it straight."

He wanted desperately to believe her. "You had these suspicions about me, yet you still trusted me and let yourself love me?"

"Yes, I trusted you, because I couldn't see anything about you that wasn't laudable. And as for loving you, Providence took the choice from me, and I saw no reason to resist."

"It's the same with me. I was a goner from the minute I looked at you, and that stunned me. Nothing similar had ever happened to me. Have you ever been fishing? I can imagine how peaceful and destressing it would be if we could sit together on a quiet lake and fish early one morning. Would you spend a weekend with me in the Adirondacks? We could hike, swim, fish and go boating."

"I'd love that. I've never had a tryst with a man. When?"

His face bloomed into a smile and his eyes sparkled. "I wish I could say tomorrow, but it will have to wait until I finish the story I'm working on. Maybe mid-July?" She nodded, too moved to speak. "You will? If I wasn't afraid I'd turn this boat over, I'd go down there and get you and love you right here. Consider yourself kissed."

"I think we ought to have things between us straight before we go, though, Justin. I know I'm the one who makes this relationship rocky, though I do it in response to you, but it's taking a toll on me. I don't know where it's going."

He had a feeling that she was getting to the root of their problem—her lack of security in the relationship. She hadn't always felt that, but from the time she discovered his deception, she had.

"Gina, my brother lives and works in New York. I want you to meet each other. Craig is my closest friend."

"What can I expect? Is he more like your mother or your father?"

He thought for a minute. "Craig will be honest with you,

and that's all I want from him. He's a man and he's well-acquainted with women. I predict that you'll like him."

"If he's like you, I will."

He raised the anchor and paddled around toward the other side of the lake. "Will you love me when I'm old and bald?" he asked her, mainly to lighten their conversation.

Her eyebrows shot up. "Will I... Oh, now, let me see. Justin with no hair. I don't know. Gray hair? Sure. But no hair? I'll have to give that a lot of thought."

He let the laughter roll out of him. Intelligent, warm, sexy, a lover for all time, and that oddball sense of humor. Lord, how he loved her! "In that case, I'd better start shaving off my hair like James Blake and Andre Agassi. That way, when I'm old, you won't notice it so much."

She looked at him from beneath lowered lashes, flirting blatantly. "Well, if the rest of you...uh...doesn't age, the amount of hair you have won't matter *that* much." She flicked a finger.

He often forgot how fresh she could be, and he welcomed it now, for it meant that her self-assurance was well stoked. He was about to say as much, when he realized she stared at his hands. She'd done that before, and he'd like to know what it was about his hands that fascinated her so much.

Without taking her gaze from them, she said, "I think you told me that you play the piano and the guitar. I want to hear you play the piano."

"I think I can arrange that." He returned the boats, took the cooler and sat down with her beneath the shade of a big oak tree. "This is probably cold," he said, referring to the blanket that he'd placed in the top of the cooler, "but as warm as it is, I don't suppose it matters."

He spread the blanket out, put a tablecloth on top of it and served their lunch. When she reached for the container of lemonade, he squeezed her hand. "This party's on me." He poured the lemonade into a glass and handed it to her.

"I can't get used to you, Justin. I've never been around another man like you. I tell myself lots of times that you're sweet, but you're so much more than that. Deep in you, there's something so good. I...I don't know how to explain what I mean."

He wiped his mouth with a paper napkin, leaned over and kissed her. "If you're saying you love me, that's all I need."

"But you have so much," she said, "and I suspect you've always had everything you wanted. Why would you need me?"

"I've had everything I need. Yes. Until I began to need you. No one's life is perfect, Gina."

"This food is wonderful," she said, enjoying shrimp salad, pumpernickel bread, strips of mozzarella cheese and cherry tomatoes. "You remember what I like."

"Of course I do. We ate together often, and I pay attention to everything you enjoy. Everything."

She looked away from him. "We're talking about food."

"What else do you think I'm talking about?"

Her expression was that of an overly indulgent parent. "Justin, you remind me of a milk cow, who gives a good bucket of milk and is so pleased with herself that she swishes her tail and knocks over the pail of milk."

He stopped eating and plastered an injured expression on his face. "You're comparing me to a cow? A female animal? I've never been so wounded."

"Yes, you have," she said. "Behave yourself."

"I don't want to. I'm enjoying this." He put the dishes and utensils in the cooler. "Can I put my head in your lap?"

She settled her back against the tree and patted her thigh. "Are you going to sleep?" she asked him.

"No. I just want you to pamper me." He lay on the grass, put his arms around her waist and his head in her lap. Neither spoke, and he relaxed as contentment washed over him. She stroked his back, and after a while, her fingers began to tease his hair, then his cheek. Finally, she hugged him as best she could before leaning down and kissing his cheek. He snuggled closer and kissed her belly.

"If you tell me you don't love me, Gina, I won't believe you. You've been making the sweetest love to me for the past half hour."

"Was not."

"Were so." He sat up. "It's getting hot. Let's postpone the bike ride." They crossed Fifth Avenue and walked to the corner where he hailed a taxi.

"Why do we need a taxi?" she asked him. "We only have to walk a couple of blocks."

"We're going to my place. Do you mind?"

"No, I don't. I'd love to see where you live."

Gina could hardly contain her impatience to see where Justin lived and how he lived. He had never hinted as to his address, and she knew now that he'd deliberately avoided mentioning it, just as she had avoided asking him. He was right. She hadn't wanted to know. The taxi stopped at the address on West End Avenue, they got out, and she looked up at the elegant building. It didn't surprise her then, but once, it would have. The elevator zoomed up to

the sixteenth floor, and when they stepped out of it, he held her hand more tightly. She wondered at his increased possessiveness. He put the cooler on the floor, opened the door and put an arm around her as they entered his apartment.

"Welcome to my home, Gina." Holding her hand, he went into the kitchen, dropped the cooler on the floor and guided her back to the sprawling living room.

"Gee whiz," she said. "This place is huge." Her gaze rested on the big, marble-faced fireplace and then traveled on to the grand piano. She imagined him sitting there on a winter evening with a fire roaring in the fireplace, playing Mozart, Gershwin or Duke Ellington. She said as much and added, "You're going to play something for me, aren't you?"

He slung an arm around her shoulder. "Kiss me, and I'll do anything for you, so long as it's not illegal."

She longed to tell him that she only wanted his love, but she didn't think it prudent at the time. With her arms raised to his shoulders, she offered herself to him, and although his groan startled her, his lips were gentle. She realized that he didn't intend for them to start a fire, so she hugged him to her and kissed his cheek.

"I'll show you around." The tour revealed in addition to the kitchen and living room, a small dining room, master bedroom with a huge sleigh bed in the middle of it, a den or office and two bathrooms.

"You have wonderful taste," she said.

A grin spread over his face. "I figured you'd say that, since our tastes are so similar. Look around. Your living room and mine have exactly the same colors from fabric to woods."

"Yes," she said to herself, "and we like the same music, food... Oh, what the hell!"

“What’s the matter?” he asked.

“Our tastes are similar in just about everything.”

He stared at her for a minute, then walked over to the piano and sat down and began caressing the keys. She recognized Debussy’s *Claire de Lune*, leaned against the piano and gazed down at him, transfixed by the magic of the music he created. His face relaxed and seemed to glow as if from some inner joy. He laid his head slightly to one side and a smile brightened his face. He lived in another world then, caught up in the music’s spell. He ended the piece, one of the most romantic and rubbed his hands over his face, as if bringing himself out of a trance.

“That was so beautiful,” she said. “I’m stunned. You could have been a professional pianist. I envisaged you sitting there playing on winter evenings with the fire crackling in the fireplace. You were a different person while you played.”

“That was a fairly simple piece, and I learned it when I was around ten, but I’m only a fair pianist. I’m glad you enjoyed it.”

“Oh, I did. I could listen to you play forever. It’s... playing like that, you can’t get lonely.”

“Who told you that? A piano is not a substitute for the company of the woman you love. Nowhere near it. When I feel lonely, I don’t go near this piano. I get out of this place.”

“When I’m lonely, I turn on the TV, or go to a movie. No matter what book I pick up, reading it makes me lonelier.”

He got up from the piano and wrapped her in his arms. “When can you meet my brother?”

She thought for a minute. “Is Friday all right? Bring him over to my place.”

“Are you sure? I thought we’d have dinner together.”

"I'll fix dinner. I have a better advantage in my own environment. What does he do?"

"Craig's an investment banker. He hangs out on Wall Street."

She nodded. "So Mrs. Whitehead has a couple of very successful sons. Hmm."

"Yeah, but she'd be happier if we were teaching at a university. Any university. I'll let you know if Friday suits Craig."

"I hope it does. Now that I know I'm going to meet him, I can hardly wait. I'd better be going. Thanks for playing for me. I hope it's not the last time I hear you play."

He sat down and began to play the *Moonlight Sonata*, gazing into her eyes as he played. At its end, he said, "I intend to play for you for years to come."

He wiped from beneath her eyes the moisture that she hadn't felt. "If you love me, nothing and no one will ever come between us."

On Friday night, Gina opened the door to Justin, Craig and a woman she hadn't met but who she knew would be her guest. Justin handed her a bunch of multicolored calla lilies, took her into his arms, flicked his tongue over the seam of her lips and rocked her with the quick dip of his tongue into her.

"Hi," he said, with a grin. "Craig, this is my Gina."

"I've wanted to meet you ever since I realized that you were probably going to put an end to my big brother's bachelor days," Craig said. "Yep, you're as beautiful and as elegant as Dad said." He kissed her cheek. "Gina, this is Farrah, my date."

"I'm happy to meet you, Craig, and you, Farrah. Welcome to you both." She turned to Justin's brother. "I'm just

learning that you're younger than Justin. From the way he spoke of you, I thought you were older."

Craig's grin had the same charismatic features as Justin's. "I don't dare get out of my place. Big brother guards his status zealously." He handed her a basket of wines.

"Thank you. We're not going there," Gina said. "Come on into the living room." She settled her guests, put the flowers on the table, the white wine and champagne into the refrigerator, and took a tray of hot hors d'oeuvres into the living room.

"Would you serve the drinks, please?" she asked Justin and walked with him to the bar. "Ice is here, margaritas in that pitcher, wine under there and hard stuff back there."

He leaned down and kissed her mouth. "You're a ball of fire in that getup. Don't expect me to behave."

Goose pimples popped out on her bare arms as she stared into the thunderclouds that seemed to have replaced his eyes. "It's j-just a dress."

"Yeah? It's doing what you want it to do, not that you needed any help."

She cocked an eyebrow. If he could tease, so could she. "The way you look isn't cooling me off, either."

He dropped the bottle opener on the bar, wrapped her in his arms and pulled her to his body. Her nipples hardened against his chest, and shivers plowed through her, as his eyes told the story of a man caught up in passion.

"I'd give anything to strip it off you and bury myself into your sweet body this minute," he whispered.

"And I'd give anything if you could do it this minute," she said with a brazenness that, a few months earlier, she wouldn't have imagined. He swallowed hard and she could see his jaw working. "Kiss me. For goodness' sake, kiss

me, Justin.” His breath shortened almost to a pant, and then his mouth was on her, showering her with heat.

“Hey, you two. What’s going on over there?” Craig called to them. “That explosion shook me all the way across the room. Cut it out.”

“Sorry,” she sang out, “but I don’t have any control over him.”

Justin busied himself pouring margaritas for Gina and Farrah. “Craig, do you want Scotch or vodka?”

“That kiss must have twisted your brain, brother. You know I always drink Scotch.”

Gina spoke to her guests, took a few sips of her drink and excused herself. “We’ll eat in a few minutes.”

After the cold salmon soufflé, she served: cream of mushroom soup; peach sorbet to clean the palate; a roast beef fillet with lemon-roasted potatoes, asparagus and steamed Belgian endives; a mesclun salad; and Brandy Alexander pie with espresso coffee.

After the meal when they sat in the living room sipping cognac or coffee liqueur as they preferred, Craig leaned back, closed his eyes and said, “This settles it. Gina, will you marry me?”

“What?” Farrah and Justin said in unison.

“I’m not backing down, brother,” Craig said. “Any woman with Gina’s looks, charm and manners and who can cook like this is a prize that should not go unclaimed.”

“Who said she was unclaimed?”

“I don’t see a ring on the third finger of her left hand.”

“Who said she cooked this meal?” Farrah interjected. “Just because she served it doesn’t mean she cooked it. I can’t imagine that a woman who lives like this spent the day cooking anything.”

"I don't suppose you could," Craig said, his voice tinged with sarcasm, and Gina knew from that comment that Farrah would never add *Whitehead* to her name.

Farrah wasn't to her taste, and as the evening progressed, she had decided that she could do without the woman's company. She'd begun to wonder what Craig saw in her. She leaned back and crossed her knees, aware that the thigh-high split in the long red jersey sheath had both Justin's and Craig's attention.

"I hire a woman to clean and do the laundry once a week," Gina said, "but I don't need a cook, because I'm here alone. And besides, not many women who work as cooks can do it better than I can."

"How's that?" Farrah asked. "Did you ever work as a cook?"

Gina saw Justin's head snap up, but she smiled to put him at ease. "No, but I could have if I'd needed a job. Good cooks earn a lot of money, and they eat well." She wanted to choke the woman, but only she would know that.

"How does it feel to have a windfall drop into your lap and wake up rich?" Farrah asked.

Both Justin and Craig gasped at the insolence of the question. This time, Gina didn't bother to hide her irritation. "Like being dumped into an ocean when you can't swim, and like finding yourself in polite company and not knowing what to say and what not to say. Who told you about my inheritance? It makes you scared that your friends are after your money. I was never so attractive as I am now."

With the evening shot, Craig stood. "Gina, I apologize for Farrah's remarks. I wish I'd come alone. Thank you for what was a really lovely evening. Good night."

Justin stood, but she didn't look at him, because she could feel his anger from the distance. "So you think I'm after your money." In her own anger and confusion, she didn't answer.

"You foolish woman. And to think how much I loved you." Without another word, he walked out.

Chapter 12

“**T**hat man is not after your money,” Gina’s aunt Elsa screamed at her, as they spoke the following morning by phone. “Are you out of your mind?”

“But you dreamed—”

“I thought you understood that it could be your fear as much as it could be his intentions. Don’t you have any confidence in what he feels for you? Believe me, if he was mine, a tornado wouldn’t shake him loose from me. Damn the money, child. Much as that man loves you, he could have it.”

“You don’t mean that, do you?”

Elsa cleared her throat. “Well, not exactly, but you’re nerve-racking, girl. I never dreamed you were unsure of yourself. It’s a pity. He’s an accomplished man, and his parents are, too.”

“What do you know about them, Auntie?”

“Washington’s not such a big place. I looked ’em up like

you shoulda done. They live up there in Chevy Chase with the rich and, from what I've been able to find out, both are university professors. A girl over at church said his mother's a university dean or something like that. And look at him. He could get any woman he wants, rich or not, except my clever niece."

"I don't really believe that about Justin, Auntie. I was so mad at Craig's date, that I couldn't think straight. It wasn't the first time that question arose, either. The executor of Heddy's estate suggested it, but that man said it because he was a sore loser. I didn't believe him, and I still don't believe Justin is after my inheritance. My problem is that I should have said so right then, and now, Justin has finished with me."

"That's up to you. You've got what he wants and what he needs. The rest ought to be easy. You don't want me to call him and tell him you're both stupid, do you?"

She didn't and she said so. Drippings from Elsa Bowen's candid and sometimes acid tongue were the last things Justin needed. Her auntie could shift from sweet to bitter in a second. "No thanks, Auntie. Only Justin and I can settle this. If it's meant to be, it will be."

"Humph. You'd better not depend on fate. This time, you got to take a risk, go to him and straighten it out. If he goes to you, he's not the man I think he is."

That afternoon, shortly after Gina arrived home from the museum, the phone rang and didn't show the caller's ID. "Gina Harkness speaking," she said.

"Ms. Harkness. This is Lynn Whitehead. I'm in town for a meeting this weekend, and I'd like to have lunch or dinner with you if possible."

Gina thought fast. "How are you, Ms. Whitehead? Are you related to Craig and Justin?" The woman should have

introduced herself properly, and she had a good mind to refuse to see her. She wondered whether Justin knew of the call.

“Yes. I’m their sister, the youngest of the three.”

Gina was not anxious to meet Justin’s sister; the vibes reaching her reminded her of her experience with Justin’s mother. “We could have lunch tomorrow,” she said. “I’m busy this evening.” She wasn’t, but she didn’t feel like spending an evening with the woman. “Do you have some place in mind for lunch?”

“Well, I thought that since you live here, you’d have a favorite place.”

“I don’t. I rarely eat out unless by invitation. Let’s see. We can go to the Kettle and Spoon on Lexington Avenue for brunch or down in Little Italy. Most midtown restaurants close on Sundays.”

“Kettle and Spoon sounds just right. Shall we meet there at noon?”

Gina would have recognized Lynn Whitehead anywhere; the Whitehead genes were evident in her height, bearing and facial features. She stood when Lynn entered the restaurant and walked to meet her.

“Hello, Lynn. I’m Gina Harkness.”

“Thanks for agreeing to meet me. I know how precious one’s weekend is,” Lynn said.

Gina refused to lead the conversation because being there was not her idea. They selected food from the bountiful buffet tables, and each declined the waiter’s offer of an alcoholic drink. Lynn talked about the conference on modern art that she’d attended, and didn’t hide her surprise that Gina had strong preferences about art.

"I'm surprised," Lynn said. "For some reason, I wouldn't have thought you were acquainted with modern art."

Gina forced a smile and reminded herself of her auntie's saying that if you gave a fool enough rope, he'd hang himself. "Really? Since you don't know me, I'm surprised that you have an opinion about me."

"Well, from what Mama said Justin told her and Dad about your great fortune, it's clear that you've been living in different worlds."

"I don't believe Justin told your mother or anybody else anything negative about me."

"Well...I didn't say that, but let's call a spade a spade here. You don't have anything in common with Justin, so why are you after him?"

Gina's fork crashed on her plate. "This is none of your business. Justin Whitehead and I have plenty in common, especially a consuming passion for each other. If you doubt that, ask your brother, Craig. Please excuse me." She pushed back her chair, put two twenty-dollar bills on the table and walked out of the restaurant.

Leaning against the building that housed the restaurant, she took out her cell phone and dialed Justin's number intent on venting her rage. But when she heard his voice, her anger evaporated like smoke in a windstorm, and an awful pain settled in the region of her heart. How could she tell him...how could she describe the way she needed him?

"Whitehead." She knew he recognized her cell-phone number on his caller ID screen, and that he didn't intend to bend. "Who's calling?" he asked with an impatience that she couldn't miss.

"Justin, this is Gina."

“What is it, Gina? Why are you calling me?”

“Because... For a lot of reasons. I know I don’t deserve your consideration, but... Will you meet me some place so we can talk? I don’t want to say this over the phone.”

The silence almost suffocated her. When she thought he’d put the phone down and left it, he said, “Where are you?”

“I just walked out of the Kettle and Spoon.”

“Hmm. Interesting. If you’re going home, I’ll meet you there in an hour.” Her heartbeat accelerated, and though her lips moved, no words came. “Would you rather meet some place else?” he asked with as much impatience as before.

“N-no. I’ll be home when you get there. Thanks.”

Justin kicked off the house slippers that he slipped on in order to retrieve his paper from halfway down the hall where the newsboy threw it and headed for the shower. Still wrung out from the previous Friday night’s encounter with Gina, he hadn’t even bothered to make a cup of instant coffee. If she had something to tell him, he needed to hear it. Although his head told him to forget about her, he couldn’t. The woman had imbedded herself into him as deeply as the roots of a centuries-old tree nestled in the earth. He showered quickly, dressed and decided that if he took a taxi he’d get there within an hour as promised.

Justin had no sooner settled into the taxi than he remembered where Gina was when she called him. Surely that could not be a coincidence. He took out his cell phone and dialed his sister’s number.

“Hi, Lynn. This is Justin. Did you find the Kettle and Spoon?” He didn’t like what he was hearing, and his hopes dwindled. If Lynn gave Gina the benefit of her

thoughts, as he suspected, Gina probably wanted to vent her rage to him.

"You may mean well," he said, "but considering how clever you are at screwing up your own life, I'd think you'd have sense enough not to bother with mine. Don't ever do such a thing again, and I am not joking."

He hung up, certain that he wouldn't get the welcome from Gina that he'd thought possible.

Gina opened the door for him, and her face had a scared look. Or was it anger? "I don't suppose you want coffee this time of day," she said as she walked with him into her living room. *Hmm. So she wasn't angry, at least not with him.*

"Oh, but I do. I haven't had a thing in my stomach today."

She appeared thoughtful for a second. Then, she said, "This'll take about ten minutes," and handed him a copy of *The New York Times*.

He had already read every black mark on the pages of that newspaper, and though he didn't pitch it across the room, not doing that required some restraint. Damn the coffee; he didn't need it. He needed to have Gina Harkness wrapped around him, loving him and believing in him. He closed his eyes and told himself to relax and see what happened.

He must have dozed off, for the scent of coffee and sausage startled him as she placed a tray of scrambled eggs, bacon, toast and a pot of coffee on the coffee table in front of him. Suddenly, his belly made a growling sound, and he couldn't help laughing.

"I didn't realize I was so hungry. I think I'm starved." She poured a cup of coffee for him and sat down. "Thanks, Gina. You're as thoughtful as ever." When she didn't reply, he asked her, "How'd you happen to be at Kettle and Spoon

today? My sister asked me for directions to that restaurant.”

“She phoned me yesterday morning and asked if I’d have lunch or dinner with her today, and I suggested lunch at the Kettle and Spoon. It wasn’t my most pleasant experience. To her mind, I’m not good enough for her brother. In response to one of her comments, I told her it was none of her business, and that you and I have in common a consuming passion for each other. Then, I put forty dollars on the table and left her sitting there.”

“So you were mad when you called me.”

“Mad as the devil, but the anger evaporated when I heard your voice.”

He finished chewing the last crumb of toast, pushed the plate aside and said, “That was delicious.” He leaned forward, unwilling to engage in small talk or to waste time bantering. “What do you want to achieve by having us meet and talk?”

As usual, she didn’t equivocate. “I’ve hardly been able to live with myself since you walked out of here the night before last. I do not believe that you are interested in my possessions, none of them, but I was too furious with Farrah-what’s-her-name to say so. You already know that when I’m angry, I’m stubborn. I’d give anything on earth if I’d had sense enough to clear that up before you left me.

“You introduced me to Craig as ‘my Gina,’ and I was never so proud in my life.”

She got up, walked over to him and, facing him, put her hands on his shoulders and gazed down at him with eyes that brimmed with tears. “If you can’t forgive me, I don’t know how I’ll be able to bear it. I know I hurt you deeply, and I know it’s not the first time. But I realize that your pain sears just as my pain does. Does it mean anything to

you that you're my heart and that I love you so much, I could give my life for you?"

He stared up at her. "Yes, you stabbed me through my heart, and I've hardly been myself since. As I said before, the course of our relationship would have been different and, I suspect, so much sweeter, if it hadn't begun with a deception." He pulled her down into his lap and put his arms around her.

"You interviewed a number of people," she said. "Why did you decide to do your 'live' research with me?"

"It was luck. The ad for a chauffeur told me a lot about you, and when I answered the ad, I could see that you had recently inherited, for your personality and outlook hadn't changed. For a balanced research picture, I needed your kind of person, but by the time I learned that, my interest in you went far beyond research."

She snuggled closer and kissed his neck. "Can you forgive me, Justin?"

"I've forgiven you, love, and I need to know whether you have forgiven me for deceiving you."

"I don't even think of that as deception. I always trusted you, and you have been first with me from the minute you walked into my office. When I behaved otherwise, it was my own insecurity that motivated me."

He wanted a commitment from her, one that said she was his and would always be. "I'm almost forty years old, Gina, and if I'm ever going to have a family, it's time I started. I don't want to be chasing little children when I'm fifty and too tired to keep up with them."

"It's worrying me, Justin, that your family isn't keen on me being in your life."

"Lynn was out of line. She thinks no woman is good enough for me, and Craig's telling her how things were be-

tween us must have shaken her up. Too bad. I can't imagine choosing a woman to suit my sister. Craig is enchanted with you."

"I liked him a lot. I hope he isn't planning to marry Farrah."

"Don't make jokes. She's like the corner soft-drink stand. He had a date with her, and he didn't want to miss the opportunity to visit you in your home, so he brought her with him. Do you have any more coffee?"

"For you, anything. What about your mother?"

"My mother was ready to come up here and give you a tongue lashing when I told her you weren't anxious to join her family. I wish I understood how she thinks."

Gina took the ceramic coffeepot and went to the kitchen to get fresh coffee. What had he been saying about wanting children before he got too old? Did he want them to get married or what? And was he going to ask her or...

She nearly spilled hot water all over the stove when his hands and arms wrapped around her waist and pulled her close. "I can't stand any more of this on again, off again stuff, sweetheart. I need a peaceful loving relationship with you, the way we were before you knew I wasn't a chauffeur. Can you accept the man I am, a reporter, a public person?"

She turned to him and faced him. "I'm proud of you, and I'm proud that with all of your accomplishments and abilities and considering the women to whom you have access, you want me. Justin, my heart is so full, I'm afraid it will burst." He heated the coffee, then pushed it aside.

"I don't want any coffee. I want you. My libido's been in high gear since you activated it night before last."

She reached up and stroked his cheek. "You haven't told me you love me. Do you?"

He stared down into her eyes, his lips trembling and his breathing short. All of a sudden, he crushed her to him, closed his eyes and shook his head from side to side. "Love you? Love you? You're my life. Everything. Oh, yes, I love you." He swept her up into his arms, strode to her bedroom and put her on her bed. Methodically, slowly, he peeled off her clothes, knelt and removed her shoes, slid off her garter belt and stockings and traced her naked flesh with the palms of his hands.

Slowly, like rubbing stones to start a fire, he heated her, all the while gazing into her eyes. When she thought she would go insane with desire, he began to remove his clothes. She reached for him, but he ignored her, climbed above her and sucked her left nipple into his mouth. She spread her legs, gripped his penis and took him into her. Within seconds, he brought her to climax and shouted his own release.

"That was too quick," he said, hugging her, "but I'll make up for it."

She looked into his eyes, soft and loving, advertising his vulnerability to her. Now what? Something positive and definitive should happen. Her aunt's words thundered in her head. "If he goes to you, he's not the man I think he is."

"Excuse me," she said.

Justin gave her a quizzical look, but he separated them and rolled over on his back. She pulled the sheet around her, went around to his side of the bed and knelt. "I love you, Justin, and I'll be a good wife and lover to you and a good mother to our children. So will you... I mean, can we get married?"

By then, he was half sitting, leaning with his weight on his elbow, and his face had the glow of sunrise. He reached

over, picked her up and pulled her into bed. "I thought you'd never ask. I'll marry you, if you'll marry me, and I promise to be faithful to you, a good husband and a good father to our children."

She hugged him, and kissed his eyes and his cheeks. "Uh...how many children do you want?"

"Well, three or four, but if that's too many, I'll take what I can get. If anybody had told me this morning that I'd ever again be as happy as I am right now," he said in a voice filled with awe, "I wouldn't have believed them." He reached for the telephone on her night table and dialed a number.

"Hi, man. Say hello to your future sister-in-law. You won't believe it, but she just promised to marry me." He gave her the phone.

"Hi, Craig. I hope you don't mind if I don't talk to you right now. I need to kiss my future husband."

"Right on, sis. I knew you'd get it together, and I'm about as happy as the two of you," Craig said. "Go do your thing."

When she hung up, Justin said, "Is two weeks all right?"

Her eyebrows shot up. "Two weeks for what? You mean, before we get married? Oh! How's about a month, and that would be pushing it."

A smile played around his lips and then brightened his eyes. "One more day is too long, but a month is better than what I looked forward to when I got up this morning. You're my whole life, my everything, sweetheart, and don't ever forget it."

She shook her head in wonder. "I never dreamed I could be this happy."



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DRIVE ME WILD

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