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March

Desire

BJ JAMES

THE HAND OF AN ANGEL



Desire

JUST AN INNOCENT BYSTANDER

One moment Brett Sumner was exchanging glances with a sexy stranger across a crowded airport. The next, she was caught in cross fire and he was shielding her body with his own.

The airport rendezvous was to have been Jamie McLachlan's farewell to his perilous undercover career. It was just a simple, routine assignment...until the unsuspecting beauty got in the way.

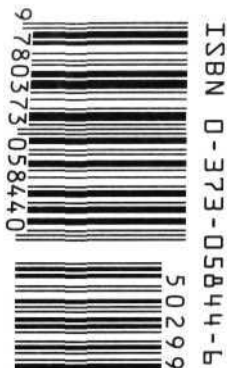
Now someone was stalking Brett—and neither of them knew why. Desperate to protect her, Jamie fled with Brett to a lush, remote island called Eden. But even their lost paradise was no sanctuary from evil... or temptation.

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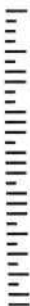
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527775

"I Should Be Going."

Brett backed toward the hall as she spoke.

"Why, Brett?" Jamie's voice from the gloom was a caress. "Why rush away? Because this is my bedroom? Because if I kissed you and held you *here* as I did on the beach—" he gestured toward his bed—"—we both know we would have ended up *there*?"

She took another step. No quick response came to her.

"Because we would make love?" Jamie followed her, step by step, not closing the gap, but never letting it widen.

Brett was suddenly tired of futile pretense. "Yes," she admitted in a ragged whisper. "Yes!"

"Then you know. You feel it, too. From the first moment there was this thing between us. This desire..."

Dear Reader,

Welcome to March and to Silhouette Desire! Our *Man of the Month*, *Wrangler's Lady*, is from an author many of you have told me is one of your favorites: Jackie Merritt. But this story isn't just a *Man of the Month*, it's also the first book in Jackie's exciting new series, THE SAXON BROTHERS.

Next: HAWK'S WAY *is back!* Joan Johnston continues her popular series with *The Cowboy Takes a Wife*, where we learn all about Faron Whitelaw's—from *The Cowboy and the Princess*—half brother, Carter Prescott.

The tie-ins and sequels just keep on coming, with Raye Morgan's *The Daddy Due Date*—a tie-in to last month's *Yesterday's Outlaw*—and BJ James's *The Hand of an Angel*, which continues her terrific books about the McLachlan brothers.

If you're looking for something completely different, you *must* pick up *Carolina on My Mind* by Anne Marie Winston. Here, our hero and heroine are abducted by aliens... and that's just for starters! And if you're looking for *humor*, don't miss *Midnight Ice* by Cathie Linz.

Miniseries and tie-ins, bold men and adventurous heroines, the supernatural and humor... there's something for *everyone* here at Silhouette Desire. So enjoy.

All the best,

Lucia Macro
Senior Editor

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**BJ
JAMES**
THE HAND OF AN ANGEL

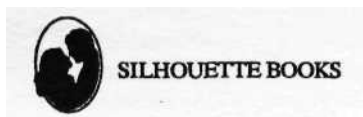


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THE HAND OF AN ANGEL

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Books by BJ James

Silhouette Desire

The Sound of Goodbye #332

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Winter Morning #595

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Tears of the Rose #709

**The Man with the Midnight Eyes* #751

**Pride and Promises* #789

**Another Time, Another Place* #823

**The Hand of an Angel* #944

*McLachlans

BJ JAMES

married her high school sweetheart straight out of college and soon found that books were delightful companions during her lonely nights as a doctor's wife. But she never dreamed she'd be more than a reader, never expected to be one of the blessed, letting her imagination soar, weaving magic of her own.

BJ has twice been honored by the Georgia Romance Writers with their prestigious Maggie Award for Best Short Contemporary Romance. She has also received the *Romantic Times* Critic's Choice Award.

Prologue

He paused only a second in the doorway. Only long enough for his dark, glittering gaze to find Madame Zara. But long enough that other gazes found him, long enough that an astonished hush swept the room.

Atlanta was no stranger to fame and fortune. Nor were those sophisticates who dined into the wee hours in this lush tropical garden.

But it was Jamie who stood in the doorway. Jamie who took their breath away, with his shock of dark hair falling over his forehead, his shoulders broad and powerful beneath the perfect cut of his formal clothing. Jamie who had given the world his music.

Music that after tonight would be silent.

There was sorrow in his face that not even the smile he offered the tiny martinet of the garden could hide. A smile that flickered and died as he took the ancient, knotted hands that reached out to him. "Madame."

"My sweet, young rogue," the old lady murmured in a stilted accent, searching his joyless face. "It is never easy to leave something you love, is it? Even when it's the right thing to do."

"Not so young anymore, nor so sweet," he said, sighing heavily, his chest rising beneath deep tucks of a snowy formal shirt. "And no, it's never easy. Not even when it's the right thing to do."

"You will miss it."

"Yes."

She nodded curtly, her coronet of silver hair gleaming in the soft light. "It is fitting that your last concert was here, where the world heard you for the first time and fell at your feet."

"I never wanted the world at my feet."

"No one knows that better than I. But we are grateful that for a while you shared your gift with us."

"Thank you." Jamie lifted blue-veined fingers to his lips. "I won't forget that. It makes everything worthwhile."

"Almost."

"Yes." He smiled again, and this time the smile touched his eyes. "Almost."

Madame Zara said no more. The subject was closed. But she didn't need the words or the look, nor her powers as a seeress to know that what one loved could take too great a toll. And that even then, it hurt to walk away. Drawing her hand from his, she touched his cheek, wishing she could ease a loss that only time could heal.

"Ah, but you're a handsome man, Jamie McLachlan. If I were only fifty years younger."

Jamie laughed as she intended he should. "You're ageless, Madame, and you know it."

A fine brow cocked over a pale blue eye. "Is that your way of saying I'm older than God?"

"It's my way of saying I wish I were man enough for you."

It was Madame Zara's turn to laugh. "You and my six husbands."

"It was five last time."

"So?" The brow arched again. "I lived in sin with the sixth."

"Lucky man."

"I think the woman who gets Jamie McLachlan for husband or lover will be the lucky one."

"If that woman exists."

"She exists. When you find her, you'll know her. And she won't be able to resist such a silver-tongued devil with the touch of an angel."

"Maybe," Jamie murmured, and kissed her again. "And maybe not." He grinned crookedly at her and, releasing her, took a step back. Another subject was closed.

The ancient Hungarian looked into the attractive young face and saw the fatigue. His last concert had been his best. He was a wise one, leaving at the top of his form. He would be missed, but it was time.

And now there was one last obligation Jamie McLachlan must discharge. Her voice dropped a level and she was solemn. "He waits."

"I know."

"It will be dangerous this time."

"No. Something simple."

"Not simple." She shook her head and clasped one of his hands in both of hers. "Dangerous."

"Then I'll just have to be careful, won't I?" Jamie smiled and patted her hand before he slipped free of her grasp and turned away.

"Go with God, Jamie McLachlan," Madame Zara called softly after him as he disappeared beyond the foliage that led to a dining room few of her customers knew existed. "Never forget," she said only for her own ears, "even in paradise there were serpents."

One

"Dammit, Simon!" Jamie slapped a hand on the table, rattling crystal.

"You knew I'd finished with The Watch when you planned this."

Simon McKinzie nodded, not bothering with denials. Picking up a heavy glass, he swirled the amber liquid, then lifted it to his lips. One move and the glass was empty. In a smooth swallow, eighty-six proof, sour mash whiskey slid down his throat. Neat, with no more reaction than if it were water.

Jamie watched as a hammerlike fist closed over the neck of a fragile decanter dispensing a second generous measure to the empty glass. Seams of the older man's jacket strained with the simple effort, but none gave way. The average man would have looked absurd in the shiny relic that had been old when Jamie was born thirty-five years ago, but not Simon. Simon might look like a grizzly dressed in a ruffled shirt, or a charging bull with satin stripes up the side of his fancy pants, but he was never absurd.

The amber liquid swirled in the glass again. Jamie waited.

"You played good tonight." High praise from Simon.

"Thanks." Jamie crossed his arms. "I tried." Leaning back, balancing his chair on two legs, he studied the man who was friend and mentor, and at times a burr under his piano stool.

"A time or two, I thought you were going to break the piano."

"I never have. Quite. Now that I'm through with the concert circuit, I don't suppose I will."

"Another time or two, I had to get out my hankie."

Jamie laughed, the scowl evaporating from his features like mist before the sun. It was the hankie that made him laugh, not the tears. Simon, the strongest man he knew, was no stranger to tears. His compassion was as legend as his strength.

Simon returned his glass to the table barren of anything but crystal glasses and the decanter. Madame Zara had known these men would have no desire for food. Nor for whiskey until this was settled, Simon was discovering, after all. He looked at Jamie, the McLachlan closest to his heart. "You all done being mad?"

Jamie brought his teetering chair down with a thump. "Yeah." He raked a hand through his hair and grinned. It was hard staying angry with Simon. "I'm all done."

"Are you ready to listen?"

"To your excuses for this? Yeah, I'm ready to listen."

"Feasible reasons," Simon corrected a little piously.

"All right, then, be feasible." No matter that he was frustrated at being drawn into one last operation, Jamie knew Simon would always be practical. The bull-shouldered veteran of thirty years of covert activities on behalf of his country hadn't conceived and formed the most proficient and distinguished agency in history by being less than practical. Jamie himself had been a functioning part of that agency, recruited by Simon many years ago.

"First off, Mendoza will be arriving at six tomorrow." At Jamie's quick look of recognition and surprise, he nodded. "Yeah, the same Mendoza you dealt with three years ago."

"He's coming out?"

"With a list and a briefcase loaded with enough evidence to wipe out this side of a particularly vicious drug cartel. Word is there are some unexpected names on that list. But we have no inkling whose, or what positions they might hold here. Could

be anybody, anywhere. Mendoza's running scared." Simon thumped his glass with a square nail, waiting until its musical knell faded. "You see now why we need a familiar face at the airport? One he trusts."

Jamie sighed and massaged the bridge of his nose between thumb and forefinger. He was wiped out, concerts had that effect on him. After tonight's performance there had been the protracted and jubilant celebration with his family. Then, once they were on their way back to Madison and safely out of the picture, this meeting with Simon. "I understand."

"Understand, as well, that all you're to do is be visible. When you're sure he sees you, set the case you'll be carrying at your feet and walk away. Light a cigarette, tie your shoe, anything, just long enough for Mendoza to make the switch. When it's done, pick up the case and stroll out of the airport."

"What happens to Mendoza?"

"That's someone else's concern. You take no chances with the case or yourself. As of that minute, you're retired."

"I thought that was last week." Jamie reached for the decanter.

"Yeah?" Simon wagged a fuzzy brow. "Well, you were mistaken. It's this week."

"So it is." Jamie touched his glass to Simon's. "To the week Jamie McLachlan, piano player and would-be spy, retired."

"And to all the little McLachlans he'll be making as soon as he finds the right woman."

"Making babies." Jamie chuckled. "A rewarding endeavor."

"Ain't it though," Simon growled in agreement, and a second glass of whiskey disappeared as easily as the first.

Brett Sumner hitched her camera higher on her shoulder and drew her arms close to her sides. Her briefcase thudded awkwardly against her knees with each step. In a rare flash of annoyance, she was tempted to relocate the briefcase, directing it with considerable force at the most vulnerable portion of the anatomy of the grumbling man who crowded behind her.

So he was in a hurry. Who wasn't? Short of climbing over deplaning passengers ahead, he would have to be patient. So would she.

Shortening her step to a shuffle, elbows tucked, wicked impulses curbed, she went with the controlled stampede. One of many restive cattle herded through a chute. Stepping onto the concourse was a relief. The camera could be moved to another shoulder and the briefcase to her side, without inflicting damage to those around her.

Resuming her normal lengthy stride, the precious tool of her trade comfortably repositioned, she emerged from the crowd. With wisps of raven hair tumbling from a battered slouch hat, and a scarlet scarf tucked carelessly into the deep bosom of her shirt, she moved with an easy grace. Sturdy ankle boots laced about the hem of blousing trousers did nothing to conceal that fluid, gliding step. She was a lean, full-breasted woman, arresting in travel-worn khaki.

Heads turned as she passed. Appreciative gazes tracked her progress through the concourse. Attention captured by an attractive face and lithe form lingered, admiring casual dignity and unruffled assurance, pondering the mysteries of unstudied sensuality.

No one acted on hot-blooded instincts stirred by the challenge of a beautiful and intriguing woman. No one dared, for it was dauntingly clear she was completely unaware of any attention. Brett was simply moving with her usual negligent elegance from point A to point B, and ultimately home to her small but functional apartment.

A part of her mind was miles and hours ahead. In her dark-room, savoring the most perfect of moments when the hopes, the dreams, the grief and pain she'd striven to capture on film came to life. Another part of her mind wandered among the throng as she passed it by, perceiving faces without seeming to. Composing them, by habit, as subjects for the camera in her mind. Seeking out the compelling mood.

Shades of gray for the worn and desperate dignity of a man down on his luck. *Pride*.

An exuberant collage of the spectrum for the unfettered excitement of a toddler discovering a new world. *Wonder*.

Fading sepia to ease the painted pain of an aging beauty clinging to lost youth. *Compassion*.

Crisp white, stark black, explosive blasts of color to describe the watchful energy radiating from a lean and attractive

man. Kinetic energy barely tamped by feigned detachment. *Subterfuge*.

That one had her slowing, turning and wondering. Hadn't she meant pretense? Pretense was common. Pretense was the mask worn to shield oneself from hurt or discovery. The challenge of her work was to recognize it and probe beyond it.

Subterfuge held a more sinister connotation... of one who was evil or grappled with evil.

Brett had no explanation why a passing glimpse of a solitary man lounging by an occupied telephone booth should arouse her artistic curiosity. Nor why she described him in terms of pretense or subterfuge. It was simply intuition.

The same intuition, or insight, that made her photographs chronicles of the soul and heart trapped beneath guarded faces, insisted now that he was neither arriving nor departing, and had no interest in making a call.

The need to record the coiled tension in his magnificent body was so strong, she yearned to reach for her camera. Perhaps it was her passion, perhaps his own finely honed instinct, the sixth sense that warns when one is being watched, that drew his gaze to her. Rending Brett's own guarded space, dark eyes that seemed black on first encounter bored into hers.

With a jolt of shock arcing between them, she saw his eyes were blue. The blue fire of lightning at midnight, and as angry.

Move on! This is none of your concern.

The unspoken message flashed from him with such force she found herself backing away, her free hand falling from her camera case. His narrowed, unrelenting gaze held hers as a luggage cart rumbled by, then blocked him from her view.

When it was gone, so was he.

Brett stared at the vacant spot, vaguely disoriented and out of kilter. Had empathy and suspicion really leapt and sparked like a naked wire between herself and a stranger? Or was she more jet-lagged than she knew? Were her mind and perceptions still steeped in the conspiracies of the cabal-ridden country she'd just departed?

Brett shook her head, rejecting her own rationale. Imagination was a creative tool. She employed it to enhance her work, but never for total fabrication.

"At least, not before now," she muttered. Casting one more glance down the busy corridor, she searched for him. In a sea of broad shoulders and countless shocks of shining dark hair, none was his. "But that much I didn't imagine."

Brett realized then that she was standing in the path of oncoming foot traffic. As weary and agitated travelers streamed past her, she turned and went with them. Engulfed again, she drifted with the tide, reconstructing the face she knew was very real.

Every feature was graven in her memory. Every detail as clear as a photograph in her mind. Straight brown hair worn brushed back from a side part touched the collar of his shirt and gleamed so darkly brown some would call it black. Brows, noble slashes across his features, repeated the color of his hair. Thick lashes that curled went a shade deeper, descending into black. Cheeks and chin hewn of flesh and bone hinted uncompromising purpose. A mischievous mouth, well-shaped, charming, made more for laughter than the grimness that had drawn it to a thin line. And always, his remarkable eyes flashing midnight fire.

A striking face more than handsome. One she should know.

Brett's steady pace faltered, only the crush of the crowd kept her from turning back to search the concourse again. Was that it? she wondered. Subconscious recognition? Could that explain the spark of awareness, the illusion of communication?

She was a logical person in need of logical explanations, and it was easy to convince herself she'd been drawn to a face anonymous only because it had been out of sync with time and place. A memorable countenance, not notorious, but known in select circles.

But what circles? And why was she familiar with his look?

Eyes distant and unfocused, she let her thoughts wander, recreating his image in another setting. Going with it when it felt right, discarding what seemed wrong.

He would be standing. Alone? Yes! As he had now, but within a circle of light. A hat? No. But his clothing would be something other than worn jeans and a broadcloth shirt. The sleeves would be buttoned at the wrist, not turned back over tanned forearms. Sleeves? Of what? Suit? Uniform? Blue collar or white?

Images spun and danced in the back of her mind. Some kept. Some discarded. All of them taunting her. All with the troubling sense that revelation was only an elusive memory beyond reach.

As she'd walked, absently, lost in her musing, by ones and twos the mob had thinned. Some departing to other concourses and other planes. Some to bars for drinks, to restaurants for food. Others, whose final destination was Atlanta, to claim luggage. Brett was alone at the exit, the elusive vision that had begun to take shape almost within her grasp, when she remembered her own luggage.

"Blast!" she grumbled, unnatural irritation surfacing again as she changed paths. She'd taken no more than a step when a solid blow sent her flying in a whirl of arms and legs and skittering cases.

"¡Putá!"

The masculine curse was snarled in a rancid wheeze against her ear as she was thrown to the floor. As her head cracked against it beneath the soft weight of a short, rotund body, her first thought was for the safety of her precious camera. The second, from a dazed mind reluctant to let go of a puzzle, was that even if her mystery man hadn't wanted interference in his affair, he needn't run her down. The third, with a flush of anger, was that he had just called her whore in Spanish.

"Blast you! Careless oaf!" Her head was fractured, she was sure of it. And for all his pudgy softness, he wasn't a featherweight. With her fists against his shoulder, she tried to push him away. "Why don't you look...?"

He was scrambling off her, his head turning in wild, frantic swoops. A sharp report sounded and with a curse he was on her again, his breath coming in gasps that scorched her cheek, his dirty fingernails clawed her hand, tearing her briefcase away. As he scrambled to his feet, Brett had only a moment to see her mistake.

The creature who had knocked her off her feet was short and fat, with greasy hair. The grumbling man from the plane, with frightened brown eyes threatening to pop from their sockets. And the briefcase he clutched as if it held the secrets of life was hers.

A thief! The thought leapt clearly from the jangled processes of her jarred brain. A dirty-mouthed thief who meant to rip her off!

"Not today, you don't!" Forgetting the jackhammer in her skull, she clambered to all fours.

"No!"

The single word boomed at Brett's back. In her total concentration on the man in front of her, she didn't hear. Lurching for her assailant, she caught only a bit of his shirt as a bloom of red appeared in his midsection and he half stumbled, half fell out the door. With his arms clasping his stomach and her case firmly in a red-gloved hand, he ran with a crablike gait to a cab at the curb.

Brett scrambled to her feet.

"Stay down!" The command was lost in a spit of sound and a shower of splintered glass.

Disgusted by the brazenness of this public larceny, the fiery temper she guarded carefully truly soaring, she hardly noticed. Thinking only of the film she was losing, the wonderful faces captured on those priceless rounds, she staggered after her thief.

"Dammit, woman!"

An arm closed like a vise about her waist, dragging her back to the floor. The body that covered hers was not short, not rotund and certainly not soft.

"Do you ever listen?" The eyes that glared down at her were midnight blue and angrier than before. But the anger that erupted from Jamie McLachlan was only the spillover of helplessness terror.

He'd been a step behind at every turn. Not expecting a man like Mendoza to panic, he hadn't been prepared when the fool bolted, running helter-skelter beyond the safeguards set for his arrival. Like a mole, the little man had run blindly, without direction. Until he'd collided with the beautiful woman with the calm, gray gaze and scared Jamie out of a year of his life.

Fear lingered, even now when she was safe beneath him. "Are you nuts?" he demanded. "Or just a gutsy broad long on courage and short on brains?"

"Broad! Short on..." Brett's strangled retort was lost in his low, wordless snarl as his body jerked, pressing closer over hers.

His arms folded over each other, forming a buffer above her head. Her face was driven into the fabric of his shirt as he held her tighter, harder, closer. His breath was a warm, sweet rush against her hair, and Brett wondered, absurdly, when she'd lost her hat.

Twice more in rapid succession the air was torn by the eerie spit of sound. Twice more his body flinched over hers, drawing her further beneath him until her world was only darkness that smelled of sunshine, soap and evergreen.

Footsteps rushed by. Doors slammed. Glass crashed. Too much had happened too swiftly for Brett to comprehend. When she finally shook free of the bewilderment that numbed her, it was anger and outrage that resurfaced. As she had before, she pushed against a body and shoulders that held her down. But these shoulders were granite, this body immovable.

"Move, blast you!"

In the peaceful quiet she hadn't noticed, he rose up over her. Hands flat on the floor by the curve of her neck, the arching of his back brought his lower body into closer contact.

"Sorry, beautiful," he murmured. "I didn't intend to be so rough. All I could think was that some fool was going to blow your head off, and I'd never kissed you."

"You what!" Brett stopped her struggling to stare at him.

Jamie laughed, pleased that his outrageous comment and her escalating anger brought color back to her pale lips. The shock of her ordeal hadn't sunk in, but if she was as resilient as her gray eyes hinted, she would weather it when it struck.

In an agile move, he launched himself away from her. Crouching at her feet, he caught her hand and lifted her from the floor.

Brett pushed away from him. "My camera!"

"Stay put." He laid a hand on her shoulder and refused to release her when she tried to jerk away. His eyes flashed again into hers. His voice was low, grating authority. "I said, stay put. I'll get your precious camera."

She ignored the command. It had been a long time since any man had given her orders, and then, only one man, and only because she loved him. If this insulting ruffian thought he could intimidate her, he could think again. "It's my camera," she snapped. "I'll get it."

His hand tightened on her shoulder. The situation had passed. Passed, not ended. Mendoza was gone, running as directionless as before, with Simon's men in pursuit. The gunman, by now, had hidden away. By tacit agreement, Jamie had been left to see to this woman's safety. And see to it he would. "No, you won't. You'll wait where I tell you and not take a step. You've been in the way twice already and nearly gotten your beautiful body shot full of holes."

"Shot!" That got her attention. So did the shattered glass and the blood that trailed over it. "Who?" she whispered, astonished at the rush of panic that sent her look darting over him, searching for wounds; bewildered by the depth of her relief when she found there were none. "Who was shot?"

Jamie kept his hand on her. "The man who ran you down."

"But I saw him at the curb."

"He was hurt, but he escaped. The worst of this is that you were caught in the cross fire. A second sooner and the bullet he took would have caught you instead."

The bloom of red in the little man's fat middle as she lunged for him and missed. His hunched, stumbling run. A red glove that wasn't a glove at all. Remembering, Brett shuddered, cold dread lay heavy in her breast. For the desperate little man, foul-spoken and foul in his person. For her own mortality.

Disappointment came swiftly on the heels of dread. Then heartbreak, for something precious that had been sullied.

Brett was no stranger to violence. She'd seen death and destruction, and had dodged bullets. But not in her own country. Not in Atlanta. This was her home, the haven she could come to, leaving the perils of the world and her profession behind.

Violence and brutality happened here, as it happened everywhere. She knew that. But not to Brett Sumner. She was supposed to be safe here. Having that security snatched away from her was more unsettling than danger or close calls.

Jamie took advantage of her silence, disturbed by the bleak look in her eyes, but using it to enforce his directive. "Stay." Then before he could call back the word, he added, "Please."

When she nodded, all the fight gone out of her, at least temporarily, he left her standing in the midst of glittering mayhem. He hated to be more than a touch away from her, but she

was all right. Swaying on her feet from fatigue and excitement, probably with her head pounding like a bongo drum, and hostage of the ache of strains and scrapes waiting to pounce at every move, but all right. He saw that much in the stubborn tilt of her chin.

He felt an odd surge of pride in her as he went to get the camera and briefcase still lying where they'd been thrown.

Brett stood as he left her. Not obeying as much as simply standing, trying to put her thoughts and what had happened into logical order. Logic. When she had that, the rest would fall into place. But there was more she needed to understand before even logic was possible.

"Here you go." Jamie displayed the camera, still safely contained in its case, for her inspection. Then the briefcase.

Her attention went first to the camera, then to the smaller case. The second startled her. She thought it had been taken, but in the confusion, she must have been in error, for here it was, locks still intact and only a little worse for wear. If the camera case was any indication, the camera itself was not hurt. But Brett knew that only time and careful inspection would tell.

"Let's move away from here to someplace quieter." Taking her arm, Jamie led her past a curious gathering and a phalanx of airport security. There were no seats or benches in the alcove he found, but its quiet was unbroken by the bedlam at the exit.

Brett would have resisted, but she wanted to be away from the crowd more than from him. And her reporter's instincts were surfacing, wanting answers. She would watch and she would wait, until she knew which questions to ask.

In their quiet corner, Jamie set down her possessions and took both her hands in his. Not questioning his need to keep her with him, he drew her close. So close, she swayed against him. That little bit of contact reminded him of how her body had felt beneath his. How desperately he'd wanted to keep her safe.

How desperately he wanted her.

Good God! Did it work like that? In the heat of danger could the normal attraction of a reasonably normal male for a more than reasonably beautiful female become torrid lust?

One sweeping look over her tumbled hair, her finely featured face, and down her tantalizing body, and he knew it could.

He knew it had.

Jamie's convulsing grip threatened to crush her fingers as he wondered if he'd lost his mind. As he drew her back, wanting that contact again, she recoiled, alarm flashing in her face.

Recognizing his mistake, he released her.

He didn't blame her for backing away, or for being alarmed. He didn't understand what he was feeling himself, so how could she? She'd been through a traumatic time and he was moving too fast for her.

Hell! He was moving too fast for himself, wasn't he? His next question asked, Moving where?

Where he would like it to take him, for starters, was her mouth. It was a lovely mouth. Cool. Aloof. A challenge. He wondered what a kiss would do to it. He wondered how it would taste. He wanted to know so badly he almost forgot he was a stranger and this was a public facility. Only the conviction that one kiss would never be enough kept him from pulling her to him and accepting her unwitting dare.

She'd moved that long, lovely body a little distance away. Because her gaze was intense and wary, but not afraid, he risked touching her cheek and was pleased that this time she didn't move away.

Content with that, he brushed her tousled hair from her face, assuring himself that she had no lasting injury. "I laughed before," he said. "I shouldn't have."

Brett remembered. The sound of his laughter was tangled in a confusion of shock and fear and with the sense of feeling safe, even when she hadn't known there was danger. He'd smelled of sunshine and soap and evergreen. He'd called her beautiful.

And regretted never having kissed her.

But he'd been teasing, to prod her from her fright. "I understand, and I know why you laughed."

"Do you?" He looked at her thoughtfully, then shook his head. "I wonder." In an agitated gesture, he took his hand from her hair. "At any rate, I'm sorry for it." Reliving his horror when he'd seen her stagger into the path of gunfire, he muttered, "This was hardly a laughing matter for any of us."

An urgent motion behind her caught his eye. Jeb Tanner, one of Simon's best agents, was summoning him.

The instant retirement of Jamie McLachlan was delayed again. But he knew why. Mendoza would be more frightened than before, and in need of a familiar face. His. Making eye contact with Jeb, he nodded and turned back to the lovely woman who aroused more than his protective instincts.

"Sorry for the interruption." He smiled again at the automatic expression of regret. "I seem to be making a habit of apologizing to you. But, dammit, I wish you hadn't been caught up in this. Any of it."

"It wasn't exactly the homecoming I expected."

"I'm sure it wasn't."

"And I'm not a broad."

He couldn't resist. His eyes swept down the long, lean length of her and back again. He liked what he saw more and more, from the tumble of dark hair that framed a patrician face, down to her booted feet. "I know."

Brett didn't give the obvious response. Didn't take him further to task for the label.

"Sorry," Jamie said, and felt like a broken record. "Out of the mouth of a fool."

"I don't think so," Brett ventured. "A man under duress, maybe, but not a fool."

Jamie saw the indignation was not gone from her steady gaze, but had merely been reigned in by reason. Remembering the range of responses she stirred in him, he wanted more than reason.

He wanted more for her than terror and violence. He wanted for himself what he couldn't have—a clean slate. And time. Jeb Tanner lurking impatiently in the background made the last impossible.

Regretfully he laid a hand over the welt across her cheek. It would discolor as blood from broken vessels gathered beneath her skin. Much as he deplored the hurt, he thanked God the blood would be contained, not spattered on the floor.

Sighing heavily, he said in an undertone, "I have to go."

"Wait!" Brett grabbed his arm. "What happened here?"

"It doesn't matter what happened. What matters is that you're safe."

His expression disturbed Brett. "This was more than a mugging and a robbery, wasn't it?"

Jeb, a tall, polished man, normally the epitome of unruffled control, was edging into jittery restlessness.

"Ah, damn!" Jamie's gaze blazed over her shoulder at the eavesdropping agent, but there was no help for it. His last obligation to The Black Watch and to Simon hadn't been discharged. And wouldn't be until this job was done. Until the problem of Mendoza was resolved.

Brett glanced over at the man who waited. She'd seen his sort before in countries across the world, in sensitive and covert situations. He was of a breed that wore danger as comfortably as a perfectly tailored suit, and as casually. In the little direct contact she'd had with these mysterious men, they were courteous to a man, even gentle. But there was something in their look, something deep in their cool, competent gaze that set them apart.

Subterfuge.

This man in front of her, with his extraordinary eyes, was the same, but with an indefinable difference. Perhaps it was the difference that made him good at what he did. She didn't doubt he would be good. Hadn't he just proven it?

"Who are you?" she asked. "What are you?"

Her wide, questioning gaze held him more strongly than her grasp. He couldn't lie to her, and there was no time for the truth. "Later." He covered her hand with his as it circled his wrist. "I think there's a lot I'd like to tell you, but not now."

"But..."

"Sorry." He grimaced at the apology, then smiled. Taking her hand from his arm, he lifted it to his lips. "Later," he murmured against her fingertips. "I promise."

Then he was gone, sprinting with the other man through broken glass and blood, and Brett was alone.

Two

"No one got her name!" Simon glared at his men, demanding the attention he already had. "You're telling me not one of you gentlemen identified this woman? That she just walked out of the airport and disappeared?"

No one answered. Of the men who sat in Simon McKinzie's temporary field office, no one dared. Jeb Tanner found a sudden interest in a roughened fingernail. Two others, Matthew Sky and Mitch Ryan, men of the same cut, as tough, stared dismally at the floor.

Jamie stood apart, troubled, on edge, his clothes still spattered with blood, his fierce gaze never turning from Simon.

The commander of The Black Watch sat in judgment, a chunk of granite, obdurate features unforgiving. "Chaos." He sighed heavily and shook his head at what had become an unparalleled sequence of error and mischance. "From beginning to end, total chaos."

The respondent silence was broken only by the self-conscious shifting of well-shod feet.

"A simple operation and we blow it right down the line." No one looked up, no one denied the accusation. No one missed the inclusive pronoun or doubted their leader counted himself

as responsible as they were. But none was foolish enough to think his harangue was ended.

In the silence, Simon turned his head in slow motion, his disdain as keen as a laser touching Tanner, then Sky, then Ryan and Jamie. Fingers splayed in a characteristic gesture, he ticked off their offenses. "We lose our man. We lose our evidence. In the process, we turn the airport into a circus. We draw unwarranted attention to ourselves. But the worst—" his hand was a fist as the fifth sin was counted down "—the very worst, we let a witness, perhaps a conspirator, slip through our fingers."

From hooded eyes as frigid as a blizzard and as unforgiving, Simon pinioned his men with the last, most damning fact. Men he'd handpicked for this assignment. His best.

"No one expected Mendoza to do anything as stupid as running. And she was a bystander, Simon, nothing more." Jamie risked the wrath of their mentor and nemesis. "She was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. Mendoza ran her down by accident. She wasn't in his path by some devious design."

Simon, known for the monumental scope of his emotions, whether anger, love, disgust, compassion, or loyalty, turned to Jamie. The smile on his lips had sent chills through friend and foe for years. "You know that for a fact, do you?"

Jamie refused to give in to the self-preserving need to flinch. "I know it in my gut."

Or did he mean his heart?

Simon hadn't finished with him. "Maybe this great knowledge was your reason for disobeying orders and involving yourself past your responsibility?"

Jamie didn't answer. He knew Simon would have done no differently. The brusque reaction was as close as the dour Scot would come to recognizing the danger and his own fear for one of his men.

Simon sighed. His face softened as much as it could, a softness not reflected in his tone. "In direct disregard for orders to do no more than switch the cases and walk out of the airport, you throw yourself into the pandemonium. Knock a strange woman on her pretty behind, shield her from bullets and flying glass, pick her up, dust her off and send her on her way without bothering to get her name." A sigh again, with the

head shake and a theatrical look of awe. "Yet you know without question she's an innocent bystander?"

"I didn't send her on her way," Jamie said evenly, refusing to be intimidated by this performance. "Neither did Jeb or anyone else. Mendoza was our priority. Mendoza, his evidence and his protection. Our mistake was judging her as we would an ordinary bystander."

He stressed the last word and paused, giving Simon time to paw and snort his disagreement. When Simon only folded his hands over a flat, rigid stomach, and returned his look with a spark of interest, Jamie continued. "Most women, or men, caught in her situation would need some sort of support and assurance from the authorities."

"No one—" Jamie stabbed a finger in Simon's direction "—including you, sir, realized this woman wasn't most women. It didn't occur to anyone that she would be such a cool customer she would collect her belongings and just walk away."

"She should have been held for questioning." Simon clung stubbornly to his premise, though he knew the point was valid.

"Yes, she should have," Jamie agreed. "For her own safety more than for our information."

"I trust that should we find her again, you'll recognize her," Simon drawled. "Seeing that you spent some time in extremely close contact with her."

"I'll know her." But would he ever find her again? Jamie wondered. Would he ever know her name? Would he have the chance to know her, to discover what beguiling secrets lay beyond her cool exterior?

"Mendoza was wounded." Mollified by Jamie's assurance, Simon turned to another subject. "From the blood he spilled, it was serious. The local police force is covering the streets where the cabbie said he bailed out. Our men are covering surrounding hospitals."

The telephone at his elbow rang. A massive fist lifted it to his ear. His face was grave, his comments terse. When the receiver clattered back into position, he addressed the men who waited. "We have a break."

The men who felt responsible, men who rarely forgave their own shortcomings, sat at attention. Alert, prepared for ac-

tion, they were anxious to redeem themselves in the eyes of the man they respected.

"Mendoza was found in an alley by a transient." A look singled out Matthew. "In the part of the city you projected he would seek out. Unfortunately, for Mendoza, it was too late. Fortunately, for us, she was too disturbed by all the blood to steal his briefcase."

"He still had it?" This was from Jeb, who had suddenly lost interest in his fingernail.

"He had it, and the cop on the beat recognized him from the description sent out on a bulletin."

"Where is the case now?" This from Matthew Sky.

"On its way up the elevator, along with the cop who found it."

Gloom turned to subdued excitement. Nothing could be done for Mendoza. But Simon's men had been given a second chance at preventing a new flood of drugs being dumped on the streets.

Jamie was anxious to see the briefcase. Something about it bothered him. Something that had been wrong even before the operation went sour. Worry scratched at his memory. Now that the pivotal piece of evidence had been found, he couldn't be still.

Leaving his place by the door, he moved to a window overlooking the city. Darkness had overtaken the sky. Only the glow of city lights marked the horizon. So many lights. Which were hers? Which of those twinkling bits of white illuminated the world for that reserved gaze? Or was she working in a dark-room, bringing to reality the images she'd captured with her camera? Images she'd risked her life for.

"She's a photographer. A professional." The perception was there, full-blown and certain, in his mind and on his tongue at once.

Simon wheeled about in his chair, back to Jamie. His eyes narrowed. He wouldn't interrupt. No one would, not when impressions and subconscious bits of information were surfacing.

Jamie kept his back to the room, his mind churning.

"She was carrying a camera. Not just any camera from the way she protected it. Not the run-of-the-mill tourist regalia, a professional piece of equipment, the sort only a serious pro-

fessional would need. She was dressed for the field." His mind was ranging now, reaching, as he visualized khaki shirt and slacks and the whimsical red scarf rucked in the neck. "A photographer, or a reporter... or both."

He felt the rightness of the path he was taking. A reflective gesture sent his fingers rifling through his hair. Beyond his look of total dedication, he bore little resemblance to the sophisticated man who'd played a farewell concert to standing ovations only hours before. At the moment, Jamie cared little for what he did or did not seem to be. The gray-eyed woman was his focus. His concern.

"She's no prima donna. She works at what she does." He was musing, speaking his impressions. "She's seen a lot, done a lot. That would explain her unexpected reaction."

And proving his point. "She was on the plane with Mendoza, I would guess returning from covering his country's latest turmoil."

Jamie spun on his heel to face his colleagues. "A paper or magazine? Would she have a byline? A picture?" He looked over the pensive faces, met the questioning looks. "She's tall, dark-haired, young. Too pretty to forget. Surely one of you who's been based here has seen her."

"Jeb?" Simon turned from Jamie to the taller, older agent.

Jeb scowled. "Her description fits a number of women in general, and none specifically." He ran a hand over the sandpaper shadow of his beard. "Still..."

"What?" Jamie moved a step closer, concentrating on Jeb.

"Sumner!" Jeb snapped his fingers and smiled, brainstorming in tandem now with Jamie. "That's it! Carson Sumner's wife!"

"Wife?" Jamie's voice was hoarse, stunned.

"Yeah. Her name is Brett. The hat had me fooled. After she lost it I only saw her from a distance. Until this minute I didn't realize who she was." Jeb looked at Jamie. "You were right, she's a hotshot correspondent, a photojournalist. Free-lance, I think."

She was married. Jamie hadn't expected it. Funny, the idea jangled. Not just because he didn't want her to be married, but because it didn't seem right. It didn't fit with what he saw. What he felt.

"Sumner." Simon slipped a phone book from a desk drawer and thumbed through its pages. With a square nail, he skimmed down the appropriate column. "Carson. No, Brett. Here it is."

"What's the address?" Jamie's relief was tempered by a dogged sense of disorder and dread he couldn't shake.

"Callaway Drive." Simon read the number.

"Not exactly ritzy, not where one would expect Sumner's wife to live," Jeb put in.

With a tap, the door opened. Another, shorter copy of Jeb led a uniformed policeman in. "This is Sergeant Mahoney. He recognized Mendoza and found the briefcase."

No other introductions were made. As Simon intended, before he knew what was happening, Mahoney was thanked, heartily commended, and out on the street. Beyond his startled impression of the giant who deliberately dominated the conversation, he would have only vague recollections of the room and the men who sat with half-averted faces. He could only suspect he'd been where few had gone, and were better off that they hadn't.

Simon eyed the battered briefcase as it rested in the center of his desk. "Let's see what we bought with a man's life."

The lock was no surprise and no deterrent. Not to the leader of The Black Watch. Its contents were another matter.

"What the devil?" Simon stood dumbfounded as the case opened.

"Well, well. What do we have here? The ever-prepared traveler with his change of necessities tucked in with business paraphernalia. Just in case the plane was delayed or diverted, of course." Mitch Ryan, the youngest, stretched out a finger, hooking it through the ribboned bands of a scrap of lace. Holding the flesh-toned wisp, he looked from one shocked face to another. "It seems Mendoza wasn't the man we thought he was."

With another finger he fished out a second garment. Tiny triangles held together by ribbonlike bands again. "At least he wears a matched set."

A third foray produced a blouse of some silky material, and beneath it, a lead-lined packet of film. "Do you suppose he was into dirty pictures as well as cross dressing?"

"Be quiet, Ryan." Simon's scowl was enough to send any young upstart slinking away with his tail between his legs.

"It was the wrong case all along." Jamie picked up the dark green blouse and realized that from the moment the case had been opened, the room had been filled with the subtle scent of wildflowers tumbling in the wind.

Her scent. Her signature.

He traced the zippered edge of the case. Black trimmed in camel, not stark, unadorned black as his had been. That was what had bothered him. To accomplish the switch without drawing attention, Mendoza's briefcase was to match the case he'd carried, and it hadn't. Too much had happened too quickly for Jamie to absorb that it had been an exact duplicate, not of his, but of this one.

It was Mendoza's case he had collected from the airport floor and given to Brett Sumner.

"They know!" Green silk crushed in his fist. "Whoever wanted our guy was as well informed, or better than we were. They will know about the cases and that they were switched."

"We can't be sure." Simon picked up a small notebook filled with neat, precise comments. There was nothing remotely incriminating in what was clearly a sketchy text to accompany Brett Sumner's photos. Tossing it aside, he tried to reason with Jamie. "If the switch was observed, they won't know who she was any more than we did."

"They know about the switch." Jamie was adamant. "It won't be any harder for them to identify her than it was for us." His voice dropped to a guttural mutter. "Maybe they have already."

Jamie was on his way to the door before the blouse he'd tossed to the desk landed in a heap over the contents of the open briefcase.

"Jamie! Where the hell are you going?" Simon demanded.

"Callaway Drive. Pray that for once I'm not too late."

Brett surfaced, rising to the top of the water like a sleek mermaid clad in a drift of foam. For nearly a quarter of an hour she'd lain in the huge tub, only a small bit of her face not submerged. As heat eased jet lag and the repercussion of her

tumble, she'd tried to ease her mind, closing it to all but the tranquil music that played softly through her apartment.

The music, the calm meditation, were a ritual observed after each expedition. It helped her deal with the enduring heart-break of what she'd seen, all she'd felt. It was her way of putting into perspective the tragedies and disappointment and failure. It was a quiet time of facing the normal irritations of each day, and repenting her abominable temper slipping its ironclad traces.

A few minutes of hiding from the world changed nothing, but the serenity renewed her.

Tonight heated water soothed her body, but the music pricked her mind. "Moonlight Sonata," the most peaceful music on earth, nagged at her, disturbed her.

Brett knew it wasn't the music. On another day Beethoven's masterpiece, *Sonata quasi una fantasia*, would be as beautiful, as restful as before. On a day when she hadn't been mauled in an airport or met a man with eyes like the night.

A man she couldn't forget.

The unexpected candor of her thought was appalling. She sat, shivering in the heat, bewildered that against her will his image was always there waiting in the shadows of her mind. Always as real as if he were with her. As if she could touch him and find his flesh warm beneath her hand. As if his eyes were truly blazing down at her one minute, laughing and tender the next.

"This is absurd," she muttered, not noticing or caring that her impatient gesture sent a drift of scented foam flying into the air and onto the floor. "I will not do this."

Brett Sumner was far too sensible to be distracted by a man. Any man, and particularly a roughneck stranger with a familiar face.

A handsome, familiar face.

"Blast!" Irritation slipped its traces again as she admitted defeat. Her unruly thoughts were not her own to command. Rising from the cooling water in another exasperated move, she knew it was time to deal with her day. Time to deal with him.

When she had towed off, slicked her hair back and slipped into a robe, she walked barefoot through her apartment. With a glass of sparkling wine, she settled in a chair.

She'd danced around it, tried to blank it out of her mind. None of it had worked. The airport and what had happened dominated her mind.

Touching the cool, frosted glass to her cheek, drawing soothing circles around and around the throb centered there, she closed her eyes and drifted through those eternal minutes.

The kaleidoscope of blurring, whirling sights. The cacophony of sound. The acrid stench of gunfire. The coppery scent of blood. Clandestine actions and reactions. Fear.

Before today, none of them were unnatural in her life as an observer, in countries not her own. What she photographed and reported was personal only in the involvement of her heart and mind. Today, in Hartsfield-Atlanta International, she'd ceased being an observer. Things she'd shown the world had come home to hers. Her haven defiled.

Brett set the wine aside. Staring at the glittering, beaded glass and beyond, she stroked the bruise another hand had stroked.

Move on! This is none of your concern. The message had leapt between them. Past the bulwark of her defenses.

Telepathy.

Flame across a firebreak.

A communion of strangers.

One mind touching another with such force she'd backed off, obeying the unspoken command. She'd turned away, unnerved, thinking never to see him again, but unable to dismiss him.

Her unnatural, unwatchful preoccupation had set her on a hazardous path, drawing him to her again. He'd been rough with her, and angry. He'd berated her, insulted her. Yet when there was danger he'd protected her life with his. And when he'd touched her bruised cheek, his hand had been gentle.

Brett shivered again, feeling the tenderness of his fingertips. Remembering her extraordinary response. The scintillating pleasure she couldn't curb.

No man but her husband had ever touched her like that. Only Carson Sumner had mesmerized her across a crowded space. Only Carson had held her life in his hands.

No! She would not think of this. Would not make comparisons where none should be. She must not. Brett shook herself

from her reverie. Not only did she sound like the lyrics of an old song, she'd stooped to maudlin and melodrama.

"It's over, I'll never see him again." Her voice rang hollowly in her empty apartment. She heard the loneliness and felt a small twinge of regret. Then she laughed, adamantly casting off her mood. "Brett Sumner! You're talking to yourself again." Her chuckle then was natural, with none of the strain of her laughter. "Maybe it's a good thing you won't see him. The poor man would think you're short on brains, after all."

Sitting for a while longer, sipping her wine, she concentrated on the work she'd done. If she had what she hoped, it would be her best. But it was the shot that had escaped her that kept cropping up in her errant thoughts. No matter how she tried, she couldn't dismiss the magnetism that had drawn her to him, hands on her camera, ready to shoot. Until his warning.

She'd almost convinced herself that in backing away, she'd simply been respecting his privacy. As she always respected her subjects. But what a portrait it would have been. What a powerful message it would have sent to the unsuspecting observer. His magnificent body alive with restrained energy, muscles taut, unyielding and tense. Danger, like an aura about him. Fierce, wonderful eyes, flashing his moods, his thoughts.

A photo to die for. A masterpiece of silent expression.

Brett wanted to believe it was only that uncommon vitality, or gratitude, that would not let her forget him. At the same time the innate honesty that guided her life would not let her deny that she'd liked his touch.

Impossible! she scoffed, setting her glass down. Carson was the only man she'd ever wanted, the only man she would ever need. His influence was apparent in every avenue of her life and in her work. He was her teacher, her mentor, her lover. What he'd taught her and given her would endure a lifetime.

She believed it with all her heart. So how did she explain away the truth? That she'd been on a collision course with an attractive stranger who stirred emotions that had lain dormant for eight long years. How did she deal with someone who made it difficult to remember there could never be any man for her but her husband?

"Work! That's what you need, Mrs. Sumner. To take your mind off silly fantasies." She left her seat, crossing to the door to the luggage stacked barely inside it. As a rule, her first priority was to see to her film and camera. Second was to unpack, a singularly unpleasant task.

Tonight she'd broken the routine, simply dumping her bags by the door, heading to the bath, stripping off her clothing as she went.

The clear head she'd hoped to regain still eluded her as she focused her attention on her briefcase. Taking it back to her seat, she was surprised that it had suffered more damage than she'd expected. The leather was scratched, the camel trim torn and the lock broken. Surprise became shock as she slid back the zipper. "What on earth?"

Expecting the change of clothing she always tucked into the case with the notebooks and the film, she was stunned by the clutter of disordered paper and packets of tattered paper money.

"What is this?" Scooping up a handful, she tried to sort it out. There were lists with the money and maps with coordinates marked on them. Some were in English. Some in Spanish. Putting them back, feeling like an intruder, she wondered, at last, "Whose is this?"

Before her question was done, she remembered. The fat little man in the airport. He'd crowded and complained leaving the plane. Then, in the commons, without warning he'd knocked her down. He'd screamed and cursed, and torn her briefcase from her hand.

"I was right! He took my case." Because he'd mistook it for his. He'd cursed her when he'd thought she'd stepped in his path deliberately. He was so sure she was after his case and had gotten it, he hadn't looked beyond the one she carried.

Running her fingers over the damaged grip, she realized she'd made the same mistake. They were almost identical.

Brett knew then she'd been right in suspecting she was involved in something more than robbery. The nasty man hadn't wanted her property, instead he'd been wild to recover his own.

He'd been wounded, from the blood he'd lost, gravely. So, how did she return what he wanted so desperately? To whom?

Until then Brett hadn't considered the magnitude of what she might have in her possession. It could be nothing more than stolen money. But her intuition warned it was more. Much more.

"*He's* involved in this." He with the eyes, the smile, the touch. Some way, somehow, he was part of it. With a sickening alarm, she wondered who had fired the shots.

Feverish and disturbed, Brett suppressed her reluctance to plunder another's possessions. Pawing and prodding, she tried to make enough sense of what she had to determine what should be done with it. Before long she knew the agitated man had been purveying political dynamite.

In these soiled, wrinkled papers, names were named. The finger pointed in the most unexpected directions. Some Brett recognized, others she didn't. Still she knew enough to understand this was the story of her life and very, very dangerous.

What should she do with it? Should she just pick up the telephone and call the FBI, or the police?

Staring at the pages crumpled in her hand, her gaze fell on a prominent name. Were there others she'd missed in this cursory examination? The wrong call could put this in the hands of someone listed in these damning documents or connected in some other way.

Unable to contain her excitement at what she'd learned, she ranged the room. Her long stride took her to her desk, and a key. A solution began to form in her mind. It was late, and dark, but halfway across town a light that was never extinguished would be burning. Elise Cheney was spending the summer in Paris, but her apartment would not be darkened. And Brett had a key.

She knew then she would take the case to Elise's place. It would be safe there from anyone who might come for it. And having it tucked securely away would give her time and space to decide what to do next.

For just a moment, in the midst of her planning, she let herself think of a second man. One who had promised explanations. If she ever needed them, she needed them now.

But who was he? And how was he involved in the treachery she'd discovered? The question loomed larger. The answer was

more critical. But she couldn't think of him now. She couldn't think of anyone, or trust anyone. Not yet.

Closing the case, regretting the broken lock, she set it carefully on a table, and went to dress.

Jamie stopped his car at the curb a block away from Brett Sumner's apartment building. The drive across the city had given him time to think rationally. He'd moved too slowly at the airport, now he was tempted to make up for it with speed. But to move too quickly, before he knew what he might find, or what her circumstances were, could be as dangerous.

With lights extinguished he sat in place, surveying the quiet street. No one walked or jogged at this hour, and few windows showed lights. Brett lived in a peaceful, little island, not uncommon in Atlanta. Nothing seemed amiss, no alarm bells were blaring in his mind, yet Jamie hesitated.

As he waited, the door to her building opened and Brett stepped out. Curious, questioning where she would go at this hour, he delayed a minute longer.

"Where are you going, pretty lady?" he muttered as she skipped down the steps. "And in such a hurry."

And with the briefcase.

He expected she would stay on the sidewalk. Instead she walked to the street, going to a car parked at the curb. Pausing beneath a street lamp, she tucked the case under her arm and dug into the pocket of her jeans for keys.

Jamie knew what was going to happen in the instant an engine revved and a car that had appeared deserted pulled from a parking space ahead. He knew before its headlights pinioned her in their glare.

Scrambling from his own car, he began to run, calling a warning that was too late.

He saw her startled face, her frozen shock, drawn in stark relief by the unrelenting blaze of light. He saw her realize too late what the driver intended, and, flinging aside the hampering case, turn to run. He heard the sound he would never forget as metal struck flesh and sent her tumbling like a broken rag doll. He heard the screech of brakes, and saw a dark figure scurry from the car.

Jamie had no weapon. He rarely carried one. Weapons were seldom needed in his duties for The Watch. All he had was himself and his voice, and the alarm he could raise.

He raced down the street to her. A specter in bloodstained jeans and torn shirt. His cry distorted with anguish.

Brett Sumner must not die. She must not!

Lights flashed on in her building. Faces appeared at the windows. The bastard who'd run her down hovered over her for a second, then, briefcase in hand, ran for his own life. The car without a plate was half a block away before Jamie ended the longest run of his life.

"Brett! Oh, God! Brett." He was on his knees, a finger at her pulse. He was grateful beyond measure for the telltale sign of life. The beat against his fingertips was thready, but all he cared was that it was there. With the stench of oil and gas rising around him, he forced himself to look for the worst.

Short of more abrasions and contusions, his careful, fearful search found nothing. There were no bones twisted at odd angles. No trails of blood warned of cranial injury. No arteries spurted. No veins trickled. Her breathing was slow, but not labored.

She'd instinctively sought the protection offered by other parked cars. Her long stride had been an asset, working for her. She'd almost made it. The bumper that struck her, struck as much of another fender.

He was brushing the hair from her face, wondering foolishly why it was wet, when she opened her eyes. When her incomparable gray gaze settled on him and he felt joy like none in all his life.

"You!" Fear flared in her eyes as she cringed from him.

Jamie went rigid. His fingers curled into a fist, the chill of her shock lingering on his fingertips. "I won't hurt you, Brett."

She struggled to get up, and hadn't the strength, managing only to brace herself by her hands.

Jamie was rigid, he wanted to take her in his arms and calm her fear, but he knew he dared not. "I came to help. Please let me."

Falling back on her elbow, she stared up at him. "Who are you?"

"My name is Jamie."

"Jamie." It was a name she should know. A face she should know. The airport? Yes. No. It was more than that. "Why are you here?"

"To help you." He risked touching her then. His fingers tracing the mark across her cheek as he had hours before.

"Gentle." She didn't flinch away, but her gaze was blurring, her lashes fluttering. "An angel."

She made no sense to him. His only thought was that she was lapsing into confused gibberish. There was no reason, nor time to think differently as she moaned softly against his palm and her supporting elbow failed her.

She was collapsing onto the pavement when he slid an arm beneath her. Feeling her shivering and her cold, he gathered her to him. Her breathing was shallow. A touch at her neck proved her heart was slowing.

Shock. The body's reaction to trauma causing marked loss of blood pressure and the depression of vital signs. A warning.

Jamie had dealt with it working in the forests as a boy and in his work for Simon. Then he'd been cool, unruffled. Now he was fighting panic. She needed help, but he couldn't leave her to roust some frightened neighbor into action. He couldn't know who might lurk behind the nearest bush or in the darkest alley.

But Simon and Jeb would be only minutes behind him. And in the lifetime it had taken him to get to her, only minutes had passed. He was sure of it.

Brett shivered again. The deepening chill of shock racked her from head to toe. Keeping her in his arms, Jamie opened the buttons of his shirt and gathered her closer to warm her failing body with his.

Sitting in a pool of light, he held her, glaring into the gloom, willing his comrades to appear. As he waited, he whispered to her. "Simon will be here. Then you'll be safe." She was a fragile doll, light, boneless, her breath so shallow he hardly felt it against his chest. "He'll be here soon, with all the help you need. I promise."

Brushing a hand over her hair, he touched his cheek to her forehead. "As soon as he comes and we're sure this is only shock, I'll track down your husband. I promise you I'll find out why he isn't here for you now."

"No." The word was only the rush of a labored breath.

"Shh." Jamie was startled. He hadn't really expected she would hear him.

"No husband."

"All right." She seemed agitated, and he wanted only to calm her. "We won't call him if you don't want it."

There were flashing lights and the sound of engines and slamming doors. Simon was there, flanked by Jeb and Mitch, with Matthew sweeping the deserted street with his keen, piercing eyes. Then preceded by its claxon, an ambulance, summoned by a neighbor, appeared out of the dark.

As Jamie surrendered Brett to the care of a medic, she whispered to no one. To anyone. Perhaps to him. "My husband isn't with me because he can't be. Carson died." Then on a long, fading sigh, as her eyes closed, "Eight years ago."

Three

There were only whispers. Whispers of light, whispers of footsteps and voices. Whispers of each steady breath Brett Sumner drew.

But in the heart of the night, as Jamie sat by her bedside, there were no whispers in his mind. In a darkness as black as his conscience, damnation howled. Damnation of himself, of The Black Watch, for what had been done to her.

She would survive, for now. But what of tomorrow? Mendoza was dead. His silence ensured with a bullet, his briefcase recovered by those who had the most to fear from its contents. But not before it had passed through Brett Sumner's hands. What had she seen? What did she know? Who waited and watched?

They were out there, whoever they were, and only Brett would know them. Only Brett stood in the way of wealth and power. And they would stop at nothing to silence her.

She was in danger and he was to blame. The instant he'd handed her Mendoza's case, he'd set her in its path. The little reparation he could offer was his guardianship. He'd given it freely and fiercely through the night. He hadn't left her side. He hadn't slept. Even in this quiet sanatorium with a trusted staff,

he had not relaxed his caution. He would not, until the danger had ended.

Jamie shifted carefully in his seat, flexing a leg that threatened to cramp. He'd sat too still for too long. A sweeping look assured Brett slept. In the darkness she was only a shape beneath the starched sheet. But he didn't need the light to know her ebony hair spilled over the pillow and her hand curled at a bruised cheek.

He eased from his chair and moved a little distance away. Leaning against a wall, head back but facing the door, he resumed his wait. Twice in the next hour she moaned and turned. A third time had him returning to her bedside, catching her left hand in his.

Brett's eyelids fluttered. Her eyes beneath her lashes were clouded. A frown drew down her brows, a line, like a shadow, appearing between them. "You."

Her voice was a drowsy mutter, more asleep than awake. Unsure if this was more than passing, restive rambling, and not wanting to rouse her, he only leaned closer, his hand tightening over hers.

"Jamie."

At the sound of his name on her lips, surprise and something curiously like pleasure flickered through him, catching him unprepared. A moment passed before he murmured softly, "Yes, Jamie."

She nodded, drew a breath and nodded again. The frown faded, her lashes drifted to her cheeks, and her fingers clung to his.

When she was deep in quiet sleep, he hooked a toe about the rung of a chair and drew it close. Huddled by her bed, her hand still in his, he kept his vigil.

The room was filled with light. With her hand lying in his, Jamie had watched as the gloom shifted and changed and disappeared. The summer day was fully upon them when she opened her eyes again.

He felt her gaze touching him before he turned to face her. Caught in a shimmering sunbeam that fell through open blinds, the healthy glitter of her hair only served to heighten the pallor that leached the color from her. Her mouth was turned to

carved marble and her skin from glowing tawny to bloodless ivory. She was hollow eyes and a tumble of dark hair swathed in the sterile linen.

But even that austere covering could not disguise that from the gently rising fullness of her breasts to the tips of her shrouded toes, her body was finely made and delicately curved.

A woman's mouth to be cherished with a kiss. A woman's body made for a lover's caress.

Beauty, strength, marred now by the travesty of yesterday.

Remorse swept through him that someone so lovely should be entangled in the dark side of his life. Hardly conscious of his actions, he stroked the path of a curl, a tousled ribbon of sable, across the immaculate pillow. His voice was an undertone of thoughts spoken aloud. "Forgive me, Brett Sumner."

She didn't blink, or look away, or respond. Her fingers were quiet in his grasp.

"But you're safe now."

"Safe?" Her voice was hoarse, but with a lilt of surprise. The telltale line reappeared as her eyes narrowed in thought.

"You have my word."

In an absent gesture she rubbed her forehead, flinching, but making no sound as her fingertips glided over an abrasion. Taking her hand away, she stared at a pinpoint of blood glittering like a ruby on the pad of a finger. "What happened?" The short nails of her left hand bit into his as her head thrashed on the pillow. "Where am I?"

"This is Grayson House, a private clinic."

"A clinic?" Her frantic stare darted over the room, absorbing the muted blend of neutral walls and earth-tone furnishings. A pleasing ambience of tranquil hues and richness. A room almost succeeding in its masquerade as a home away from home. But nothing could mask the nature of her bed, nor the medical paraphernalia that flanked it. Her free hand slashed through the air, palm vertical, fingers rigidly aligned. A blade, slicing away the myth. "This is a hospital!"

"Yes." He wouldn't add to her alarm by denying the obvious.

If she'd been stronger, his own hand would have broken in hers. "Why am I in a hospital?"

"You don't remember?" Jamie kept his voice quiet, reserved.

She pulled free of his grasp and boosted herself upright in the narrow bed. "What is there to remember?" The sudden move sent a wave of dizziness washing over her. Startled, she bowed her head over steeped fingers. There was only the rustle of bedding as she strove to regain her poise.

When she spoke again she was composed, and only a little of her dismay was in her voice. "I remember the airport. And my apartment. Then a light, a blinding light."

Jamie waited, catching only a glimpse of her studied expression half hidden by the curtain of her hair. He wanted to brush back the riotous mane and lift her face to his. He wanted to tell her it wasn't important how much or how little she recalled of the night before. But it would be a lie.

He was no stranger to lies. His life had been a lie, the years of dual lives, one public, one secret. The latter making the first a monstrous deception. There would be no deception now. There were matters she couldn't know, for the sake of security. For her own safety. But there would be no lies in the part of his life that touched Brett Sumner.

Taking care to do nothing that would break her concentration, he sat quietly. His own expression was studied and somber as he admitted he honestly didn't know if his concern for her came from his conscience or his heart.

"Darkness." Her fingers slid from her chin to her temples, then threaded through her hair and away. "All I remember is darkness." She lifted her head, her eyes finding his. "Darkness, and then you."

Jamie kept still. He kept his silence, letting her puzzled gaze roam over him unchallenged as she considered him. As she tried to piece together the role he played in what she seemed to have lost.

"Your name is Jamie. That's all I know. You told me when..." The wisp of a memory drifted beyond her reach.

"When did I tell you, Brett? Do you recall?" Jamie had to know if one recollection could trigger another.

Brett shook her head cautiously, mindful of the last heedless move. "After the airport and my apartment, everything's a blur of light and darkness. Except you."

"The light." He leaned forward in his chair, not sure at all that he wanted her to recall the glare pinioning her in the path of a careening, murderous machine. "Do you know what the light means?"

Brett locked her restless hands at the nape of her neck, staring down at a blank sea of white linen. Bewilderment clouded her features as she struggled against a wall as blank.

Silence hovered like a cloud. Oppressive, unrelieved. Beneath a veneer of utter stillness, the passions of desperation coiled closer and tighter. She was reaching, searching, and there was nothing. Glimmers danced and taunted on the edge of perception, then were gone beyond an impenetrable void.

The night had no more substance than smoke. Yet it was morning and she bore the evidence of its violent passage.

What violence? What harm had been done to her? Beyond the steel ball that bludgeoned her skull, and a dull pervasive ache that left not one tiny muscle or sinew untouched, she didn't know.

"I can't remember." There was an edge of panic in her voice. "Dear God! I really can't remember!"

Brett clutched the sexless hospital gown over her racing heart. Her throat convulsed in a dry sob as she realized the full import of her futile attempt. "Heaven help me." She raised frightened, horror-filled eyes to his. "I've lost part of my life."

Jamie didn't stop to think that her horror and fright might include him. He didn't stop to think of anything except that she was hurting. That she'd known nothing but hurt from the moment he'd come into her life. As he went to her, taking her in his arms, beyond his need to hold her and comfort her, he didn't think at all.

"Shh." He drew her head to his shoulder. "Don't try to think anymore. Everything will come back to you in time. Just rest for now."

"No!" Brett pushed him away. "I have to understand this!" The sudden move made her wince. She'd underestimated the viciousness of the steel ball. It meant to smash her skull and wouldn't stop until it shattered into tiny pieces. Biting her lip, she knew she couldn't worry about that now. "I have to know!"

Jamie reached for her, wanting to help. "Brett—"

"Don't!" She warded him off. "Don't touch me and don't evade. Tell me what happened. Tell me!" She went very still. It was morning, but what morning? Horror bloomed. "Tell me what day it is."

"Today is Sunday." His voice was calm. "Only Sunday."

Leaning back against her pillows, Brett sighed and closed her burning eyes. "Sunday."

Thank God, only Sunday. It hadn't been as long as she'd feared, but that was little solace. Losing even a minute of life was spooky.

"Yesterday was Saturday." She was speaking to herself, like an anxious child toiling beneath the weight of an impossible task. "I remember Saturday. I remember arriving in Atlanta, the airport, the frightened man. He was running. He knocked me down." She paused in her staccato recital to look again at Jamie. "You picked me up and gave me a briefcase. It wasn't mine."

The last was half statement, half question, as what had begun as a crisp, clear recollection faded to uncertainty.

"You were given the wrong briefcase." There were excuses he wanted to make. Explanations he couldn't give. He had to content himself with admitted blame. "I gave you the wrong case."

"It looked so much like mine. I didn't know until I opened it." Brett drew a surprised breath. "I don't know why I'm so positive of that when there are so many other things I can't focus on. But I am."

"What did you find, Brett?" Jamie probed as he must, but gently. "What was in it?"

"I don't know. Everything is so clear and then nothing!" Her expression was defeated. "What happened to me?"

Jamie had to steel himself against the desire to take her back into his arms. He moved to the foot of her bed, putting a chasm of pristine white between them. "There was an incident, you were left with a concussion. It's not uncommon for people to lose a few hours before or after the trauma."

"An incident? At the airport?" Had she forgotten more?

"No." He could almost read her thoughts, the alarm escalating once more. "It didn't happen then. There was a second occurrence outside your apartment building."

Brett sat up slowly, eyes narrowed and watching him closely. "You've called it an incident, then an occurrence, never an accident." Something in his face made her heart pound harder and her mouth go dryer. "It wasn't an accident, was it?"

Jamie hesitated. How could he tell her someone had tried to kill her and would probably try again? How could he explain his fault in it without making her hate him?

She watched the play of doubt and guilt on his features, realizing she'd trusted this man without question. From the moment her eyes had opened and found him at her bedside, she'd felt safe.

When, perhaps, she shouldn't have.

"Blast it! Tell me, Jamie Whoever-you-are, what happened to me and how it involves you!" She was angry, control of her carefully prudent life had been wrested from her. She wanted to know how. She wanted to know why.

Jamie didn't recoil from her outrage. Brett had every right to be angry. Every right to an answer. But how much could he say without adding to her peril? How much without compromising The Watch? "I wish I knew what I could say to you."

"Don't say anything, Jamie." The answer came in a voice he knew as well as his own. "I'll explain all Mrs. Sumner needs to know."

Brett's attention spun toward the men standing in the door. To the bear of a man who dominated his space and all the neighboring space. "Who are you?"

"My name is Simon McKinzie." The giant with a face hacked from granite took a step toward her bed. With a gesture, he drew the men with him to her notice. "This is Dr. Erlinger and Dr. Cohen, the gentlemen responsible for your care last night."

"What care and why?" Brett acknowledged the teutonic Dr. Erlinger and the smaller, darker Dr. Cohen with only a glance. She would thank them later, when she knew for what. For now she was intent on the bear. "I want answers. I want them now."

"Then you shall have them." Simon faced his companions. "Doctors, I think we can all see that Mrs. Sumner has made a remarkable recovery, given the circumstances. I wonder if we might delay the routine morning check of her vital statistics.

Delaying until she has her explanation might improve her blood pressure."

When Cohen would have objected, an obdurate Simon raised a conciliatory hand. Simon, the gruff, sometimes the diplomat. "I promise this will take no more than fifteen minutes, and I give you my word that I won't upset her further."

He waited until the doctors agreed, ignoring their reluctance to break their scheduled morning rounds. "Good," he said curtly. "In fifteen minutes."

The door he closed behind them nearly caught the coattail of the stolid Erlinger, who was slow of foot.

"Now..." Physicians dismissed, Simon addressed Brett. "You want to know what happened, and why." A nod toward Jamie included him in the next. "And you want to know just who the devil we are."

"In reverse order." Brett folded her arms over her breasts, and, keeping her spine erect, leaned back on the pillows. The first normal thing she'd seen was the harried doctors. A sight that reassured her of the legitimacy of the hospital. But this man and Jamie, for all their cool and competent manner, were another matter.

Simon advanced to her bedside. He flicked an eye over the tired, handsome face across from him, and knew that Jamie hadn't slept at all. "Working overtime, Jamie?"

"Some."

"Martyr complex?"

"No, sir." There was true regard in the respectful answer, but no trace of deference as Jamie met the inquisitive look levelly. "Paying my dues."

Simon looked hard at the young man he would have liked to have for his son and his lips drew down in a grim line. Conscience made better agents, but there was never a more ruthless taskmaster.

Almost imperceptibly, Simon's piercing gaze shifted from Jamie to Brett and back to Jamie. A question had been asked and was answered by a nod as imperceptible. The big Scot caught back a sigh as he learned the doctors Erlinger and Cohen had predicted correctly: Brett Sumner remembered nothing of what had brought her to Grayson.

With a grave courtliness, he addressed Brett again. "I've told you my name is Simon McKinzie. I haven't told you I work for the government. And, despite the fact that Jamie is determined to shoulder all the blame, I'm most responsible for your presence here.

"What part of our government Jamie and I serve, and what we do, isn't important. What is important is that before we get into what happened, you must believe we are *exactly* who and what we say we are."

Brett listened, making no comment.

"I believe you know the governor?" As was common with Simon it was more statement of fact than question.

As he assumed the role of observer, Jamie knew that from the moment her identity was discovered Simon had made it a point to know all there was to know about Brett Sumner. From what she wore to bed, to the meal she'd had on the plane. If he asked her about her acquaintance with the governor of Georgia, then Jamie knew for a certainty that she was acquainted with the gentleman.

Brett was startled by this little known bit of information. Sensing another invasion into her life, she tilted her chin a belligerent degree. "The governor and I met years ago."

Simon held the telephone. "You would recognize his voice?"

"I would."

"Over the telephone?"

"We've spoken over the telephone, I would know his voice."

"You could judge that the call isn't a hoax? There are things you can say to the man that no impostor could know?"

Brett made a puzzled, affirmative gesture, not sure at all where this strange interrogation was going.

"And you trust him." Again a question phrased as a statement.

"He was a friend of my husband's." Then, considering it an indefinite answer, she conceded, "Yes, I trust him."

"Good." The word was a bark as Simon dialed the number.

Confounded by the huge man's abrupt but kind manner, she looked to Jamie, to gauge by him her own reaction. There was nothing to gauge. This mysterious man with flashing eyes was as he'd been from the first: self-possessed, steady. Not even

rumpled clothing diminished his aura of curbed strength. Nor could jeans and casual shirt hide a rare classic style, an un-studied grace.

There were no bloodstains now. No reminders of either the airport or the second "occurrence," as he'd called it. Sometime in the night, before he'd assumed his bedside vigil, he'd shed the offensive reminders of violence. As she watched him stand quietly, taking in the rapid-fire, forceful bearing of Simon McKinzie, she could almost believe nothing out of the ordinary had happened. That hours hadn't been lost from her life.

But she had only to move her body to be reminded the lost hours were more than delusion.

Torn between denial and truth, trust in her own judgment falling prey to doubt, she fought the longing to reach out to the one person who'd been constant and steadfast in this insanity. She needed a mooring, something real to hold on to.

In the murky limbo of her lost hours, only Jamie was constant. Only Jamie was real.

Feeling the intensity of her look, he shifted his attention from Simon. Smiling down at her, he kept his expression bland when, actually, he was astounded. Simon, who was rigidly exacting in guarding the security of The Watch, was about to tell Brett Sumner more than he'd ever told an outsider.

A twinge of disquiet scratched at Jamie's surface ease, his smile faded. Every disclosure was an added liability. Another danger. There was worry deep in the indigo gaze that locked with hers.

Simon was speaking, but neither listened. That strange moment in the airport, when an awareness leapt between them, was repeated. This time there were no unspoken words, no silent message. Only recognition, riveting and seductive.

Simon's voice droned on, piercing the hush. Jamie was first to draw himself from the spell, first to acknowledge the end of the moment. With a small, gallant bow, and a thoughtful quirk of his lips, he shrugged his shoulders in an elegant gesture and looked away.

Jamie. Jamie. Jamie.

Brett sucked in a startled breath. A half beat later she realized the litany was in her mind. For her ears alone. At first she

thought the sense of déjà vu was triggered by the way he moved, the graceful salute, or a trick of the light on the somber planes of his face. Or another caprice of her concussed brain.

Whatever the reason, in that flash of time she was left with an impression, the stirrings of an illusive memory. She heard his name called again and again, a chant to the accompanying rumble of thunder. The soft, restful earth tones of her not-quite-home-away-from-home room, leached to stark, unforgiving black and glaring white. In its center stood Jamie dressed in evening clothes, his shoulders broad beneath raw silk, his tanned face alight with a rogue's smile.

In the thunder, Carson Sumner laughed.

"The governor will speak to you now."

Brett couldn't take her eyes from Jamie, couldn't acknowledge Simon as she searched her memory for a time and a place. A time when Carson was with her.

"Mrs. Sumner."

Brett frowned, finally drawing her attention from Jamie to send a distracted look at Simon.

"The governor," Simon reminded with surprising patience.

"Yes, of course." Wrenching her mind from her probe, she took the receiver thrust at her.

And in that unrelated moment she knew where and when she'd seen Jamie McLachlan.

"This can't be happening." Woefully reminded that she'd refused medication, Brett stretched her long legs before her to ease a severely bruised thigh. She wanted to climb out of the bed she'd come to consider a prison and move around the room. Only the indignity of controlling the immodest, utilitarian nape-to-buttocks slit in this hospital version of haute couture, kept her firmly ensconced in her sheeted cage. With her teeth clenched against the effort to sit still, she glared first at Simon, then Jamie.

The conference Simon had promised would take no longer than fifteen minutes had stretched into an hour. Doctors Erlinger and Cohen had been pacified by the allotment of a small section of that time. A time in which she'd foolishly rejected the prescribed analgesic and had been examined so thoroughly she expected they would see to her lack of mani-

cure, as well. In their thoroughness, she was pronounced reasonably sound. Bumps, bruises, a mild concussion and an errant memory notwithstanding, she was a fortunate woman.

In this particular instant, Brett was feeling anything but sound and fortunate. Her talk with the governor had verified what she'd begun to suspect. But it hadn't prepared her for the power of Simon's elite and clandestine organization.

Channeling her misery into indignation, she continued stubbornly, "Things like this don't happen to ordinary people."

"You're right, they don't." Wondering when this stunning woman had ever been ordinary, Simon leaned on the back of a chair, blithely disregarding creaks and pops as it protested his weight. "But that doesn't change the fact that it has."

"I mind my own business, taking my little photographs and writing my little reports. I'm an uninvolved observer, a dispassionate chronicler of the times. I come home for a little R and R. I expect peace and quiet. After days in a country under military rule, I look forward to moving around freely. Then wham!" An emphatic flick of her fingertips rearranged the folds of the sheet crumpled to her waist. "Here I am!

"Next, the two of you come suggesting—no, *telling* me I can't go home."

"Brett," Jamie interrupted her nascent monologue, "I've seen your work." When he knew her condition was not serious, and while she was in the doctors' hands, he'd made it his business to delve into the information Simon had brought with him. "You're good at what you do. The pictures I've seen, the reports I've read, were not uninvolved and were far from dispassionate. We hate to ask this of you."

"Ask?" Any other time Brett would have regarded his judgment as complimentary. But not today. Not when she felt as if her life had taken a left turn when she'd intended it should go right. When it was being taken out of her hands.

"All right, then," Jamie conceded gently. "We hate to insist on this course of action. We understand that few people can put their lives on hold for days on end. But the timing isn't all bad. You are between projects, you have no immediate family. And by your own admission, Carson Sumner's children

wouldn't worry a minute or even question if you simply weren't around for a while."

"That much is true."

Jamie pounced on the admission. "Then you'll agree to stay at Grayson? To let the doctors treat your injuries?"

Brett looked from Jamie to Simon. But in the course of the conversation, Simon had moved to the background, giving Jamie center stage. "Not injuries!" she insisted. "Minor abrasion and bruises."

"Deep-seated bruises that could calcify, destroying muscle tissue." Jamie paused in his debate to let his gaze sweep the length of a shapely thigh barely concealed by the sheet. "I haven't seen your legs, but I don't have to see them to guess they're gorgeous. I don't have to see to know what a shame it would be for their perfect lines to be furrowed by atrophied tissue. I don't think I could bear it if that elegant stride became a limp."

Beneath a fringe of lowered lashes, Brett stared at him. "A limp from a bruise? Laying it on a bit thick, aren't you?"

"With the therapy the doctors are suggesting, you wouldn't have to worry."

"I'm not worried in the first place. Not about a limp from any of my bruises, at least."

"Then what does worry you?"

"The truth. The real reason you want me to stay here."

Jamie glanced briefly at Simon, who shrugged, a declaration of hands-off. Sensing a strong rapport between Jamie and Brett, he'd backed away. Managing Brett Sumner, convincing her to listen to reason without telling her more than was good for her, was in Jamie's hands.

Jamie slanted a thanks-for-nothing-pal look at him as he turned again to Brett. "What is the truth, as you perceive it?"

"Perceive? You're kidding, right?"

"I'm not kidding, Brett. When my conscience is involved, I never kid. Humor me in this. Please."

A tiny inclination of his head sent a wash of bright light over his features. Then she saw a very young Jamie McLachlan taking his bows on the concert stage, applause rising like thunder around him. Caught up in a past when Carson's arms were around her and his praises for the young and gifted virtuoso

rose longest and loudest in her ear, she nearly lost the thread of her anger.

"The truth, Brett," Jamie encouraged. "As you know it." A great deal of what he might tell her was classified. A lot was more than she would need to know. But he could hear her speculations and tell her when she was right and when she was wrong. Contrary to popular belief, ignorance was never a blessing.

"I don't have to speculate." She crossed her arms at her breasts, the unconscious move thrusting their fullness to the drooping neckline.

Jamie noticed a band of discoloring tissue at the delicate point when her breast curved away from the hard plain of her chest. He wondered at the force of the blow that marked the tender swell and longed to sooth away the ache with his lips.

He thrust his lecherous thoughts aside. Cursing his folly, he wondered what such an intimate act would do for the ache that had begun in his own body. He wondered how in hell a man who was so foolishly tempted could hope to persuade her to let him protect her?

"And that's the truth. Not just as I might recognize it, but as it really is, isn't it?"

Brett had been speaking and he hadn't heard a word. "I'm sorry. What?"

"Mrs. Sumner was explaining the truth," Simon put in dryly, amazed, amused and annoyed at Jamie's distraction. "Made a good job of it, she did. Care to play it again, Mrs. Sumner? In a nutshell."

Not sure when she'd lost Jamie's attention, or why, only knowing that she had, Brett curbed her impatience. Complying to Simon's request with more grace than she felt, she repeated only what was pertinent. "I stay at Grayson for the twofold benefit of treatment and sanctuary. Until you find the missing luggage, or until I remember what was in it. Whichever comes first."

In the past hour spent with the men of The Black Watch, she'd added bits and pieces to what she knew, but nothing conclusive or helpful. She'd learned Mendoza's name, and that his briefcase had been filled with papers. Knowing herself, she didn't question that she'd read them. But if there were names,

she had no recollection of them. She had no memory of the car that ran her down, nor did she have the faintest clue where she'd been going with Mendoza's evidence.

In the past hour she had blasted the lost time enough to send it to hades.

"You might remember, Brett," Jamie said. "At any minute."

"Or never. If it's never, am I to hide forever?"

"We didn't say that." Jamie moved closer to her bedside. She had been given a clean bill of health, but her body had suffered severe trauma, and this long harangue was exacting a price. The frown line was back between her brows. He wouldn't bet against a pounding headache. Taking her hand in his, he was pleased when she didn't pull away. "All we're asking for is time."

"We!" Brett left her hand in his but shook her head. "You play pianos for a living. What in blazes are you doing mixed up in this?"

"That's a story for another day." He laced his fingers through hers. "Listen to me, please. We can't let you walk out of here and back into the line of fire. These people don't know what you might have seen or learned. They won't care.

"They'll simply take you out." His look burned into hers. "I can't let them do that."

"What's the big deal?" Simon asked. "You're back from assignment." A splayed finger folded into his palm. "You need to develop the pictures you've taken. There's the text to write. You're beat to hell and need to rest. After a few days of therapy here, then you're off to a quiet island off the South Carolina coast."

"An island! In the Atlantic!" Brett spun to face him. "No one said anything about an island."

"An island that's safe and beautiful," Simon continued as if she hadn't interrupted. "A good place to heal and a good place to work. A place where you can move about as you wish, with no walls to hold you. An island house shaded by palms and live oaks instead of hospital corridors. Breezes laden with the scent of the sea, not the stench of medicine. You'll be safe and you'll be free.

"You'll be in Eden, Mrs. Sumner." With the fist he'd formed, running out of fingers long before points, he tapped the back of a chair. "What more could you want?"

"To stay home," Brett quipped.

Jamie muttered a low, unintelligible curse and walked away. In the courtyard beyond her room, midday shadows pooled beneath trees and shrubs. Shadows could be beautiful, adding wonder to the landscape with their depth and contour. Today they seemed only sinister. A place for lurking evil.

"Brett." Simon straightened from the chair, discarding the formality of surnames. "You aren't being given a choice."

"No choice?" Brett heard her voice sliding up the register, growing shrill in frustration. Catching the edge of her lips between her teeth she bit down, diverting her concentration to the serrating points of her teeth. Slowly she managed to bring the mad whirl of emotion into a semblance of reason. And with it she retrieved her poise. "If I have no choice, then what was this all about?"

"We wanted you to hear our point of view and agree to go willingly." Jamie had turned his back on the courtyard, on the shadows that lurked there.

"If I don't agree, if I don't go willingly, what will you do?" The anger she'd suppressed flared. "What? Kidnap me?"

"It's called protective custody." Jamie ran a hand through his hair, and Brett saw utter weariness and despair in the motion.

Her resolve softened as she thought of the long hours he'd spent by her bedside, watching over her with worry drawn on his face in somber lines. Worry, not for himself, or for Mendoza's evidence, or the mission, but for her. For Brett Sumner, a stranger who had been in the wrong place at the wrong time.

What Simon McKinzie and Jamie McLachlan were offering was sanctuary and protection, with little regard for anything more than her security. They'd been honest about the dangers she faced. In that light she questioned her motives for fighting them. Perversity for the sake of being perverse?

Not her style at all. She was battling to stay in an intolerable situation. Not a logical reaction. "All right," she said, startling both Jamie and Simon. "I've gone out on a tangent without looking at the truth. I know it hasn't sounded like it for

the past half hour, but I value my stiff neck as much as the next person. I'm a logical woman, it's time I started being logical."

She looked from Jamie to Simon. "I'm tired of this bed. How soon do we leave?"

Simon's response was more growl than laughter.

When a slow, relieved smile lifted the piano player's lips, Brett noticed a fascinating dimple.

Four

They were a sailing party. A husband and wife entertaining business associates aboard their sloop. Anyone curious enough to check would find they were Roger and Joan Hamilton, their midsize vessel was registered as *The Moon Dancer* and called *The Dancer*. Their point of origin was the eastern coast of North Carolina. Their path down the intercoastal waterway could be traced through ports of call.

They were hiding in plain sight, too visible to be anything but innocent. Only the flight to the coast had been clandestine. Simon's theory. Simon's plan.

After more than a week confined to the grounds of Grayson House, Brett had expected to find the freedom of sailing exhilarating. The sloop was beautiful, the weather wonderful. The sun on her skin was better than anything Erlinger and Cohen could prescribe.

It was an idyllic journey with congenial and unobtrusive guardians, through magnificent country to an island paradise. As she stood at the rail listening to the lap of water against the side of the boat, watching the attending magnificence glide by, Brett wondered why she was feeling gloomy.

"It won't be long now."

"What?" She faced the man who moved to her side with the step of one who might have spent his life on the sea.

"It won't be long before you'll be on the island." Jeb Tanner leaned on the teakwood railing. For the duration of their cruise he had become Roger Hamilton. As if he were a chameleon adjusting to a new environment, he bore little resemblance to the man glimpsed at the airport. With a mustache and his dark gold hair lightened to sun-streaked silver, he had metamorphosed into a tanned, gray-eyed Adonis. A footloose summer vagabond, lean, athletic, successful. Wealthy enough to play as hard as he worked.

Even Brett found little of the tight-lipped, coolly efficient operative who had been a distant but ever-present specter during her days at Grayson. With his changes, this engaging man of many faces had moved from the fringes of her life to center stage.

How many faces had Jamie McLachlan worn?

As a casual arm dropped over her shoulders, Brett abandoned the futile path of her thoughts, resolutely putting Jamie from her mind. Stage, she decided was a good choice of words. The men of The Watch were masterful in the roles they were given. Jeb played the public role of husband and lover to the hilt. Matthew Sky and Mitch Ryan were facile and credible as genial business associates and avid fishermen. In private, each was circumspect, almost gallant in his respect for her. Gradually they had progressed from forced companionship to friends.

"Hey! What's this?" Jeb brushed the corner of her sober mouth with a teasing finger. "How about a smile for that pretty face?"

"You think I need cheering up?" Brett asked.

"You look like a lady with a lot on her mind, not all of it good." Taking his arm from her, Jeb lounged against the rail, his back to the shore. "It's not easy to put your life and future in the hands of strangers. You wouldn't be human if you didn't have doubts."

"Not doubts so much as lack of understanding." She didn't understand who these men were, nor what their organization was. She didn't understand what had happened to Jamie. He'd been a part of her life for more than a week, devoting himself to her. In her anguish for the lost hours, chafing at the en-

forced confinement, Jamie became her link to reality. He was sanity in a world turned upside down. Then one day, he wasn't there.

Brett didn't understand why he'd gone, nor why she cared.

"Tell me," Jeb said quietly. "Maybe I can help."

She was tempted but curbed the impulse. She wouldn't vent her bewilderment on Jeb. "I don't understand why this is necessary." She was improvising, but truthful, as a wave of her fingers included the sloop, herself, Jeb. "Why go to such lengths?"

Jeb chuckled, appreciating rather than mocking her appraisal. "One of Simon's greatest strengths is that he does the unexpected. It's rare that anyone outguesses him. Hiding in plain view like this is an example. When you think of it, it isn't a bad idea. The only way to the island is by boat or helicopter. A chopper would attract too much attention. So might a mysterious ship suddenly appearing in the area without justification. What better way to avoid suspicion than to create a history and a purpose for *The Moon Dancer*?"

"It seems so elaborate." She looked to the mainland. The land had grown flatter, the swamps thicker. The soil had changed from red clay to black sand. Spanish moss draped the trees in ghostly charm.

"It may seem elaborate, but Simon always had his reasons."

"How long have you known Simon?" It was as close as she had come to asking more about the mysterious government agency that had taken over her life. She knew the organization had been established by Simon, its people handpicked by Simon, and the unofficial name given the truly nameless organization had been given in Simon's honor.

Even on board *The Moon Dancer* she'd heard the secret group called The Watch, or The Black Watch. At times, in jest, her companions referred to themselves as Simon's Ladies from Hell.

In close quarters with these quiet men seemingly stamped from the same mold, she discovered infinite differences. From Jeb, to the mysterious and watchful Matthew Sky, to young, irrepressible Mitch Ryan—all utterly different. Neither their

differences nor their kindnesses deceived her into thinking the fierce spirit of their namesake did not exist in them, as well.

One of the fiercest of the lot was looking down at her now with nothing but friendly affection.

"How long have I known Simon?" Jeb sighed thoughtfully. "I'm not sure anyone ever really knows Simon. We know parts of him, the parts he allows us to see. But to answer your question in specifics, Simon McKinzie has been my friend and the moving force in my life for nearly fifteen years."

"You're so unlike. What common bond brought you together in the beginning? Who were you before Simon McKinzie?"

"No mystery there, at least where I'm concerned." Jeb shrugged. "You could call this typecasting, I was what you see. A Californian, happiest on the water or in it, on a surfboard or a boat. Bluntly, I was a beach bum playing my way through college, figuratively and literally.

"There was some trouble with Simon's public enemy number one—drugs. The Watch was involved. I was an innocent civilian implicated by unsavory associations. Thanks to Simon's skill as an investigator I was exonerated. For some reason the Scot saw something worthwhile and recruited me."

"Simon," Brett murmured. "The Scot."

"American born and bred, but with a heritage powerfully rooted in Scotland. His mother came to North Carolina directly from Scotland. In the isolated mountain stronghold of the McKinzie's, her speech and traits were his greatest influences."

Brett had heard the trilling burr, seen the Old World mannerisms. "You called yourself a civilian?"

"A name for someone not of The Watch."

"Of course," she said softly. In their singularity The Watch would look at outsiders as civilian. "You haven't said what Simon saw in you. What made you worth recruiting?"

"Only he knows." Jeb lifted her shirt from the back of a chair and dropped it over her shoulders. "Too much sun, sweetheart," he cautioned. "I'll be turned over a slow spit if I deliver you to the island in anything but perfect condition."

"Simon," she murmured as the shielding cloth drifted over the tanned flesh revealed by a demurely cut halter and shorts. "Always concerning himself with unexpected kindnesses."

Jeb slanted her a long look, then nodded, letting her misconception lie. "Of course, Simon."

"A unique man who discovers the unique in others."

"I suppose he does." Jeb knew where her conversation was leading. He would have had to be blind not to know. In watching over her from his remote vantage point, he'd seen her cope with the chaotic circumstances of her life and he'd seen her source of strength when her own flagged. He knew the real focus of her interest, but he would let her come to the point in her own time. "We all have some innate ability he saw, some expertise he could use. With me, part of it is water. What's in it, what's on it."

Brett was sure there was more to Jeb Tanner's story, but she wouldn't challenge his version.

"Matt's a tracker." Jeb directed her attention to the extraordinarily handsome Matthew Sky. The soft-spoken, reticent Sky was actually Matthew Winter Sky, part Chiricahua Apache, part French. A fiery mix of cultures, an enigmatic man.

"A tracker?" An odd term in modern times. Her mind drifted back in the past, imagining the copper-skinned man dressed in breechclout and buckskins. A hawk's feather bound with leather and turquoise tangled in his coal black hair.

The Moon Dancer rolled and skipped as a sail caught the breeze. Jeb's surefooted stance didn't waver. With a hand at her arm he steadied her until the surge and swell ended. As the boat ceased its bucking he released her and continued his story. "Matt can trace a feather over concrete."

Brett shot her companion a skeptical look.

Jeb grinned. "Not a total exaggeration. The man's a phenomenon—three parts skill, three parts unique powers of observation, four parts intuition. Give him two and two and he skips ahead accurately to eight."

"An invaluable skill for The Watch." Brett sensed there was no more she would hear of Jeb or Matt, and turned to the younger Lady from Hell. "Mitch?"

"Our Mitchell is a complex man. More than any of us."

Brett slanted another disbelieving look.

"Mitch was a juvie. A delinquent, a troubled kid, incorrigible, whatever the current label. No one knows the what, where or why of Mitch except Simon. He laughs, he teases, he jokes. He seems as guileless and as gentle as any man I've ever known."

She heard the irony. "Guileless and gentle, until?"

"Until an innocent is hurt, particularly a child. Then, God help the one doing the hurting."

"That's his skill? What he brings to Simon?"

"That and his genius. If there's a machine he doesn't understand, he hasn't seen it yet. Or a car he can't steal."

At her look of astonishment, Jeb chuckled. "He's a reformed character now, but in his hot-wiring days he was a street kid, falling through the cracks." Jeb watched the younger of their group as he joked with the silent, tolerant Matthew Sky.

"He laughs now," Jeb added, his calm features belying his grim words. "But only God and Mitch, and perhaps Simon, know what hell he went through before The Watch."

"Then beyond your talents, each of you had lives and experiences that groomed you for the needs of The Watch." What in Jamie's life had suited him for The Watch? Jamie, who'd sat by her side and watched over her, who'd brought flowers and silly gifts to ease the boredom of her stay at Grayson House. Who had walked the carefully manicured grounds with her, laughing, talking, always turning the conversation from himself.

Jamie, always watching, always caring. Then, nothing.

Brett curled her fingers into the fabric of her shirt, pulling it closely about her and turning back to stare at the moving scenery.

"He isn't like the rest of us, you know," Jeb said.

Her gaze moved from the landscape to Jeb. "Jamie."

Jeb touched her cheek. "Yes, Brett, Jamie."

"Am I that transparent?"

"I'd rather say I'm that good at my job." Recalling the fiasco that had put her here in his temporary charge, Jeb grimaced. "That good at my job as an observer, at least."

"Observer, watchdog, guardian." An edge of bitterness crept into her voice. One she knew she had no right to feel. These

men had been nothing but kind. If they were in part responsible for her dilemma, she owed them her life as well. "You all do it excellently, but only because it's part of the job description. Right?"

Jeb knew her inclusive observation had little to do with Matt, or Mitch, or himself. "He didn't abandon you, Brett. In fact he was far more involved than Simon intended he should be. His part of the scheme was to finish with Mendoza. Jamie was in direct disobedience of his orders when he came to your apartment."

"But if he hadn't..." She didn't want to think it.

"We all know the answer to that, ugly as it is."

"If his work was done, if he was disobeying orders, then why was he at the clinic?"

"Concern." Jeb shrugged and slid his hands into the back pockets of his shorts. "A terminal case of guilt."

"Jamie felt responsible for my being involved," Brett agreed.

"He has a good case of conscience, does our Jamie. It's the Scot in him, I'm thinking." Jeb's broad parody of a Scottish accent brought a reluctant smile to her eyes, as he intended it should. "He's more Scot than just his name. When it comes to stubborn, Simon, our other Scot, has finally met his match."

"Land ho!" Mitchell Ryan called behind them. When Jeb nodded that he knew and Brett spun to face him, Mitch grinned. "Always wanted to say that. Since the day I snuck into my first pirate movie."

Matthew was setting a new course. Beyond him, with the surf breaking over champagne-colored sands, an island lay like an emerald in an azure sea.

With a bow straight out of a pirate epic, made no less gallant by his bare chest and tattered shorts, Mitch swept a hand toward the glittering shores. "Your first glimpse of Patrick McCallum's Eden, Mrs. Sumner."

"It's beautiful," Brett murmured, her voice nearly lost in the creak of rigging as sails swung about. "But it looks deserted."

"It does," Jeb agreed while the sloop turned leeward. As the island was left in *The Moon Dancer's* wake, he added, "It is. Almost."

Wind-driven clouds hovered low over the horizon, obscuring the rise of a full moon. The sea was calm, steeped in an eerie quiet. The night was coal dark with only its phosphorescence to light it.

When Matthew turned *The Moon Dancer* away from McCallum's island, he steered a meandering path through the waterway. Miles beyond the island, the sloop threaded through a narrow channel into the open sea. Hours ticked by, the sun set, clouds gathered. In the darkness, with no land in sight, Brett lost her bearings.

When she'd questioned their oblique course, Matthew answered, "Security." He spared her a glance from his vigil of the sea. "Can't risk any connection between *The Dancer* and the island."

"Who would suspect? Who would connect us with anything that happened in Atlanta?"

"Their eyes are everywhere, Mrs. Sumner." Mitch's use of her surname had been in theatrical jest. Matthew's was respectful convention. His piercing look didn't waver, but his voice was patient. "But so are ours."

Reassured by the calm statement, Brett fell quiet. When Matthew returned to his watch, she moved on, continuing a restless stroll over the deck. *The Moon Dancer* was alone in its little portion of the sea. It had been alone for hours, and in those hours, except the little time he had given to Brett, Matthew's keen stare hadn't relented.

In the days before he'd disappeared from her life, Jamie had introduced her to the disposition of the men of The Watch, the creed they lived by. Never assume. Never trust to luck. Believe only what you know. And never forget, what can go wrong, will.

It had. It could again. Against that eventuality, Jeb and Mitch and Matthew Sky were ever on guard.

As the hours crawled by Brett reverted to her role of trained observer. Now they were moving soundlessly, auxiliary engines shut down, lights dowsed, voices muted. Dark clothing had replaced the light, bright colors of the day. Jeb had pulled a baseball cap over his silvered locks.

Sails were hauled down, the anchor dropped with a muffled splash. The black of the sea around them was undisturbed. No lights from passing vessels flashed in the distance, none from the atoll lying like a sleeping giant before them. But were there eyes in the night watching, they would see a sloop being put to bed, leaving only Mitchell to take his turn at sentry.

Under cover of dropping the anchor, a small raft had been launched. Matthew was over the side, waiting with the patience of his ancestors, when Jeb laid a hand on her shoulder.

"It's time." His voice was a whisper, trembling on the brink of a void that was the sky, the sea and the waiting island beyond.

Stifling a shiver and a sudden reluctance to leave the sloop, Brett sighed and stood. When she reached for her duffel, Jeb was there before her. "I'll get it," she insisted.

"No." Just as insistently, Jeb's hand tightened on the grip of her bag. The tone of his voice didn't alter, but the look of him, a solemn-faced man dressed in the dark garb of secrecy, left no question of his intent. "You'll wait right here and not take a step until this is loaded and we're ready for you."

Almost as an afterthought, he added, "Please."

Her argument died on her lips. With a yielding gesture, she looked away. These men of The Black Watch, accustomed to commanding and controlling, had no concept of how arrogant they were in their protective zeal. Arrogant, smug and a few other epithets she could name. With the occasional courtesy thrown in for persuasion's sake.

"So I'm funny, now, am I?" A teasing voice rumbled close by.

Sobering, she looked up at the hulking shape that was Jeb. "Not funny, just of a type. Jamie said almost exactly the same thing to me, in a tone just as obstinate."

"You miss him, don't you?"

"Miss him?" Then lamely, "Who?"

"Jamie," Jeb answered with tongue-in-cheek solemnity. "You've missed Jamie from the moment he left Grayson."

"You're mistaken. Why should I miss someone I hardly know?"

"Good question, why should you?" There was muffled laughter in his voice, but he was completely professional when

he led her to the rope ladder dangling over the sloop. She had one foot on a wooden rung when he leaned closer to whisper, "I'll ask again in a few weeks."

Her head came up, she strained to see his face, to read from his expression what his comment meant. Before she could speak, he slanted a finger over her lips.

"No more conversation from this point," he warned. "Sound carries too far over water." He waited for Brett to begin her descent. When she hesitated, he prodded gently, "We rendezvous on shore in fifteen minutes, and Matthew says the cloud cover's lifting."

Brett clung to the ladder, the sea beneath her an oblivion as black and empty as the gap in her memory. Old resentments stirred, for the choices she'd been forced to make, for what she couldn't remember, for the life that was no longer her own. But in her ever logical way she knew this marshaling of her life, this elaborate and clandestine scheme, was for one purpose alone—her welfare.

A sojourn in a paradise called Eden. To keep her safe.

Clinging to the rope, she looked at the clouds and the sea. Neither had changed, but if Matthew Sky said the cloud cover was lifting, she knew it was. Resigned to her fate, she descended the ladder to the raft and Matthew's steady arms.

Jeb came quickly to the raft, joining Matthew at the oars. The sea and the tide were with them. In what seemed an incredibly short time, the raft touched ground. In the moonless night, the breaking waves were luminous ridges ruffling the murky water. In a pale, glittering froth, they spilled over a deserted, black velvet beach.

Beyond the rush of the surf there was stillness, beneath its muted roar a soothing hush. Small sounds, the tumble of a shell over another, the shifting sand, the whisper of a breeze, served only to enhance the silence.

Rocked by gentle eddies, with sea spray kissing her face, Brett knew why Patrick McCallum called his island Eden.

Matthew secured his oars. Signaling that she should stay as she was, he slipped over the side into a waist-deep current. As he gained purchase, as if a silent signal had been given, a shape separated from the somber shadows of the forest skirting the shore.

"And you thought it was Simon who would roast me over a spit if you were delivered in less than perfect condition." Jeb's comment was made with a low, wry laugh. Before she could react, he was in the sea, moving to aid Matthew. Tossing a mooring rope to the figure on shore, together the two in the water wrestled the raft into the shallows.

There, with the current swirling about their ankles, three figures merged into one. Indistinguishable voices blended with the sound of the waves. Hands clasped, shoulders were cuffed. Laughter rose and fell. One separated from the huddling camaraderie, a singular figure treading through foam and surf.

Brett had no time to prepare, nor to think, before she was lifted from the raft and cradled in brawny arms.

"Welcome to Eden, Brett Sumner." The deep voice was muted, familiar, beautiful.

"What?" The question was involuntary, unnecessary, as she looked into a shadowed face.

"I said welcome, Brett Sumner." Jamie McLachlan smiled down at her. "I thought you'd never get here."

She heard his voice, she saw his face and felt his arms around her but couldn't quite deal with the unexpectedness of it. "Jamie?"

"Who else did you think would be here?" He laughed softly and, needing no answer, held her closer. "Hold tight, and we'll have you at the main house before you know it."

Turning a deaf ear to her protests, he moved with her to the shore, then through the forest to the trail that led to the house they would share in the weeks to come.

The house had been explored, her room inspected, and Jeb and Matthew had gone. Matthew with a nod and a smile. Jeb with one last bantering reminder. "I'll ask you why you should miss this determined gentleman when we meet again."

Then they were away, moving like ghosts through the forest to the beach and their waiting raft. After the close quarters of *The Moon Dancer* and without her shipmates' comforting presence, Patrick McCallum's island house seemed large and uncomfortably alien. In this new stillness Brett was realizing she was in an unfamiliar place, alone with a man who was little more than a stranger. Telling herself this was no different from

her free-lance sorties into foreign lands, among exotic people, she forced herself to be cool, to collect her thoughts and her wits. To be calm.

Looking around her, familiarizing herself with her surroundings, she saw the room was like the little she'd glimpsed of the house, spacious and simple. An island house in the truest sense of the word, appointed in conservative, uncluttered island style. With no expense spared.

Dark and pale woods were mixed with cane and wicker, stripes with florals, and cotton with silks and simple brocades. An eclectic and pleasing blend of texture and structure. A pleasing, but sensual feast for sensual tastes.

Unconsciously her fingers traced the delicate seashell pattern of her chair as her gaze moved to the portrait that hung over the fireplace. The mood of the painting was romantic, a dreamy figure caught in a sunlit mist. The woman's blond hair gleamed brighter than the sun, her smile was serene, her amethyst eyes tranquil. She was the most beautiful creature Brett had ever seen.

"Her name is Jordana."

His voice broke her trancelike fascination and Brett turned from the portrait to Jamie as he sat across from her in a chair much like her own. He'd been watching for some time.

"Jordana," she repeated, liking the sound of it. "A lovely name for a lovely woman. Somehow I think an exceptional woman."

Jamie turned from Brett to the portrait. "As unusual as her name. As exceptional as she is lovely."

"The house is hers?"

"Patrick bought the island and built the house for her shortly after they were married."

Brett had heard of the Scottish financier, enough to know he was extremely wealthy. But this house spoke more of devotion than money. "He must love her very much."

Jamie was not quick to respond, considering how to describe Patrick McCallum's love for Jordana. "Yes," he said simply, at last. "More than his life."

Thoughtfully, Brett considered the beauty Patrick McCallum had given his wife. "Then she's a fortunate woman."

But she must know how fortunate each time she sees this house."

"Jordana's never seen this house."

Brett's brows drew down in a skeptical frown. "Never?"

"Never. Jordana's blind, Brett."

Her gaze returned to the portrait. Skepticism turned to shock, shock to regret, regret to compassion. Regret for the man who would create such beauty in the name of love. Compassion for the woman who must know his love, yet could not see its expression.

"Such marvelous eyes," she said sadly.

"I know. Eyes like Jordana's shouldn't be blind, but that doesn't change the fact that she is. She has been since she was an infant and nothing can reverse it. Patrick moved heaven and earth trying." Jamie skimmed his fingertips over the patterned fabric covering his chair. "She likes the feel of things. Wood, cloth, the wind on her face, the sun on her skin. She imagines colors in the textures she feels.

"Patrick's love and his wealth can't give Jordana her sight. So he gives her a world like this. Above all, he gives himself."

Listening, hearing the hurt in his voice, Brett wondered if Jamie weren't a little in love with Jordana himself. The sudden contraction of her heart took her unaware, leaving her unsettled and struggling to deny it. How could she be covetous of what Jamie felt for another woman? Why would she when she wanted nothing more than friendship from him?

"Music," she heard herself saying. "If she sees through her other senses, Jordana must love your music."

"Mine," Jamie agreed. "And all others."

Brett couldn't keep from looking at the grand piano that occupied a place of obvious honor. In the classic room filled with treasures and artifacts and flowers, the eye was constantly drawn back to the piano. She ventured a certain guess. "Jordana loves all music, but especially yours."

Setting an untouched snifter of brandy aside, Jamie left his place to go to the piano. From a window seat beyond it, he took up a guitar. Strumming the badly tuned strings, he smiled ruefully. "Jordana's a musician, naturally she would love music, any music."

"She plays the guitar?"

"Excellently."

"The piano, too?"

"No." Jamie laid the guitar aside. "You must be tired. I'm sure you don't want to sit here talking of music, mine or Jordana's, when you're probably exhausted."

She hadn't realized until then that she really was exhausted. The frustration of her days at Grayson, the rigors of the charade she played with Jeb, coupled with the shock of finding Jamie on Eden, had brought her to the end of her stamina. "I suppose I am."

"You've had a difficult time of it, haven't you?" His voice was troubled. Troubled for her and about her and her plight.

Cradling her forehead in her palm, she massaged her temples with thumb and forefinger. After the incidents at the airport and outside her apartment, then later during what she'd considered her incarceration at Grayson, he'd been kind to her. But they were only intervals. Little pieces of time in the whole of her life. She was unaccustomed to anyone being troubled for her. She'd fought her own battles separately and alone for so many years she didn't know how to deal with his concern.

Tears stung her eyes and she blinked them away, assuring herself this was fatigue, only fatigue. "I've had difficult times before. I managed then, I will again."

Jamie saw the somber set of her face, the faded color of her cheeks, the glitter of tears she thought she'd hidden. "I know you have. I know you can. But you don't have to now, Brett. At least not alone." The look in his eyes was calm, but something secret and tender flickered in their midnight depths. "Not while I'm here."

Brett wasn't ready to deal with the look in his eyes, nor the tender promise in his words. She wasn't sure if she would ever be ready. Or if she understood.

"Why are you here, Jamie? You've finished with The Watch. You're retired, ready to begin a different sort of life." She was sitting on the edge of her seat, suddenly intense and unconsciously rejecting the comfort it afforded. "No matter what guilts you're determined to assume, this is really no longer any concern of yours, so why are you putting *your* life on hold?"

Jamie crossed the room, one step after another, as graceful as a lynx, as dangerous. In his dark clothing, jeans that clung

to thigh and hip, a soft knit shirt molding slender torso and heavy shoulders, there was little of the concert pianist in him, little of the gentle companion she'd missed.

As she watched him, wondering what he intended, she thought about what she was doing on a deserted barrier island in the Atlantic with a man she didn't truly know.

When he stopped, massive as he towered over her, she flinched. Not out of fear, but from some startling reaction that set her heart skipping and turned her mouth dry. He was handsome. Not pretty or refined, not genteel or urbane, but rough and fierce, with a rugged sophistication that had captivated and seduced audiences and friends. Blue collar, white collar, photojournalists alike.

But, she thought feverishly, she was immune to men, ruggedly attractive or not. In the past eight years, first struggling to prove herself in a field that was virtually a masculine province, then achieving success and a degree of contentment, she'd gained that assurance. She'd needed the immunity in her profession. She'd wanted it in her life.

Carson Sumner had been more than her husband, more than her mentor. He was wisdom and direction and the motivation for who and what she'd become. When he died in her arms he was more than twice her age and the love of her young life. The only love she ever wanted.

After Carson, she'd guarded her heart, carefully, completely. But in a way she couldn't explain, Jamie was dangerous—not to her, but for her.

Hands clasped tightly over the arms of her chair, she searched his face. The look that met hers was calm, regarding her thoughtfully. There was compassion beneath the danger, gentleness tempering the virile strength, and she was more frightened for the life she'd fought to build than she'd ever been.

"Why, Jamie?" she asked again, a litany in a voice husky with strain. "Why are you here?"

He smiled down at her, and only the sound of the surf could be heard through the open door. Then, gallantly, he leaned to take her hands and lift her from her chair to stand toe to toe and eye to eye with him.

The silver gray of her eyes darkened to pewter. A storm of confused emotions was gathering. He wanted to take her in his arms. He wanted to hold her until the storm passed. There was much he wanted to tell her, much he wanted to show her, but proud, brave woman that she was, she was dealing with enough for now.

Life had been brutal to her, he wouldn't add to her distress by moving too fast.

Contenting himself with the feel of her hands in his, he turned with her to climb the curving stairs. At the door of her room he risked a kiss to the back of her wrist. An old-fashioned courtliness. Comforting, unthreatening.

Brett caught her breath. Losing herself in the secrets of his dark eyes, her whirling thoughts played back a broken record. "You never told me why you're here."

"I'm here because you're here," he whispered as if sharing a public secret. He smiled, then, a lazy smile that took her breath again. "Good night, Brett Sumner. Sleep well."

The door to the room she knew was his had closed before she turned back to her own.

Five

When Jamie wound his way through shrubs cloistering the trail from the beach, Brett stood on the terrace outside her bedroom. Her face was raised to the late morning sun, a breeze tangled in her hair.

Captivated by this unexpected vision, he stopped beneath a palmetto, his fishing rod over his shoulder, a forgotten stringer of fish looped through his fingers. As he watched, she lifted her hands to her hair, laughing as the tousled mass threaded through her fingers.

Her laughter was sultry, sensual. As sensual as Brett in a nightshirt he had chosen for her stay. A creamy concoction of lawn and lace that skimmed her thighs. With her tumbled hair a sexy contrast to its simple design, she was bewitching.

From his place in the shadows he gave himself up to the pleasure of watching a woman waking to a new world without the specter of fear and danger hovering on her horizons. A woman unconsciously shedding rigid, self-imposed boundaries of another life. The change would be gradual but had already begun. He'd seen the magic of Eden before, in other people, in himself.

Witnessing her metamorphosis would be fascinating. A woman who was beautiful would be magnificent.

But as he watched her stretching and swaying, her body revealed by the subtle molding of soft lawn, it was difficult to comprehend that she could ever be more tempting. Tall and languidly graceful, with bare legs that seemed to go on forever and unbound breasts rising with each breath, she was innocent, sensual, the forever girl of youthful daydreams.

The power of his thought startled him. He was attracted to her from the start, feeling the stirrings a virile man would feel for a desirable woman. But he hadn't separated desire from guilt. He hadn't admitted one had nothing to do with the other. Yet he wanted Brett Sumner, and now he'd begun to think he wanted her forever.

Forever. The word sent him reeling, taking an involuntary step that drew her attention.

"Jamie!" Brett bent over the railing, her hair rippling over her shoulder like a curtain as she looked down at him.

"Good morning." He smiled up at her, his teeth a flash of white in his tanned face. "Did you sleep well?"

"I did." Then, as if she were surprised, "I really did."

"The island has that effect. Trouble belongs in another world."

Maybe it was the island, maybe the sun, or the sound of the surf, but Brett almost believed him. The anxieties that plagued her the night before seemed far removed from a morning in paradise.

She looked from Jamie to the naturally landscaped garden of beach daisies and cacti, and oleander heavy with its delicate blooms. Perfectly groomed paths wandered through palms and palmettos to the sea rising against the horizon. Jordana McCallum lived by her senses, everything she would love was here. Gifts from Patrick.

Now these gifts were hers to share for a while with Jamie. "Eden," she murmured, "where the world isn't real anymore. Patrick named his paradise well."

Jamie wanted to climb the terrace wall, take her in his arms and show her real paradise. He would. Soon. But for now he must keep her safe and bide his time. "Perhaps the world isn't real, but even in Eden there are mortal needs."

Brett had been celibate for eight years. She was a virtual innocent in sexual experience. But one did not work among men without learning to recognize lust or sexual contretemps. She'd seen the look in Jamie's eyes, but she hadn't expected the words.

At her strained look, Jamie grimaced. "Mortal, darlin'," he drawled. "Not masculine. How about breakfast?"

She was a second in regaining her composure. "Fish?"

"Ah-hh." He dragged out the sound as if he were considering. "I'm an avid angler." A hint of laughter turned to a grin. "But not that avid. I had in mind a more conventional meal."

"That's a relief." With a spark of humor, she asked, "Who cooks?"

"I do. As soon as you're ready."

"You're on." Brett spun from the rail, the hem of her shirt swinging about her lean thighs. "I warn you, I'm starving!"

Jamie dropped his napkin by his plate and slid back his chair. They were seated on the terrace by the kitchen. He still wore the faded shorts he'd worn on the beach. Only his shirt had been changed. Brett had dressed in khaki slacks and print shirt. Both crisp and new.

Sunlight dappled their table and the rustle of palmettos joined the rush of the sea for their music. Through it all Jamie regaled her with tales of the island's past, of pirates and treasure, and tall galleons skirting its shores. Spellbinding tales that left no time for the self-conscious worries of strangers. Now he leaned back in his seat, considering her. "You've found everything to your liking? Your room is comfortable and you have everything you need?"

Replete from the breakfast he'd made, relaxed by the engaging conversation and refreshed by a restful sleep, Brett couldn't think of anything she lacked. "If I didn't already agree this was Eden, I would now. I was so tense last night I didn't stop to realize how much trouble your agency had gone to for me. I didn't understand that it would mean new clothing and..." At a loss for words, she lifted her hands, fingers splayed in an expressive gesture. "And everything."

"You were listed as a traffic fatality. We couldn't take anything from your apartment. We couldn't risk the suspicions if something was missing, Brett."

"Who would know? I have no family. Carson's children wouldn't know if anything were missing, even a nonexistent body." She stopped abruptly, her hand going briefly to her mouth in renewed fear and anger. "The cartel! You think their contacts stateside will go through my things searching for clues about me."

She was right on every charge. None of Sumner's children had come forward when the story of her death had been planted in the paper. Friends were put off with a tale of distant relatives arranging interment in a faraway place. Her apartment was left untouched. He didn't try to dissemble. "That's what we think."

Brett was shocked as she understood what he was saying. "You want them to go into my home. You've set a trap!"

"They have to believe you're no threat."

"What you mean is, dead women don't pack bags."

He hesitated, but never wavered. "No, they don't."

Brett thought of her room beyond the terrace, and the clothing there. The perfect sort, the perfect size. The lingerie, the cosmetics, her fragrance, all new, all correct. As part of the deception, someone had to know her as well as she knew herself.

Not just someone. Jamie.

"You did this. You chose the clothing, the makeup. Even the medication I take occasionally for allergy." The easy companionship had fled, perhaps it had only been an illusion, anyway. Now she was taut and tense. The sunlight seemed cold and dim. "What else do you know? Have you left any part of my life as my own?"

"I'm sorry, Brett. Sorry you were drawn into this. Sorry you feel we've intruded in your life." He reached across the table to take her hand. When she recoiled, he felt the stab of regret. "For what it's worth, I know how you feel."

Brett had thrown down her napkin, leaving the table to pace. Now she turned on him. "Do you? Do you, indeed?"

"After a fashion, in one part of my life. I've lived under a microscope, with the press and the tabloids waiting for scraps

of gossip or scandal. Every move was held up for public scrutiny."

"You chose the life, expecting the intrusion. I didn't."

"That's true." He left the table to stand by her side, careful not to touch her. "Still, I understand and I'm sorry."

Brett folded her arms, her hands clutched at her sides. An unconsciously protective stance against invasion of the little space left her. "What else do you know? I want to hear it. All of it."

Jamie leaned against a column and began with an apologetic shrug. "I'm afraid it's pretty extensive. For starters, I know you were illegitimate, deserted first by your father, then your mother. Your maternal grandmother cared for you until her death. When you came to Atlanta you were only eighteen, with no marketable skills. I know you were nearly desperate when you captured Carson Sumner's attention. He photographed you, fell in love with you and married you. He was fifty-nine, you were three months shy nineteen."

Brett refused to look at him at first, but, gradually, as he spoke, she turned to him. Shock that he knew so much scored her face.

"It was a good marriage," Jamie continued. "You were his lost youth. He became your mentor, teaching you all he knew of photography. He was a master and you proved more than an apt pupil. For six years you shared everything while his children silently disapproved. At sixty-five, Carson suffered a stroke and died in your arms."

Brett did not speak, nor try to hide her tears.

"One minute you were the beloved wife and star pupil of a gifted, wealthy man. The next you were a pariah. In the words of his children, 'a callow opportunist who preyed on a senile old man.'"

"Carson was never senile," Brett snapped. "He was sharp, witty and younger than men half his age."

"From what I've learned, everyone knew that. Just as they knew you loved him. But none of that matters when a fortune's at stake. To keep from sullyng your marriage, to keep them from painting their father as something he wasn't, you backed away. Rejecting your inheritance and taking only the

skills he gave you, you carved a place for yourself in a demanding profession.

"From the day of Carson Sumner's death, you've fought your way to the top, never letting another man in your life. Now, thanks to the fiasco at the airport, your career is on hold, and there have been men of all sizes and shapes cluttering your life."

"That covers my life pretty well, but I'm sure there's more. Like what I ate on the plane, perhaps?"

"Or your shoe size," Jamie countered, ignoring her venom. "That the curl in your hair is natural and the perfume you wear is a blend Carson had made especially for you." Jamie took her elbow in his palm, turning her arm to expose the tender flesh at his fingertips. "Though you aren't sexually active, you wear these."

Encouraged that she hadn't pulled away from him, he stroked the tiny ripples barely beneath the skin. "Surgically implanted birth control, a prudent choice for a woman who risks capture and rape, and unwanted pregnancy with every assignment she takes."

Brett drew her arm from his grasp, the tears she'd shed for Carson swept away by brittle anger. "Have you left me nothing? Is my life common fodder for anyone in The Watch?"

Jamie backed away. He wanted to shield her from the ugliness of his profession, but she would take no comfort from him now. "No one but Simon knows as much. No one ever will."

"I should thank you for that little kindness?"

"You have nothing to thank me for."

"We agree on that, at least." Brett rubbed her arm where he'd touched her. "If you will excuse me, and if it's permitted, I'd like to take a walk on the beach."

She didn't wait for permission and was at the head of the staircase that led to the garden when he stopped her. "Stay on the beach, Brett, or the trail. The marsh can be dangerous for one who doesn't know it. If any traffic appears at sea, leave the beach at once, and come back here."

Her only move was a nod. "The beach or the trail."

Jamie waited for more, when there was nothing, he sighed heavily. The last place she wanted to be was here with him. "That's all, just be careful."

"It's too late for that, isn't it?" Brett didn't listen for an answer. Descending the stairs, she crossed the garden and hurried to the solitude of the forest and the beach.

Jamie stood watching long after she disappeared. After a while, wondering if her anger would ever die, he returned to the table to clear away the remnants of their meal.

Jamie spent the rest of the morning and the afternoon re-checking Patrick's surveillance system. He wasn't surprised when Brett didn't return for lunch. Breakfast had been late, and for a slender woman, she'd put away a surprising amount of food. He knew from first-hand reporting that it was her best meal since her injury. The doctors at Grayson had assured him it was not uncommon for patients with memory loss to suffer loss of appetite with it. A phenomena both physical and emotional.

It was that return of appetite that had kept him babbling over the table, hardly eating himself, as she nibbled and listened and nibbled some more. Before his tales were finished, she had eaten all he'd served her and an extra biscuit.

Jamie had chuckled as her eyes widened at the honeyed taste of the bread. He hadn't lied to her when he'd said he would cook, but one day soon he'd have to confess the biscuits were the caretaker's specialty, cooked in quantity and stored in the freezer.

Hattie Boone, Patrick's caretaker, claimed she was one-third white, one-third black, one-third bird, and one-third fish. When it was pointed out she was a third too much, Hattie always laughed, gestured at her enormous size, and assured the foolish one who counted that every inch too much was *all* woman.

Jamie laughed at his memory of Hattie, but the sound was hollow. Putting away a lantern he'd tested, he glanced at his watch. Four o'clock. Brett had been gone for hours. The wind was rising in fits and starts, and clouds gathered where the sea touched the sky.

His maintenance chores done and the busywork behind him, he had nothing to do but worry. "Yes, dammit," he snarled to the empty room, "I'm worried."

Had Brett become lost? Was she hurt? He wanted to give her the space she needed to come to terms with what The Watch had done to her life. But could he give her any more time? Had he waited too long?

A door banged in a gust of wind and Jamie hurried to shut it before the beveled glass shattered. As he passed the piano, he dragged a finger down the keys. Despite the heat and moist air, it was in perfect tune. Hattie Boone again. A woman of unexpected talents.

Long after the jarring notes faded, the wind still moaned about the eaves and through doors he hadn't closed. The air was heavy. Electric tension sparked. Storm warnings for the senses.

This was hurricane season. None had been predicted, but summer squalls could come out of nowhere. Quick, unpredictable, gone almost before they began, they could be violent and dangerous.

Jamie stepped onto the terrace. He scanned the sky, a blue expanse broken by small drifts of wind-driven clouds. Harbingers of the turbulence that hovered over the sea. There was time before the storm broke and the rains came, the danger now was lightning. That rogue bolt that streaks out of an innocent sky, homing in on the lone fisherman, a jogger, a child playing at the water's edge.

A beautiful woman lost in thought, tramping the wet sand.

He didn't close the doors behind him. He didn't think of beveled glass, or treasures at risk in the coming weather. He focused on Brett, sickened that he'd driven her into harm's way again.

The path he took to the beach was serpentine but easy, a broad, carefully groomed track with no jutting roots or writhing vines. As he ran he was grateful Patrick would tolerate no snare for a step without sight to guide it.

As if a hand turned a switch, the wind died. Palms stood stark and unmoving, sweetgrass on creeks and marsh were without ripple. The air was close, cloying. Sweat trickled down his face and body, soaking his clothing. His feet pounded the hard earth, his chest heaved.

When he broke free of the undergrowth, the shore was deserted. In an illusory sphere of land and sea, no birds sailed the

sky or trotted in pursuit of prey. The steady wash of surf over sugar sands was placid and oddly hushed. This little part of the world was a vacuum, created by the changing pressures.

Clouds still churned, piling higher over the sea. A monster storm hoarded fury to unleash on the shore.

Jamie wheeled around, looking left, then right, his eyes straining. Nothing. Not even a crab scuttling for shelter.

"Dammit! Brett, where are you?" he demanded in an undertone, as if by willing himself to find her, he could. His anger was mounting, at himself for waiting. At Brett for...for what? For hating the turmoil and intrusion in her life?

He wheeled around again, uncertain which direction he should take. And then he saw her crossing the shore from a small cabana. Head down, shoulders bowed, her hands deep in her pockets, she stood at the edge of the sea. Resisting a need to run, he went to meet her. An arms length from her, he stopped, waiting until she turned to him.

"I'm sorry." Two words, two voices. Two smiles, tentative, forgiving and asking forgiveness.

Because he came from a family of men who offered comfort and succor as shamelessly as they teased and fought, it was the most natural act in the world to take her in his arms. He only meant to hold her, to offer the little solace he could. But when she lifted her face to his, a need for more than his arms around her darkening her gaze, nothing on earth, neither the storm threatening at sea nor the tide lapping at their feet, could have kept him from kissing her.

Her lips were sweet, her breath on his cheek a caress. Thigh to thigh, hip to hip, soft breasts crushed against hard chest, her body was a perfect fit for his. When his hands slid to her hair, sending her hat tumbling to the sand, he caught the sable strands to keep her.

As she clung to him, he kissed her forehead, her eyelids, teasing his lips against the veil of her lashes. Bending he kissed the hollow beneath her ear, savoring the heat and the scent of her. Slowly, his lips burning a trail across her cheek, he found her lips again.

This time hunger and need throbbed in him. The sweetness was not enough, he wanted in. He wanted the taste of her, the

moist softness. He wanted the dark, hot passion she had guarded from any man but Carson Sumner.

"Dammit, Brett," he muttered, tugging back her head. Her gaze was slumberous, her cheeks flushed from the sun, the heat, the abrasion of his stubbled beard. Heavy-lidded and with her hair wild about her face, she looked like a woman awakening from a long sleep. A woman more desirable than any he'd ever known. "Don't shut me out." He shook her gently. "I won't hurt you. Not ever."

"I know. Even when I was ranting at you, I knew." She looked to the sea and sand behind him. "I've walked for hours, coming to terms with—" she shrugged, unable to put into words the magnitude of the chaos of her life "—with everything."

Sudden anger tightened her features, anger directed at herself, her naivete. "I was a fool, wasn't I? Believing I could plunder the troubles of the rest of the world, ripping away proud flesh, exposing suppurating wounds with my silly little photographs, then walk away unscathed to my own private sanctuary where nothing could ever touch me. Never penetrate this smug shell around me. Smug and selfish, and always unscathed," she said bitterly. "Even when I walked heart-deep in atrocity."

"Was Fate calling in her markers?" Her lips quirked in a grimace. "Teaching a lesson in compassion and humility by putting me in Mendoza's path?"

"Brett, don't." His hands were gentle at her shoulders as desire was tempered by her raw pain.

"Don't what?" She backed away from him. "Don't hold a mirror up to myself? Don't see myself as I really am?"

Her mirror was biased by guilt. What she saw was distorted. Brett Sumner had sealed off her unhealed wounds and lived in her own guarded world, but Jamie knew she was never selfish or smug. Her "silly little photographs," as she called them, were unforgettable proof of that. "Brett, please..."

An abrupt gesture silenced him. "Let me say this. I've spent hours recognizing the truth. For the first time in a long while I'm finally able to see beyond myself. Until now, I hadn't once considered the damage that will be done to so many lives if the cartel isn't stopped. I didn't think about the danger Jeb and

Mitch and Matthew had put themselves into for me. I never stopped to consider what this has done to you, all because the key to the puzzle is locked inside my mind.

"I sat for hours in the cabana, racking my brain. I walked miles. I screamed. I cursed. Then I prayed. But there's nothing." Unremitting agony was in the look she turned to him. "God help me, Jamie, I can't remember."

A woman's tears had always been a McLachlan weakness. The undoing of resolute, uncompromising men. They were nothing to this dry-eyed anguish that threatened to rip a beating heart from his chest.

His arms closed around her, drawing her to him. As if his body were a lightning rod for hers, he felt her utter weariness, and her despair. Every pain-filled emotion that racked her took its toll on him. She was hurting, shedding the armor that had shielded her from an unfair world. Feeling, as she hadn't in years.

As she clung to him, scarcely aware of what she did, he took her up in his arms, and walked with her through the threat of the storm to the cabana. The cabana, really a shanty constructed of posts and a thatch roof, meant only to offer rest to the sunburned and spent beachcomber, offered little respite from the rising tempest of the wind. But it was enough as he sat on a bare bench, cradling her in his arms, muttering ceaseless sense and nonsense. Words she should hear but wouldn't believe. A patch on a wound only her own strength could heal.

"It isn't your fault, love. None of it. You can't blame yourself for what's been done to you. You mustn't." Rocking with her to the rhythm of words interspersed between light kisses, he wondered if a butterfly shedding its chrysalis hurt as badly.

"I should remember," she insisted against his throat. Her voice was softer, calmer, the turmoil of lonely hours slipping to the back of her mind. Jamie was kind. Always kind, no matter how uncivil and ungrateful she'd been. It had been so long since anyone had been kind to her. So long since she'd been held. "I should remember." This time her conviction drifted away in a whisper as she sank deeper into the comfort of his rhythmic rocking. "I must."

"Shh." He stroked her hair and kissed her eyes closed. With a soft sigh she nestled against him. He knew she didn't sleep, but the total quiet, the unreserved calm was as healing.

She was vulnerable, a woman who had known far too little comfort, falling beneath its spell. He could make love to her. If he listened to his body, he could make love to her, and she wouldn't reject him. Not now. He was tempted, painfully tempted. Listening to his heart and his honor was the most difficult thing he'd ever done.

But he didn't want her like this. Hurt and confused, turning to him for comfort. When she came to him, he wanted a woman who was strong and confident. Who understood what she was doing. Who knew what she wanted. And what she wanted was Jamie McLachlan.

So, for now, he held her. And as her storm abated, others seethed and intensified. One at sea, the other in him. But for now, they were safe from the first. As for himself, it wouldn't be without effort, but he could wait until she came to him.

With an eye on the lowering clouds, and sheltering her from the wind, he delayed as long as he could. Rogue lightning became the lesser threat as the squall gathered speed and strength. The first raindrops were already scattering over the beach and pattering on the thatch when he knew he must rouse her. She lay still against him, her breathing so even he wondered if she slept, after all.

"Brett," he called quietly against her ear. "We have to go."

She roused so quickly he knew he'd been mistaken. She hadn't slept. Instead, like the new butterfly who must let its wings unfold before it can fly, she'd been regathering her composure and her strength. Pushing away from him, she stood, looking down at him not at the sea. "The storm?"

Jamie nodded. "We have to seek better shelter."

The storm was careening toward them, the atmosphere was charged. Standing, drawing her against him, he studied the sky. The clouds were lower, blacker, the air so hot it stifled. In it lay the acrid presence of the lightning he'd feared.

More than an hour had passed since he'd taken her in his arms, and time had run out. Trailing the back of his hand down her cheek, he warned her. "We're in for a race."

Brett nodded, feeling the brush of his skin against her own.

Jamie took her hand. "We should close the house." With its circling terraces, the island house was a house of doors. When Eden was inhabited. They were always open to the breezes from the sea, making them a part of the house. But the air was wild now, as if a banshee slept beneath it.

Palmetto fronds at Jamie's back began to clatter. One look over her shoulder and an urgent "Go!" from him was all Brett needed to set her into a swift, long-legged stride over the sand. She was a runner when she could be, and comfortable now with the terrain and the pace. Jamie ran as easily a few steps behind. The first drops were falling over the garden as they mounted the terrace steps.

A door banged on the opposite side of the house. Jamie went to attend to it and the rest of the first floor, while Brett climbed the stairs at a run to secure the upstairs. There were four bedrooms, but only the two in use had been opened.

She went first to her own room, closing and shuttering each of four massive doors. Down the hall at Jamie's room she hesitated, feeling a sense of intrusion. Perhaps he knew all there was to know of her, but that made it no easier to barge in. Giving herself a mental shake, she was reminded that neither Patrick nor Jordana would appreciate her reluctance if the alternative was water damage.

For that matter, she reasoned, neither would Jamie. She stepped inside. As if the devil chased her, she flew across the room, concentrating on the doors, but aware that a gun lay on the table by his bed. Keeping her head down, she tried not to see the scattering of pictures over the dresser. Some of men, some of children, some of women.

Chiding herself that the women in Jamie McLachlan's life were no concern of hers, she set to work sealing and shuttering these giant portals as she had her own. She was struggling with the last when Jamie's sun-browned hands brushed hers aside.

"There!" He finished with a flourish. "Not a minute too soon." With his head cocked, he listened as rain descended with all the wrath expected. This would be more than a summer squall.

With the windows shuttered, they were in near darkness. In the little light filtering through wide louvers, Jamie seemed more shape and shadow than substance. But the darkness lied.

Her body remembered the touch of his body, solid, hard, strong. Her fingertips knew the crispness of his hair and how it swirled as it grew low on his nape. Her lips knew the softness of his kiss. In the darkened bedroom, her memories were too exquisite to bear.

"I should be going." She backed toward the hall as she spoke.

"Why, Brett?" His voice from the gloom was a caress. "Why rush away? Because this is my bedroom? Because if I kissed you and held you here as I did on the beach—" he gestured toward his bed "—we both know we would have ended up there?"

She took another step. No quick response came to her.

"Because we would make love?" Jamie took each step she took, not closing the gap, but never letting it widen.

Brett was suddenly tired of futile pretense. "Yes," she admitted in a ragged whisper. "Yes!"

"Then you feel it, too. From the first moment there was this between us. This desire. Matthew would call it destiny and say the time was right. But if it hadn't been, if we'd never met again, I wouldn't have forgotten. A part of me would always have wondered."

Shaken by her own admission, uncertain if her knees would hold her, Brett stopped backing away. Jamie was so close she could see raindrops catching splintered light glittering in his hair. So close she could hear the rasp of his breath and see the rise and fall of his chest. So close she wanted to touch him and draw him closer.

"Would you have wondered, Brett? Could you have forgotten?"

"Yes. No!" She gasped for much needed air. "I mean..."

"I know." He quieted her with a touch at her cheek. "We've a lot to learn about each other, a lot to resolve. Casual affairs aren't your style and I didn't mean for this to happen so soon. But now that it has, it's for the best. Now we can deal with it...."

"I'm not an animal. My body might say one thing and my mind another, but I won't pressure you. I've not been a monk, nor have I been promiscuous. You've nothing to fear from me." He snapped on a lamp. When light flooded the room, he tilted her chin so that she might look into his face. "I give you

my word as a McLachlan. And when you come to me, it must be because you want me as much as I want you."

His promise took her by surprise, for in the slanting light he was more than the man she knew, more than the intense agent of The Black Watch. He was the cosmopolitan pianist, a rugged realist, a dreamer with a hint of devilish maverick. But in any psyche, with his looks and body, Jamie could fascinate and seduce any woman he wanted.

In a wave of jealousy, Brett considered the classical circuit's variation of groupies. Sophisticated and worldly women sexually attracted to dynamic and accomplished men. Yet Jamie told her he was not promiscuous and promised she had nothing to fear from him. An oblique pledge for her safety, her heart and her health.

He startled her from her musing as he took her hand. "I've meddled in your life, it's only fair you know about me." He led her with him to the photographs scattered over a dresser. "My family."

One by one he introduced them. Dare, the oldest brother, father figure of the parentless boys. Its strength and power. Ross, a pediatrician, the heart of the family. Its soul. Mac, an engineer. Jamie's fraternal twin with a family resemblance so strong they could be identical.

"We're stubborn and given to practical jokes, some of us are worse than others. Over the years, Ross and Mac stood back and watched the fireworks when I wanted one thing and Dare another. Particularly when I wanted to stay on the farm and work with the trees, and Dare fought for the piano."

"Then it's true, what was written before your first performance?" Brett had heard Jamie called a lumberjack. She'd read the sarcasm and the ridicule. Then she'd read the reviews.

"I was a lumberjack. I still work at it when I'm home."

"But Dare won the battle."

Jamie smiled. "Dare wins most battles."

They were an impressive family, attractive and engaging in their striking resemblance. Brett longed to meet them with a camera in her hand. *Brothers*. The photograph would be called simply that. And she would show the love and respect she heard in Jamie's voice when he spoke of them.

"Now the pretty part of my family." With Dare, there was Jacinda, artist and teacher. With Ross, the glamorous Antonia, actress and author. With Mac, Jennifer, physician and psychologist.

"Attractive *and* accomplished," Brett murmured.

"Best of all, they all love each other."

"It shows." Returning a photograph to its place, Brett turned her attention to the last group. "These are your nieces and nephews?"

"Plus one on the way for Mac and Jennifer." Tyler was first, loved no less because he was adopted. A handsome teen pushing into manhood, heir to the fortune of his natural father. A second set of twins, Amy and Paul, an astonishing blend of Dare and Jacinda. And tiny, year-old Orelia, a Down syndrome baby for Ross and Antonia, and fiercely loved.

"I wouldn't have wished this for her." Jamie set the baby's picture aside. "But she's too beautiful to regret."

Brett heard the pride and though he'd told her nothing of himself, he'd told her everything. Jamie was his family. When he spoke of them, he spoke of himself.

"Dragging these around is a habit Mac and I formed when we were kids in college. We've led nomadic lives and it helped to take our family with us. Now I won't have to. By the time the new baby comes, I'll be home for good. Enough history," he declared abruptly. "I think we should do something about dinner."

"You're cooking again?"

"After a fashion." He went with her to the door of her room. "I'll meet you downstairs in half an hour."

With a kiss on her forehead, whistling as he went, he returned to his own room.

Dinner was a surprise. Hot dogs with chili that dripped from buns in thick droplets too good not to retrieve. Fries with the skin darkening their edges, and all of it washed down with a concoction of juices. One sip and Brett was sure she'd truly found paradise. "This isn't the sort of meal one expects of a suave concert pianist."

"Suave, huh? How about a lumberjack?"

"Maybe. I'd like your secret for this juice."

"For that I'll have to introduce you to Hattie Boone."

"Someone lives on the island?"

"Not a soul."

"Then who's Hattie Boone?"

"A rare experience." Sliding back his chair, he stood. "But that's tomorrow. Next on the agenda for the evening is this." He touched her lips with his. A kiss as sweet as it was quick. "And the dishes. Tonight, sweetheart, they're all yours."

Before she recovered, he strolled from the kitchen.

Her chore was finished when the music began. Jamie's music, drawing her to him. Slipping into a chair, she listened, seduced by music as passionate as the storm, as gentle as his kiss. He was all men at the piano—gifted musician, rugged realist, daring maverick. Dreamer.

As his fingers moved over the keys, she knew they would be as skillful on a woman's body. As daring, as tender. The storm and the night wore on, drifting in the darkness, with Jamie's melodies surrounding her. For the first time in a long, long while, Brett wondered if making love would be as beautiful.

Six

If Brett wasn't prepared for the conclusion of their stormy evening—with Jamie's chaste little kiss and a virtual pat on the head—she certainly wasn't ready for the morning and Hattie Boone. But no one could have prepared her for the morning. And for Hattie Boone? Never.

She woke with the feeling she wasn't alone. Lying with the coverlet she'd kicked aside during the night securely tucked now beneath her chin, and with the scent of jasmine tea drifting from a pot by her bed, Brett knew she was definitely not alone.

Opening one eye, she saw light flooding through doors that had been shuttered against the rain the night before. Then she saw her visitor, perched on the foot of her bed, glaring at her through dark eyes that bulged from a hairy face.

"Oh-hh!" Her scream died as she scrambled to her knees, the coverlet clutched against her breasts. If she was frightened, her visitor was petrified. He leapt from the bed and scurried up a wall hanging, swinging as he chattered at her.

A monkey! Her visitor was a monkey no bigger than a cat.

"You scared me out of my wits," she managed when she found her voice. The coverlet clutched in a death grip, Brett studied the animal. It was a frail little thing, with unblinking

eyes dominating its face. Someone had dressed it in a tiny red shirt and short pants.

"Where did you come from?" As she spoke, she slid toward the edge of the bed, and succeeded in setting it screeching and climbing farther up the tapestry that was not exactly a bauble.

"All right," she placated with an eye for damage it might've done. "I won't move if it disturbs you." Looking to the terrace, she discovered it was deserted. But the monkey must have an owner somewhere. The person responsible for opening the shutters and doors and tucking the cover under her chin?

The animal showed signs of quieting and Brett tried again to leave her bed. A ululant cry sent her scrambling back. Frustrated, she glared at it. "Look, fellow, I'm back where you want me. Now would you stop? This isn't good for your throat or my ears."

Leaning against the bleached wood of the bed, she muttered, "I don't believe this! Trapped in a bed, trying to reason with an ape."

The monkey's cries faded, the tapestry stopped swaying. Brett sighed. "Thank you."

The monkey only stared without blinking.

Brett wondered where Jamie could be. Surely he'd heard the ruckus, he should have heard it *long* ago. Suspicion sparked. Was the creature a McLachlan practical joke? Was there any other answer?

Sitting stiffly in the bed, she planned an escape that would least damage the tapestry. Then she would deal with Jamie. "I'll kill him," she promised. "As soon as I find him, I'll kill him."

"And who would a pretty lady like you be killing?"

An astonishingly beautiful woman as big as a mountain, stood in the doorway. Her black hair was slicked back from an unlined face. Kohl rimmed her slanting eyes and scarlet colored her full lips. Her dress was of batik, draped sarong fashion over statuesque anatomy. Monstrous earrings of bone and feather and blood rubies brushed broad, bare shoulders. A black satin chord circled her neck. A filigree ball suspended

from it tumbled over her breasts and deep cleavage. Every move drew from it a resonant chime.

Her ringless hands were large, with nails like rapiers painted to match her lips. She should have carried a scepter, something primitive and exotic. Instead she held a tray and a vase of oleander and fern.

She was a figment out of a jungle movie, *Queen of the Amazon*, with a little *South Pacific* thrown in. Brett was half expecting her to break into song when she turned on the monkey, instead.

"Lucifer!" The name was a roar befitting royalty. "What are you doing there? You know better."

"I frightened him." Brett was certain this was Hattie Boone.

"Frighten Lucifer? Ha!" The woman set down her burdens to extricate the animal from his perch. Though she'd scolded, she handled him gently. "He was showing off. Lucifer isn't frightened of the devil himself. In fact, I suspect he is the devil. Hence, his name."

As she plucked Lucifer from the tapestry, he scurried up her arm to her shoulder, settling there like a scrawny vulture. The queen didn't seem to mind as she bowed gravely and made a needless introduction. "My name is Hattie Boone. This creature is Lucifer, given to me by my grandchildren to see to my torment in their absence."

"How do you do, Hattie?" Brett stopped short of introducing herself. Should this woman know who she was?

"You're Brett Sumner," Hattie supplied. "You're in trouble, and Jamie brought you here to keep you safe."

"You know?"

"Some." The tall woman smoothed the covers and tucked a second pillow behind Brett's head. That done to her satisfaction, if not Brett's, she set the tray in Brett's lap. Next she poured a cup of tea. "Not to worry," she said cheerfully. "I know just enough not to get either of us into trouble."

Brett ventured to slip a word in. "Who, uh..."

"Who the hell am I?" Hattie finished for her again. A laugh erupted as she put her hands on her hips. "I'm a third black, a third white, a third fish, and a third bird, and every third all woman." She grinned, showing square, white teeth. "I'm Eden's caretaker."

Hattie drew up a chair and squeezed into it. "Eat, child. You need meat on your bones and strength in your limbs if you're going to mate the handsome scalawag who's watching over you."

"Mate!" Tea sloshed over the rim of Brett's cup.

Hattie didn't seem concerned. Rolling great, black eyes, she heaved her shoulders to the accompaniment of the caroling ball tumbling over her bosom. "If only I were thirty years younger." With a sigh, she shook her head and set the bones in her earrings clacking, and Brett decided this outlandish woman enjoyed being a walking symphony.

"Well, maybe twenty," Hattie amended. She didn't notice Brett's silence for she was quite accustomed to talking while others listened. "But I'm not and there's no need crying over lost feathers. So, the least I can do is see to it that the woman he gets is an armful."

Lost feathers? Brett wondered at the metaphor, but only for a moment. With this woman a moment was all she had. "Hattie." She set her tea aside, choosing the safer course of ignoring the bizarre presumption. "I'm not accustomed to breakfast in bed."

"Not to worry, you'll get the hang of it." Hattie didn't blink when Lucifer clambered over her breasts to her other shoulder.

"I, uh, I really can't. Perhaps Jamie would..."

"Would like breakfast in bed?" Hattie was as proficient at completing sentences as she was at monologues. "Lord amercy! He'd take a horsewhip to me, or put wiggly things down my back, if I even suggested it. Which I wouldn't, for a manly man would lie abed for only two things. Sleep and love!" Her voice boomed. "That's all that keeps a good man in bed. And sleep's incidental."

Brett made no comment. The woman hadn't finished.

"I knew!" Hattie proclaimed. "When the launch dropped me off and I saw Jamie fishing, I knew something was wrong."

That drew a reaction from Brett. Bolting upright, she forgot the tray. Hattie saved it from upending on the bed.

"There's something wrong with Jamie?" On her knees, hands clasped, Brett wasn't aware that her shirt slipped from

one shoulder, or that her hair fell about her face in a black cloud. She had no idea how made for love her lithe body was.

Neither the image nor the latent sensuality were lost on Hattie. "Of course there's something wrong, or he'd be in bed with you, not on the beach." She glided to a table. Setting the tray on it, she busied herself with the oleander and hid a smile. Brett's reaction was the one she wanted. When she turned around, the grin was gone. "I thought it might be you were just purely pug ugly, or something."

"Or something," Brett said faintly.

"But not to worry. When I saw you sleeping like a princess, I knew it wasn't that. You might be a tad skinny." Her gaze dropped to the swell of Brett's breasts visible beneath the shirt.

Brett's own gaze followed, then skittered away, mortified by the woman's ramblings. If she was thin, it wasn't there. Except, she admitted wryly, by Hattie's criteria.

Hattie's gaze swept over her again, concealing her approval. "Even with that impoverishment, you're not ugly."

"Thank you," Brett managed. "I think."

"You're most welcome."

Hattie was as majestically adept at hearing only what she wanted to hear as she was at monologues. How could anyone be angry with one so blithely assured and unaware? Brett fought back unexpected laughter. "So, just in case Jamie's down on the beach instead of in my bed because I'm too skinny, you decided to fatten me up."

"A pound or two would work wonders. I set Lucifer to send up the alarm if you woke, then marched myself to the kitchen."

"Send up an alarm? But he seemed so frightened."

"Because he clambered up Patrick McCallum's prized highland tapestry? Ha! He knows better, but he was so taken with you, he'd rather show off than behave."

"Taken with me? How on earth would you know that?"

"Because he told me, how else?"

"Of course, how stupid of me." Brett wondered if this were Wonderland rather than Eden.

"He's the devil incarnate, but he is a good watchdog."

Wonderland! This had to be Wonderland, and Brett Sumner had suddenly become Alice. "I do appreciate your concern but..."

"You aren't going to tell me you don't want Jamie McLachlan! Any unattached woman in her right mind would want him. And, to his everlasting vexation, some not so unattached."

"This isn't about wanting or not wanting. It isn't personal at all. Circumstances threw us together then brought us here." The same circumstances that drew them to each other on the beach.

"Circumstances," Hattie mimicked. "If you expect me to believe that, you'd better explain why he insisted that you come to the island. Maybe you can explain why he delayed his retirement to be here with you. Or why he moved heaven and earth to see that you had everything you needed here? Why, Brett Sumner?"

Brett had no answer, but Hattie didn't wait for one.

"I've known Jamie since he was in college. He spent a part of a lot of summers here. Later he rested here between concerts when there wasn't time to go home. He comes from a close family, and each of his brothers has found his woman. Jamie's wanted the same for himself. Yet he's remained a solitary man." Hattie paused for breath, her black gaze held Brett. "Solitary! Until you. Now, explain that!"

Brett had forgotten Lucifer until he stopped his grooming to add his stare to Hattie's. Now two pair of eyes seemed to accuse her. But of what? "This isn't what you think. Just believe me and try to understand, guilt and honor can masquerade as a lot of things." Honor, that had him backing away when other men would not.

The sleek head shook, with its attendant sound. "You're asking me to believe that neither of you finds the other attractive?"

"I'm not blind and I'm not immune to Jamie's magnetism. And, as you reminded me, this is Jiden." Brett's gaze drifted to the glittering paradise, remembering Jamie, handsome and rugged and gentle in the storm. There was a melancholy in the look she returned to Hattie. "But when this is resolved, no matter what happens here, it won't change anything."

For once Hattie Boone was speechless. Even her jewelry was silent. She had no argument for the sadness she heard.

In the reprieve, as the sun grew stronger with each passing moment, Brett reflected on the madness of her morning. A monkey, an exotic woman and conversation far too personal between strangers. Where else but in Eden?

"Hattie." Brett looked into ageless eyes. "I had the perfect marriage. When my husband died I knew I would never love again."

"It isn't written in some great book of rules that we can only love once, foolish child."

"It is for me."

Hattie shook her head so fiercely Lucifer scurried from the room. "I would laugh at your rubbish, but I can see you believe this."

Brett was tired of the conversation. She wanted to escape into the sunlight and not think about how lonely her life had been. "I do." There was weary resignation in her tone. "I believe."

"Good morning, ladies." Jamie stood in the terrace door, gilded by the sun, more attractive than mere man should be, and perfectly at ease with Lucifer hanging from the pocket of his jeans. An affectionate smile touched Hattie, softening as it moved to Brett. "I see you've met."

As Brett looked at him, the day took a turn for the better.

The day was bright, fresh washed. Limbs beaten down by the storm, thrived now in the sun. Leaves, tiny or swordlike, and flowers alike reached for the light. Their colors were richer, darker and quite handsome dressed in the jeweled glitter of lingering moisture.

But not as handsome as the man who walked by Brett's side. Stealing a glance as he matched his pace to hers, she pondered the many faces of Jamie McLachlan. Each time she was with him she encountered some new facet of his personality. And each time she was with him, in some odd and indirect way, her life took a turn for the better.

As yesterday at the shore, when she'd taken an honest, pain-filled look at herself and her life. When she'd seen the empty self-centeredness of it, the abject loneliness, he'd put aside his desire and cooled his passion to console her.

When there was trouble or violence, in the end Jamie brought her solace. Brett wondered, as they walked side by side, if it would always be so.

When he'd snatched her from Hattie's killing-with-kindness clutches, he'd been pleasant and low-key, but with mischief dancing beneath the surface. After a bantering conversation with Hattie, and a pat for Lucifer, he'd wanted to spirit Brett away. He had a surprise for her. One quite different from the caretaker and the monkey.

Only her insistence that she must have at least five minutes to brush her teeth and dress kept him from dragging her on this secretive journey barefoot and in her nightshirt. With little patience, he'd stalked and paced while she took an extra minute or two to splash water on her face and run a comb through her hair. And now, as they meandered through the garden, he seemed to be in no hurry at all.

Brett was so wrapped up in her thoughts of this man, this enigma, she was startled when he took her arm.

"Sorry." He took his hand from her. A frown tempered the mischief. "We seem to do a lot of that."

"Apologizing, you mean? We do, more than a lot."

Jamie stopped on the path, waiting until Brett stopped and turned back, too. He held her gaze deliberately. "Do you hate this careful tiptoeing around each other as much as I do?"

Her brows fluttered in a tiny frown, but so quickly it was gone in a heartbeat. A hint of color washed over her cheeks. The disquiet would be an oblique admission of her intense awareness of Jamie and of what was happening between them. "Yes," she said after a long hesitation. Her voice was hoarse with the strain of another step into the living, feeling world. "I do."

The butterfly's wings were still unfolding, but every small admission was progress. She would fly, soon, free of past hurts, open to the world and to him.

"For every step we take forward, we take another backward. We dance around each other like nervous strangers, avoiding a truth that can't be avoided much longer, Brett."

When she would have offered evasions, he stopped them with a shake of his head. He'd seen the sudden leap of apprehension in her and cursed himself for it. He'd schooled himself

from the first to be patient, to wait until she was ready to admit the attraction between them. Time and again he'd drawn back when he'd wanted to hold her.

Perhaps the kiss on the beach had been an omen that their time together was coming. Soon.

As desire intensified, he had to be more patient than he'd ever been. One wrong move, too soon or too urgent, and the dreams of a lifetime would lie in dust at his feet.

In her profession, she was brave, confident and innovative, never refusing a challenge. In matters of the heart, she was an innocent, as skittish as a wild colt. Taming her, suspending her careful logic long enough to teach her to love and trust and to accept it in return, would be his challenge.

The steps she'd taken weren't enough. He must be patient. When his body ached with its repercussion, he must remember the alternative would be losing Brett.

He would not lose her.

Steeling himself against his own needs, he looked into her eyes. Beautiful eyes filled with the confusion and question he'd brought into an ordered life.

Patience, damnable, eternal patience! He reminded himself in bittersweet frustration its reward would be paradise.

Brushing a curl from her face, he smoothed it over her shoulder. Her hair was down, a rare and enchanting sight that made her seem more vulnerable, in need of safekeeping. From him, from herself.

She needed an escape, an interlude of peace, and he knew a place. Letting his hand fall from her shoulder, he gathered her fingers in his and turned from the path they'd taken. "Come."

Bewildered by his mood and this change of direction, Brett held back. "But your surprise!"

Jamie hesitated, keeping her fingers twined with his. "There's time for it later. The day has just begun and I've discovered there are other things I'd like to show you."

Brett stared at him mutely, wondering what she should expect next from this strong and stable man who was suddenly as changeable as quicksilver.

"Come with me," he said, and with her hand still securely clasped in his, they ventured deeper into the garden. Walking the sandy path, he led her past twisted limbs and fallen trees.

Dodging beneath low-hanging Spanish moss and tangling vines, he held them back for her.

Brett stepped carefully where he stepped, grateful she'd insisted on time to change into walking shorts, a loose, cotton shirt and sneakers. A nightshirt with nothing beneath it would hardly be de rigueur for a tramp through the junglelike vegetation.

They were moving toward the sea, and with each step the trail and the garden grew wilder. Then, abruptly, their way was blocked by an impenetrable wall of undergrowth. Jamie hesitated only a moment, then the wall was moving. Brett realized the wall was a fence and he'd opened the gate. Before she could voice her surprise, he was leading her through it into a small clearing, a grotto of green bordered on one side by the sea and above by the sky.

Jamie didn't speak as he led her to a small bench. Sitting with her, he waited as she looked around in delight. He watched as she took in the peaceful ambience embellished by fern and ivy and a bank of roses. In the midst of them, a child, a young girl sculptured in stone, offered a treasure from the sea to a little boy.

"This is Jordana's favorite place," he told her at last, his voice quiet. "The garden is old. No one knows exactly how old. All that's certain is that Jeremiah Brody, a descendant of the original owner of the island, made it for his children. A young girl and little boy who were lost at sea. When Patrick bought the island, he and Jordana discovered the garden and beyond a minimal amount of restorative work, decided to leave this as it is."

"A sorrowful place."

"No," Jamie disagreed. "Losing his children was a tragedy, but Jordana's convinced Brody never intended it as a place of mourning. In fact, she's certain it was the opposite. She's convinced that if one listens, he or she can hear the laughter of children in the sound of the sea and the wind."

"In her words, 'where there's laughter there must be peace and truth and no one can be sad or frightened.'"

He took back her hand, holding it in both of his. "I wish the garden could work the same magic for you. I wish you could put the tragedy and sorrow of your life behind you and that you

could conquer your fear of letting yourself feel. You've made a beginning, but there's so much more. Don't be afraid, Brett. Not of me, nor of what I want."

Brett stared down at their joined hands. She wanted to ask him what it was he wanted. One minute she was certain she knew, the next she was reeling and lost, without a clue.

No, she brought herself up short. That wasn't true, she always knew. Jamie might change, but never the desire she saw in his eyes.

But how did she deal with that desire, and with herself? After Carson Sumner, this part of her life had ceased to exist. It was the way she wanted her life to be. And for a long while this carefully guarded existence was enough. Until Jamie, who drew from her an unexpected wealth of emotion, each new and exquisite and frightening.

"Jamie." Brett shook her head to clear it.

"Shh." He knew she'd taken a giant step, but there were even greater steps to take. She would need more time. "No, sweetheart, not yet. Let it go for now." He drew her into his arms, holding her against his chest. "This day is too perfect to spoil. Close your eyes." His lips moved against her temple, his breath was a soft rush against her skin. "Don't think of what brought you to the island, or what's between us. Listen to the peace Jordana hears. Just listen."

Slowly, as if she were mesmerized, Brett obeyed, shuttering out the world as she had the storm the night before. Secure in his embrace, with the sun to soothe her, she sat, thinking that without sight the world should be lackluster. Instead she discovered a new dimension where other senses were keener.

Where there were secret sounds beneath the drifting wind and rushing tide. Sounds she'd never truly heard—the cry of a gull, the whirl of a wing. The beat of her heart and Jamie's.

Where scents old and new blended together—the rain-soaked earth, the sea, the roses. Evergreen and Jamie. A beguiling perfume.

Where there was no touch but Jamie's. No taste but his kiss on her lips. Jamie. Always Jamie. As she fell beneath the magic of this special place, only Jamie.

In this new world of exquisite sensations and illusion, the sweetest sound Brett heard was not the laughter of children, but

music. Music as Jamie had played it last night, shutting out the storm. Music too perfect for words. So perfect that when it had ended, it had seemed right that he should come to her, a broad, virile figure moving through the shadows, his step slow and measured, his chiseled features half-hidden. Then nothing, neither fear nor heartache, would have kept her from putting her hand in his to go silently as he led her to her bedroom. It had seemed right that she should go into his arms as he held her, murmuring again an apology for what he'd done to her life.

Even the kiss he'd brushed over her forehead had seemed as it should be. Everything seemed as it should, until, with regret etched on his face, he'd moved away.

The perfect evening shattered. Then she was lost and alone in her room. She hadn't seen its loveliness as she wandered from shuttered door to shuttered door, nor felt the tranquillity when she realized the storm had passed. Not even a long soak in the bath had consoled her. Nor had the bed, as she lay sleepless, wondering what it was she wanted.

She'd tossed and writhed, thinking she would not sleep. And she hadn't until the darkest hour of the night.

Then she woke beneath Lucifer's stare—

"A penny."

Brett opened her eyes. "For my thoughts?"

"For your dreams."

"Only a penny?"

"A pirate's doubloon instead? A rose? A kiss?" He'd only meant to tease, but with the last, his intentions went awry.

Brett was silent. Only her breasts rose with each breath, their softness brushing against the hard wall of his chest. Her gray gaze was solemn as she regarded him. Here in the garden of laughing children she saw that he hadn't changed. His quick-silver moods were only a match for hers.

He wasn't many men, but one. A heady mix of rugged masculinity and sophisticated charm drawn from a youth of labor, a public life as an artist, and a dark and secret life in The Black Watch. He was a mystery. A rogue. Brother and friend. A man alone.

He was Jamie. One man. Gentle, caring. The man she could give her heart and her body to in a paradise called Eden.

He still watched her, unable to interpret expression after expression as they flickered across her face. Troubled by her silence, he felt the tension winding tighter in him. Waiting for her answer, he questioned how much more he could take. How much in the name of patience could he endure?

Her perfume drifted on the breeze, mingling with the scent of sea and roses. It enveloped him, became a part of him, setting his body into heated response.

How long? Dear heaven, how long could he wait for her?

"How much for your dreams, lovely Brett?" he heard himself say hoarsely. "The pirate's coin? A rose?"

Her palm cupping over his lips stopped his words. Her touch was as delicate as her fragrance. Arousing. Driving desire to a new dimension. He heard his own breath rasping in his chest and felt the heat of it pouring over her skin.

"A kiss," she whispered, the sound of it, too, was like her scent, enveloping him, arousing.

Madness. The utter delicious madness he'd longed for.

Her hand curled around the nape of his neck, her fingers threading through his hair. With the slightest pressure, she drew him down to her. "A kiss," she whispered against his lips. "For my dreams."

In a fleeting glimpse he saw the sun rippling in her hair, catching on her lashes. A moment before that dark veil drifted to her cheeks, he saw her eyes were shadowed silver. Her breasts were crushed against his chest, the thin cotton of her shirt and his forgotten in the heat of his desire melding with hers.

Then there was only Brett's lips moving over his. Brett's mouth opening for him.

She shivered against him. It had been so long since she'd wanted a man's kiss. So long since she'd felt this blazing need. Need she'd thought she'd never feel, or ever want. The shock of it was overpowering. If she hadn't been sitting, she would have fallen to her knees. If Jamie hadn't been holding her, she would have lost all sense of time and place.

But Jamie was holding her. His mouth crushed hers, his tongue caressed. His hand moved over her back, drawing her hard against him. He ran a hand down her side, the trail of his fingers brushing the soft swell of her breast, teasing her. Dear heaven, teasing her!

Brett sighed against his mouth and, burrowing her fingers in his hair, tugged down and down, willing him to understand from the demand of her kiss her need for more than this light touch at her breast. Her life had been a prison, rigid, ruled by logic and loneliness. With a kiss, Jamie had torn the bars away. With a caress, he'd drawn her into an inferno of passion.

There were no rules, no logic, no loneliness. Not so long as Jamie held her.

Not so long as they were in Eden.

Jamie drew away, his arm cradling her against him, his free hand tracing the line of her jaw. Her gaze as it held his was dark, smoldering. Her lips were swollen from his kiss. There was desire trembling in her, as new as this day, as true and unsullied as the rainwashed world. He wanted her here and now, in this special place. He wanted to lose himself in her and forget that danger threatened.

He wanted to make love to her as she'd never been made love to before. Until she forgot any man but him.

Soon, he promised himself. But not yet. Not in frenzied, unreasoning lust, but passion and desire. Strong, true, a wild and gentle madness that would endure.

His hand was unsteady when he put her from him. At her stunned look, his smile grew rueful. She was no more surprised that he was doing this than he. He'd likened her to a wild colt, and one so uncertain wouldn't be truly tamed by the first touch of a man's hand.

Patience. It would be the death of him. "I think it's time for the surprise I'd planned for you."

"But—" Her cheeks flushed as she looked away.

"It isn't that I don't want what you want. I do. You've known for a long time that I do." He had to touch her, and settled for tangling his fingers in her hair and drawing her to him for a kiss at her temple. "God knows, I do! But fires that burn too hot too soon, burn themselves into nothing. I don't want that for you. I don't want it for me."

He was babbling nonsense, the first thing that came to mind, but Brett nodded as if she understood. Sighing, he drew her to her feet. "This has been a day of surprises. Now it's time for one more."

At the garden gate, Brett hesitated and looked back. The path, almost obscured by underbrush and thorny thickets and nearly impassable even to the sighted, bore little or no resemblance to the perfectly groomed paths that traversed most of the island. "The way here is so wild, how can Jordana manage alone?"

"She doesn't. She's never wanted to. When she comes, one of her three sons or Patrick comes with her. For Jordana, this is a place to be shared with one who's loved."

Jamie opened the gate and pulled her from this secret garden. As she pondered the meaning of his quiet reply, he led her away.

Brett stood in the center of a small room, marveling at the state-of-the-art equipment gathered there. "It's perfect! Everything I need." She turned to Jamie, who lounged against the door of the small, one-room building, smiling at her pleasure. "You did this. This is what Hattie meant when she said you moved heaven and earth to see to it I had everything I would want or need."

"You're a photographer. A photographer needs a dark-room."

He shrugged aside his thoughtfulness, but Brett knew the effort he'd made. She knew why. She'd known even when she'd been angry with him for disrupting her life. What he'd done—the prying, the clothes, the equipment, even backing away today in the garden—had been for her.

From the beginning, everything had been for her.

She stretched out her hand. When he moved to take it, she said the only thing she could. "Thank you, Jamie McLachlan. For this, and for my life."

Seven

"Blast!"

Brett tossed aside a sheaf of photos. Stark, sad faces stared back at her from the floor. Had she caught their spirit? She couldn't judge. One of her greatest strengths was her ability to divorce herself from her work and evaluate with the critical eye of an uninvolved stranger. Now she was at an impass.

Jamie's efforts, making it possible to continue her work on the island, had been a waste. She couldn't concentrate.

Hattie had questioned why anyone of sound mind would want to spend hour upon hour in a darkroom rather than in the sun with a sexy man. Brett was beginning to question it herself.

"Particularly when the result is this." Gathering up the photographs, she stacked them in a folder. Part of her knew her rejection of them had more to do with her mood than with their quality. A part refused to face it.

She'd been on the island three weeks. Beyond developing the film she'd shot in South America, she'd accomplished nothing. There was certainly no dearth of scenes to shoot. Sunrises were magnificent, sunsets magical. In her walks she'd discov-

ered picturesque culs-de-sac that should have her lusting for her cameras.

The island was rich in history, with family graveyards, the ruins of houses and a crumbling battery used in the Civil War. A book of photographs with accompanying text should have been exploding in her mind. Instead she was sitting in her perfectly equipped darkroom, dissatisfied and alone.

"It makes no sense." She stripped off her protective clothing and put the room in order. If her work was good, her mood wouldn't let her see and appreciate it. Brett stepped onto the lanai that surrounded the small cottage. The day was radiant and warm after the cool darkness. She'd worn a halter made of bandannas with denim cutoffs to work. Now the heat and light felt good on her skin.

The light was what she needed, and a walk to exorcise the restlessness that plagued her. But she couldn't go to the shore without the customary clearance from Jamie.

In her restless weeks she'd learned *The Dancer* and its crew were constantly cruising the area. Under the pretext of deep-sea fishing, Jeb and Mitch and Matthew, along with Alexis Charles, her stand-in in a dark wig, kept close watch on passing sea traffic. She understood now that Jamie's morning fishing expeditions were part of that same surveillance, with radio contact from ship to shore made at regular intervals. Until the all clear for the day had been given, she mustn't be seen on shore.

She had not seen Jamie since another of their carefully polite dinners the night before. On the days of Hattie's twice weekly journey to the island, his chores began before Brett could escape the caretaker's tenacious concern. The golden giantess still thought she could resolve the tension that brewed beneath the surface with mountains of food and cheerfully hedonistic monologues. Along with being a bona fide character, Hattie was an actress and her own best audience. Understanding that made escaping no easier.

When she had escaped, her time in the darkroom proved futile.

Scuffing the toes of her sneakers in uneven sand, Brett realized in her preoccupation she'd taken the path to Jeremiah Brody's garden by the sea. At the gate, she paused. This was

her first visit since Jamie had shown her this special place. She was reluctant to enter and didn't know why.

"Ridiculous," she grumbled. To prove how ridiculous, she opened the latch and stepped in. The garden was as she remembered, a place where time did not matter. The girl still offered a seashell, the little boy waited. Roses bloomed, ferns nestled beneath the trees, and sunlight still dappled the ground.

Sitting on the lone bench, Brett sighed and closed her eyes. Her deep breath was filled by the scent of the sea and the perfume of flowers. A sultry breeze stirred, teasing tendrils of sable hair that had fallen from her hastily pinned topknot. Stirring in silky wisps, they brushed her bare shoulders. Brett shivered but didn't open her eyes. She drew another deep breath and listened to the muted tide. She could almost believe she heard the tumbling of shells as the surf broke over the sand.

Through it all, she heard the sound of music. Jamie's music drifting through her mind over and over, making her heart and body ache. Consigning her mind to a barren limbo, where nothing was alive or vibrant but Jamie.

No matter where she was, or what she did, her thoughts turned to him. But never so strongly. He'd kissed her on the shore and she'd convinced herself it meant nothing. He'd kissed her in the garden and for days she'd convinced herself again that it meant nothing.

And each time she'd lied.

Here, where Jordana had decreed there must be peace and truth, and one couldn't be sad or frightened, there could be no lies.

"Not anymore." Brett opened her eyes. Nothing had changed, yet she knew that nothing would ever be the same. She looked to the sea visible through the undergrowth. Jamie was out there, somewhere, going about his chores, keeping her safe, keeping his distance. The perfect gentleman, waiting for her to come to him.

"Waiting." Rising, she went to the gate. The restlessness was gone, and with it a dull throb behind her eyes she hadn't been aware of until it eased. Her toes no longer scuffed in the sand, her step was sure. The gate shut with a metallic clang. "Waiting for me."

* * *

"Hattie!" Brett stopped short. "You're still here!"

"Surely," she agreed drolly, without pausing as she arranged a huge bouquet of flowers from the rose garden.

"Is the launch running late?" On the days Hattie came to the island, LaMar, her sister's son, brought her in a small motor launch. He was a long and lanky man with shifting eyes and a way of staring that made her uncomfortable. In one rare meeting at the dock, he'd watched her as a snake watches a bird. Rebuking herself for being unkind, she'd decided he was simply curious and harmless.

"The launch was on time." Hattie added a flower to her creation. "I sent it away."

With a sinking heart, Brett realized how much she was anticipating the evening with Jamie. "Will you stay the night?"

"Mercy, no." Hattie's dark gaze ranged over Brett. "I simply hadn't finished the flowers for the evening."

"Flowers?" Absently, Brett lifted Lucifer to her hip when he wound his skinny arms around her leg. Holding the monkey as she would a child, and accepting the nibbling kisses he peppered over her shoulder, she stared at Hattie. "You stayed over to arrange flowers?"

"Special flowers, for a special evening." Massive shoulders lifted, even more massive breasts bobbed beneath a blue sarong, and earrings of turquoise and silver performed a musicale. "It is to be a special evening, isn't it? You've made the inevitable choice at last."

"How did you...?" Lucifer chose that time to leap from her arms to hide behind a chair.

"How did I know?" Hattie's voice was almost lost in the sound of Lucifer's plaintive whimpers. "There's change in the wind. A gentle one. What could it mean but two lovers coming to their senses?"

"Hattie, why do you play this game?"

"What game is that, my sweet?"

"Pretending to know things you couldn't possibly know."

"Pretending!" Hattie was amused by Brett's accusation. "Tomorrow will prove which of us is pretending."

She cocked an ear to a sound Lucifer had heard long ago, and Brett not even now. "LaMar is coming." Going to the

chair, she fished the reluctant Lucifer from his hiding place. "I know you can't abide LaMar, you opinionated creature. But he's family." She scolded the animal even as she cuddled him to her. "Until Clyde's broken leg has mended, he's our sole source of transportation."

"LaMar isn't the one who usually brings you to the island?"

"Heavens, no. Clyde, another sister's son, has been doing it for years. I have no head for navigation, or LaMar wouldn't be my choice, either. Sometimes I wonder why he came back to the islands after being gone so long. To my shame, I don't like my own sister's child any better than Lucifer. Still, he needs work and I need transportation." Earrings rang in emphasis of her monologue. "So, what's a few hours twice a week? Maybe we're fortunate to have him, what with Clyde's peculiar accident."

"Peculiar?" Brett was uncomfortable with this information. Any change out of the ordinary, especially the switch in personnel, could mean trouble. "How so?"

"It just wasn't like Clyde to trip over rigging he was repairing." Hattie shrugged.

"This accident, when did it happen? Recently?"

"Goodness, no! We've not been fortunate enough to have LaMar for that little time. Clyde broke his leg nearly three months ago."

Relief flooded through Brett. She was so on edge, she was seeing menace where there was none. Still, she made a mental note to tell Jamie of the change.

Satisfied there were no more questions, Hattie gave her pointers on the finishing touches for the evening meal and the wine, a fine champagne from Patrick's cellar. Patting Brett's flushed cheek, with a sly grin she wished her a marvelous evening and took a cowering Lucifer to meet the launch.

Brett watched her disappear out of sight, then with butterflies in her stomach, went to her room to make ready for the night.

Jamie was tired. His day had been an odd one and nothing had gone right. He'd begun as always with surveillance on shore. After greeting Hattie at the dock, and seeing LaMar

away again, he'd discouraged a second boat of fishermen peddling their catch. Next, in making radio contact with *The Dancer*, he'd been informed that its engines were failing and not even Mitch could coax life into them.

The Dancer would be making for port within the hour and would remain out of range for however long it took for repairs. Mitch was certain it would not be long. Twelve hours, give or take.

With that message and a signal that the coast was secure, *The Dancer* had turned into the wind, and Jamie had been on his own.

The only way to keep watch on the back side of the island where the marsh was nearly impenetrable, was from high ground, an unusual ridge that rose a rare few feet above sea level. But from it, the shore, with its easy access, was invisible. Consequently he'd spent his day ranging from one outpost to another.

Once from the ridge he'd caught a glimpse of Brett on the path that led to the ancient garden. He'd relaxed his vigil enough to wonder if she would think of him in that quiet place. Would she linger, remembering the kiss they'd shared? As he'd watched, on the edge of his peripheral vision something moved in the marsh, shearing away his attention. In the time needed to identify a tree uprooted in some long-ago storm, Brett was back on the trail returning to the house.

So much for lingering over memories.

From then a day already badly begun went downhill. His mood was not good when thirteen hours later the crew of *The Dancer* signaled they were back in place and all was well.

Once he was relieved of the watch, he found he was oddly reluctant to return to the house. He was too tired to fight the battle he had with himself each night. Too tired to muster the strength to walk away from the one person he wanted more than he wanted anything.

Stripping off his clothing, he plunged into the sea. The moon was rising, whitecaps gleamed as if they were iridescent, and when they broke over his bare body, they were soft as foam and warm. Floating on his back, staring up at the darkening sky, the lazy undulations of the drifting current should have been calming. But as the moon tracked farther across the sky, he

admitted defeat. The sea could never quench the inferno inside him.

Letting the tide take him to shore, leaving his clothes where he'd flung them, he went next to the pool house and the shower. Even standing for long minutes beneath its icy, needle-sharp spray, was not the cure for his malady. When he was done, he shrugged into one of the long, hooded terry robes Patick provided for his guests and made his way to the main house.

When he climbed the terrace steps, it was long past the latest dinner hour. A single lamp lit the main room. Upstairs another shone through the open door of his bedroom. Jamie hadn't known what to expect, or how he would react if he saw her. Now, as he wandered the empty great room, he was both relieved and regretful that she had not played the dutiful guest waiting for her absentee host.

Sighing, he pulled the belt of his robe tighter and went to pour himself a drink. Taking it to the terrace, he settled into a chaise and leaned back to watch the continuing course of the moon. The Scotch went down easily. Because he'd eaten little, he felt its effect before he finished it. Deciding it wasn't such a good idea, he set it aside, that small effort drawing an unconscious groan from him.

"Tough day?" Her voice was quiet, drifting from the shadows.

Swinging his feet to the tile floor, he spun to face her, wondering if it was the Scotch or fatigue that kept him from hearing her footsteps as she moved from darkness into the light. Her hair had been pinned up, but was already escaping around her face. Her dress was a translucent creation of dark lavender. With each step, it swayed around her like a cloud in the last of sunset. The bodice clung to her breasts, held there by straps that were nearly an illusion. The scent of jasmine seemed to pulse from her with each beat of her heart.

She stopped only a touch away, her face obscured. He couldn't see her eyes, but he knew that their gray would hold a hint of the lavender, as he'd known they would when he'd chosen the dress.

She was a vision in the moonlight, a woman dressed for love.

"Have you eaten?" She didn't seem to notice that he hadn't spoken, or that he was devouring her with the look of man who

was starving, but not for food. Kneeling at his side, she brushed his damp hair from his face. "Hattie left a light supper and a bottle of wine."

"Yes. I mean, no, I haven't eaten." He didn't know what the hell he was saying. The Scotch, the moonlight and the woman were playing havoc with his mind.

"Poor darling, guarding errant photographers can be a thankless task." Closing her hands around his wrists, with the slightest tug she had him rising to stand before her. Releasing her grasp, she stared up at him. In a languid motion her fingers curled about the collar of his robe, then slipped to his bare chest and the pulse at his throat. At her touch she felt its strong, steady pace quicken. Rising on tiptoe, she brushed her lips over his, murmuring, "But it needn't be."

His exhausted mind was slow to comprehend. When he recovered enough to reach for her, she was no longer there.

She lingered in the doorway, her dress turned to lavender mist by the light at her back. "I've set a table on the terrace upstairs." Her voice was a husky, trembling whisper. "Tonight I'd like to be closer to the stars."

She turned and left him as quietly as she'd come. He saw then that he hadn't heard her step because she was barefoot.

There was something erotic in that nonchalance. For all her formal dress, with her hair tumbling down and her shoes discarded, she seemed relaxed and unaffected. Sensual and sexy, and touchable.

He was reeling. One emotion spilled over another, spinning out of control. He didn't follow her immediately. He dared not. For a time, he simply stood in the dark, seeking its peace for himself. A discipline as fruitless as his swim in the sea, or the frigid shower.

On a lazy night breeze was borne the memory of a delicate perfume. Her scent, and he knew he was lost.

His blood was hot, his heart pounding and his body quickening as he climbed the stairs at last.

She was waiting, the table would be laden with whatever delicacies Hattie thought appropriate. But there was time. Yes, he thought as he stepped from the deserted hall to his own room, time for the dignity Brett merited.

* * *

Brett kept herself very still. When she heard his footstep on the terrace floor, she didn't turn. When he came to stand by her side, neither spoke. There was no need.

Far out at sea a steady beacon crossed the sky, warning ships of a dangerous reef. Farther still a smaller, paler light rocked with the rhythmic swell.

"*The Moon Dancer* and our guardian angels." His words were soft, a melodic murmur. "They've settled down for the night. Matthew, with his incredible night vision, will take the watch."

"Yes." The sloop was always near. She'd grown accustomed to its presence. Looking up, seeing it riding against the horizon, was as natural as breathing.

No one would guess the sophisticated equipment that was secreted below deck. No one would guess that the hand that raised it to full, beautiful sail, was a sailor only when it suited the needs of his country. Just as no one would believe that the rugged and gifted man at her side led a second life, as mysterious, as dangerous.

But Brett didn't want to think of danger, nor of The Black Watch. Not tonight.

Turning her back on the sea and the distant vessel brought her face-to-face with Jamie. A Jamie she'd only seen on the stage, caught in a spotlight, as he played, making more than music. Making magic.

He'd taken time to dress. Not in tails but formally. Black jacket, creamy ruffled shirt, black tie. His drying hair fell over his forehead, but he made no move to brush it away. He was the gifted pianist she'd listened to, transported by the exquisite moods he created. He was the man who commanded the respect scoffing critics would have denied him.

Beneath the stars and in the wavering candlelight, he was every inch that man, but a rougher, more rugged version that left her mute with wonder.

He was so close she was touched by the subtle fragrance of the soap he'd used to scrub away the rigors of his day. So close she could feel the heat of his body. His face was stark, his eyes fierce. There was hunger in him, and need. She could see it. She

could feel it mingling with the heat. Yet he didn't reach out for her.

Perplexed, wavering on the edge of frustration, she backed away. "There's champagne," she heard a voice unlike her own saying to him. "Hattie chose champagne for our dinner."

"All right." He turned with the agile grace she surmised he'd learned in the forest when he labored with his brothers to survive.

With moves that seemed almost angry, he poured the effervescent liquid into two glasses, ignoring the froth that gleamed like whitecaps as it spilled over their rims. When she held her glass in her hand, he tapped it with his own and drank to her while the bell tone of crystal still rang in the air.

When the last of his champagne was gone, he closed his eyes fiercely against the sight of her, trying to forget for a moment the longing he saw in her eyes. A man in agony, trying to remember that at the great age of thirty-two, and with a marriage behind her, she was as vulnerable and as untutored in seduction as she seemed.

This time had been too long coming, and the flash point for him was too near. He could destroy everything with frenzied, unbridled passion. Brett was a fragile treasure to be savored.

His look was grim as he struggled against himself, but, desperate for a diversion, his touch at her arm was gentle. "Shall we try to do at least a bit of justice to Hattie's dinner?"

She made a sound of assent and, linking her fingers through his, led him to the tiny table. In the flicker of a candle shielded in a hurricane lamp, she watched him as she sat before a delicate repast neither of them wanted.

Brett knew the battle he was fighting, she could see it in his face. She knew it was for her. Even though it was long past time for rigid control, he wouldn't relent. No matter how it hurt him, the first move must be hers.

Jamie had no intention of making this easy.

She was new at this. Carson Sumner, older and far more worldly than she, had been a consummate lover, making all the moves. Eight years alone had added nothing to her experience. She wanted Jamie, but accepting a lover was frightening.

Could she? Could she surrender, even to Jamie, that private part of herself she'd guarded so furiously?

Brett shivered and in a guarded gesture folded her arms close.

"Are you cold?"

"What?" Then, dragging her mind from its bemused state, she shook her head. "No, of course not." Unable to meet his gaze, her downcast eyes found his untouched plate. "You aren't eating."

"No," he said with the little forbearance he could command. "I don't want dinner, Brett. I don't want champagne." He clenched his fist in his losing battle with his temper. "I'm sorry, but this hasn't been the best of days, and I'm tired. Tired of sitting a world away from you over whatever meal it happens to be, choking down food I don't want. Thinking thoughts that would send you running for shelter. No," he repeated in a low rasp, "I don't want dinner or champagne."

Rising, he slid back his chair with such force it toppled over. Without a glance, he kicked it away. He'd thought he could play the civilized game. He'd tried, for her sake. But with each soft word, and the rise of her breasts with each trembling breath, desire that clawed at him grew more uncivilized. "Dammit, Brett! Neither food nor drink are what I need."

His last bit of patience sheared away, leaving nerves and temper a raw edge.

Flash point! And no turning back.

Brett stared at him. He was at the end of his endurance. The future lay in her hands. If she wanted it, whatever the cost to him, he would back away forever.

Forever, a price too great to pay for the fear of surrender.

"Tell me what you want." She was trembling inside. Her heart threatened to leap from her body, but her decision was made. It would not change. But for just a moment she needed the illusion of security and permanence. She needed the pretense that this was more than the infatuation of Eden. "I need to hear what you want."

Jamie was quiet. His gaze moved over her face, halting for an interminable interval at her mouth before moving on. He liked the line of her throat, so smooth and regal, with the tiny hollow throbbing with the pulse of her heart. Her breasts were full and deep, the cleft between them a shadowy mystery. No

bra could be worn beneath the dress, and her body's response to his marauding scrutiny was apparent.

If she'd driven him to the brink of madness before, he'd gone over the edge now. "I want you." His voice was guttural. "I want you in my arms and in my bed. I want your body naked and wild beneath mine. If you've forgotten, then I'll remind you. What you've never known, by God, I'll teach you. And then, Brett Sumner, I want to hear you beg for my touch and cry out my name. *My name!*

"I want you to know then, beyond any doubt, that without me you'll never..." Jamie stopped himself, slamming a palm onto the table. Slowly, one finger at a time, his hand curled again into a fist. He closed his eyes, his chest heaved as he gasped breath into starving lungs. Then another and another until his fisted hand relaxed and his eyes opened. The mid-night gaze that regarded her over the flickering candle was somber. "There, you know. I promised myself you would never see the power of what I feel. But now you have."

Brett could scarcely speak. She'd never seen such untamed and honest passion.

"I never meant to frighten you, Brett. You've had enough fear and pain in your life without this."

She couldn't believe what she was hearing. He thought that witnessing how much he cared was frightening? Jamie, an accomplished, experienced man of the world—no, man of two worlds—and he didn't know his outburst was vindication for her own emotional upheaval.

Frightened? She had been. But not anymore and never again. With his stark and furious honesty, he'd outstripped her fear, shattering her last reserve.

Brett picked up her glass and drained it. Setting it very carefully on the table, she slipped from her seat. She had glimpsed the warrior beneath the perfect dress. He would be her lover.

Standing by her chair, she waited for his gaze. As the night breeze ranged over her body, setting her skirt swaying against her legs and teasing her tumbled hair, she imagined that it was his hand skimming over her, his caress driving her to distraction. When he looked up at last, regret etched on his face, she smiled.

"I'm not frightened, Jamie," she whispered. "Not anymore."

As he caught back a groan, she began to move toward him, all he wanted and needed in her eyes.

Brett stopped a hand's span from him. She'd come this far, a little distance measured in feet and inches, but from another realm in the measure of her life. The last step must be his.

Jamie knew her principles, the foundation of her life and how she'd chosen to live it. He knew how far these last few steps had brought her from that life. He knew how great her courage, and now, how intense her passion.

He knew, and she was magnificent.

"Brett," he whispered, fiercely proud that it was to him she had come. And as the candle guttered in the wind and died, he drew her into his arms.

For a moment he simply held her, savoring the touch of her body against his. But as she curled into his embrace, holding her wasn't enough. Tipping back her head, he kissed her slowly, his mouth slanting over hers, teasing, seducing, until her breath shuddered from her in an unintelligible sound. As she moved harder against him, he felt her hands slipping over the silk ruffles of his shirt. Her fingers tangled in his hair, tugging his head down as her mouth softened, opening to him.

Wonder stirred in him and with it the demand of his body, so strong, so sweet, he hurt. With a groan he denied himself and the pain. He'd waited too long for this woman, too long for this moment to be lost in quick and violent sexual release.

Brett was his to cherish.

Backing away, in the moonlight he saw the shock in her eyes as she clutched at him. "Easy," he quieted her dismay. "I won't leave you. There's more, but not for here."

Her wide gaze never left him as he gathered her hands in his and drew them to his lips. "The night has only begun." He kissed her fingertips, watching her over their joined hands, teasing her with the softness of his touch until her hand curled in his.

"We've just begun," he murmured. "And I promise you, not one minute will be squandered."

Brett sighed, and when he moved away, she let him go, only to find herself tucked beneath the shelter of his arm. Her head

was on his shoulder, her step in time with his as he led her toward the single light spilling from his bedroom.

She was startled when he stopped in that small circle of light only a step away from his room. When he tilted her head with a finger under her chin, her gaze was lost in the midnight depths of his.

"I love you, Brett Sumner," he said softly. "No." He stopped her startled response with a touch at her cheek. "Don't say anything. Not yet." He smiled crookedly. "I simply thought you should know before we go any farther."

Brett was trembling. She didn't want Jamie to love her. Love hurt, and she never wanted to hurt him. Every instinct screamed that she should walk away, now, before it was too late. But when Jamie reached for her, drawing her with him toward the light, she knew it was too late already.

It had been too late for a long time.

Her mind reeled, her heart thundered, and a moan rippled through her as her body shuddered in concert with Jamie's. Nothing had ever been like this. Carson Sumner had been an experienced and masterful lover. An aesthete who knew the right technique, the right time, who gave more pleasure than he took. And yet...

Dear heaven, it had never been like this.

Never so hot-blooded, so hard, so ruthless. Nor so tender.

Living, breathing, simply being, had never been this unbearably beautiful. Being a woman had never been so wonder-filled as with her warrior lover.

Reveling in the power of his spent body over hers, she drew him closer, holding him tighter. Brushing his sweat-soaked hair from his face, she kissed his heated throat and remembered how he had loved her.

When she would have been logical, he swept logic away with a look. When she would have been guarded, he broke the barriers with a kiss. He'd drawn her into the room, holding her captive only with the power of his blue-black gaze as he tugged off his tie and tossed away his jacket, and with it his shirt. The mark of his early life was there, in his heavy shoulders, in the corded line of his torso. And when he took her back into his arms, crushing her breasts against his nakedness, her hands

gliding over him found his muscles were tense, steeled against the burgeoning need he fought.

His fingers tangled in her hair. As kiss followed kiss, each pin slipped from it until it fell like an ebony curtain to her shoulders. Deserting her mouth, his lips blazed a trail over her cheek to her temple, then slipped in a long, slow glissade to her jaw and down the slender column of her throat. His hands roamed over her as hungry kisses scorched down the slope of her breasts.

"No!" he snarled as lavender chiffon barred his path. Recoiling in frustration, he found the line of tiny buttons that marched from bodice to hem. His fingers were clumsy, his forbearance brief. "Dammit/" His curse was guttural and raw. "Who chose this abominable thing?"

Brett surprised herself by laughing. "I think, my impatient lover, that you did."

"Then I was a fool!" His face was as grim as his tone as his fingers curled over the top of her dress. In a silken, tearing sound, chiffon was rent from chiffon, and buttons torn from loop after loop, until there was no barrier for his kiss.

When he drew the straps from her shoulders and slipped the ravaged garment from her, Brett made no move to cover herself. She had worn nothing beneath the dress and for a moment in the fall of lamplight she had seen wonder in his eyes.

Mesmerized, he touched her breasts, drawing the tips of his fingers over the soft swell, smoothing his palms down her sides, tracing the ridge of ribs as they disappeared beneath the undercurve. Cradling the fullness of her breasts in his palms, he smiled as her nipples shrank from full-blown roses to delicate buds. His thumbs teased over the darkening crests, and before the violent shudder that ripped through her was done, his mouth was there to still their ache.

"Jamie." Brett's nails dug into his shoulders, her body arched against him, moving in time with the rhythm of his suckling.

When her knees finally betrayed her, he caught her in his arms. Crossing the room, he lowered her to the bed. Then, pausing only long enough to fling aside the last of his own clothing, he came down to her. His mouth took hers in a kiss that was nearly brutal. His hands slid beneath her to her buttocks.

Rising to him, her breasts brushing his chest like a fiery brand, she met his kiss, her lips parted, her tongue seeking the caress of his. One kiss begat another, hot, deep, craving more. Where one caress ended another began.

He was amarauder, searching and exploring, plundering her body. He was strength and power barely held in check. He was infinite patience, when impatience ravaged her mind and body.

He was arrogance and male pride when her body arched to receive him.

He was her lover.

He was love.

In fulfillment, as he lay quiet and drowsy in her arms, Brett discovered that if there was surrender in making love with Jamie, it was surrender shared.

He stirred and rose over her, resting on his elbows, his forearms framing her face. "You wanted to be close to the stars."

"We were."

"Maybe a little." He chuckled and nibbled at her swollen lower lip. "One night, soon, we'll go for a midnight swim. Nothing is more breathtaking than swimming in a moonlit sea."

"Nothing?" Her fingers danced down his side to his hip. She felt his body tighten.

"Nothing except making love on a sandy blanket, then lying in each others arms, watching stars that seem close enough to touch."

"Nothing else?" She moved slowly beneath him, and smiled into his shoulder as he shivered and caught a harsh breath.

"Nothing, my lovely witch, but making love to you here," he growled in her ear.

"Now?"

His bronzed body reared over hers. He smiled. "Now."

Brett knew she was playing the wanton, abandoning the tenet of her life. Anywhere else in the world, and with anyone else, she would be courting disaster. But this was Eden, and this was Jamie.

Jamie who made music and magic, and would always keep her safe.

Jamie, who touched her.

And then, for a while, she was not alone.

Eight

Hands.

Caught in a tangle of sheets, Brett woke slowly. She was thinking of hands. Pianist's hands.

Lying on her back, blindly mesmerized by the slow circuitous motion of a ceiling fan, she let her mind drift where it would.

She'd never really considered a pianist's hands, any more than she had a painter's, an actor's, or even a photographer's. Had she, beyond talent and skill, she would have imagined elegance. Grace. Long, slender fingers, unscarred, even delicate, with oval nails buffed and manicured. She would've imagined narrow palms and small wrists, and soft, palely translucent skin.

Nothing like the hand that held her.

With a languid smile she lifted the curled hand from her naked breast, and drew it to her lips. Jamie's even breathing didn't change, he didn't move from his face-down sprawl as she linked her fingers through his.

There was a rough, uncommon elegance in the hand she clasped. His fingers were long, but not slender. His nails were square and scored with reminders of old injuries. His knuckles

were large, his wrist more than the circling span of her hand. The palm was flat and broad and hard-edged. Taut skin stretching from wrist to fingertip was tanned and callused and scarred.

Rugged hands for a rugged man. Powerful in grace and skill, delicate only in his touch. Efficient hands that could fell a tree, coax breathtaking melodies from piano keys, safeguard a life.

Make love to a woman.

"Ah, yes," she whispered against a roughened knuckle, and smiled as she put his hand aside on the tumbled bedding. Moving to the edge of the bed, she stood. Jamie stirred, frowning and mumbling an unintelligible sound as he clutched at the sheet where her body had lain. He mumbled again but didn't wake.

Brett bit back the impulse to smooth the ruffled hair from his face and kiss the sleep away. But it was better to let him rest. The sun was rising and his day would begin all too soon.

With a regretful look at his brawny body half hidden by the drift of snowy sheets over tanned hips, she turned away. Slipping into the terry robe he'd worn, she padded on bare feet to the terrace. Leaning on the balustrade she watched the sun beginning to lift like a great ball of fire out of the sea. For a perfect moment, with water reflecting the fire of the sky, one blended into the other until there was no horizon. No shadowy silhouette of the ever-present *Moon Dancer* rocking in bas-relief against it. No specter of intrigue and danger threatened.

In that little time, with Jamie only a heartbeat away, it was a happy world. So happy, Brett felt guilty.

A sliver of regret raced through her as old, indelible memories came rushing back. Clutching her sides beneath the capacious robe, she closed her eyes, steeling herself against their onslaught. In the inertia of her self-imposed darkness, a touch intruded, as warm as the sun, as light as the wind.

Jamie waited until her lashes fluttered from her cheeks before he lifted her face to his. His look was clouded and troubled as it met with hers. "Regrets, love?"

"No." Brett shook her head vehemently. "Not about you." He hadn't bothered with clothing, and in the blaze of dawn he was too glorious a male to regret. "Never about you."

"But regrets, nevertheless."

"How did you know?"

"I've been watching you since you came to the terrace."

"I'm sorry." She flushed at the apology, remembering how he hated the need of them. "I didn't mean to wake you."

"You didn't. Not in the way you think you might have." At her wrinkling brow, he laughed his indulgence as the pad of his thumb skimmed lazily over her jaw. Leaning so close his hair brushed hers and the latent passion in him arced like wildfire, he asked, "Did you really think I wouldn't miss you? That I wouldn't know the minute you left my bed?"

"I didn't know... I've never..." She shook her head again, this time with an air of uncertainty. "I don't suppose I did."

Her tone more than her words sparked a hunch that she'd never slept the night through in a man's bed. An intriguing thought, but not the time to explore it. He changed the subject, or perhaps approached it from another angle. "You were thinking of Carson."

Brett didn't try to deny it. "Yes."

"Feeling that you've betrayed him?"

"Haven't I?"

"Carson's dead, Brett, he has been for eight years. Or he would be if you hadn't become his immortality."

"That makes no sense."

"Doesn't it?" Jamie grasped her shoulders. "By becoming everything he wanted you to be, by excelling in his field as he taught you, you're a testament to the success of his life."

"Is that wrong? I owe him so much."

"No one denies that. For that matter, I owe him a lot, too." He smiled at her widening stare. "That surprises you?"

"I never realized you knew him."

"I never met the man, but I'm indebted nonetheless."

"'Indebted'?" Brett echoed faintly.

"For you, love." Jamie skimmed his hands down her arms to her wrists. Bringing them to his lips, he kissed the tender flesh at the base of each thumb. When she shivered and caught her breath at the lave of his tongue over a pulsing vein, he lifted his head. "His influence contributed to making you the woman you are. Because of him, you're that rare, wonderful combination of innocence and sensuality. For that I'll be eternally grateful."

"I don't know what you mean."

"I know you don't, and for that, too, I'm grateful to Carson."

"Are you?" Thoughtfully she added, "I wonder if you really understand exactly how much he did for me?"

"You could tell me, Brett." He knew. The reports Simon had gathered were clear and detailed, leaving little to conjecture. He hoped she would never know how detailed. The reports were concise, hard, cold fact in black and white. He wanted the shades of gray, the human impetus, the whim and whimsy, the joy and the pain. "Tell me. Tell me all of it."

Brett looked down blankly, staring without seeing. "It's funny, but there's really not that much to tell, after all. Six years together," she said with bewilderment in her voice, "and a few words can sum it up."

Jamie waited. The sun was riding the rim of the sea. There was still time before he must make contact with *The Dancer*.

"I was a naive little country girl who had no idea how young and how foolish I was when I came to Atlanta," Brett began briefly and succinctly. "But I learned. The golden life I'd dreamed of and even expected never materialized. Fate and circumstance weren't kind. I was on the brink of being forced to accept some sordid and desperate choices when I met him."

"I know." What Jamie didn't know was that, without warning, his fingertips were crushing the frail bones of her wrist. He didn't know that his eyes were suddenly blue-black and brooding. All he knew or felt was the rage that invariably flared wild and white hot when confronted with the scum from the underbelly of Atlanta that preyed on young and innocent children. Pimps and madams, the crazies and the sleaze. They would've recognized that special quality Carson had seen in her. And by any means would've trapped her in their ugly web, trading on that sensual innocence until it was destroyed.

Until Brett was destroyed.

"I wouldn't have accepted their offer," she said, determined not to flinch or call attention to his harsh grip.

"Accept! Good Lord, Brett! Are you pretending now that you were being given a choice?" He released her, then, not because he'd realized he was hurting her, but to make a slashing emphasis. "Isn't part of this undying loyalty to Carson Sum-

ner because you know he snatched you from the living hell of sex for hire?"

"How do you know all this?" Brett was pale, her cry a low, raw whisper. "How could you possibly know?"

"Part of it was in the legal records when Carson's children tried to discredit you. Part was garnered from reading between the lines. One learns to do that in my profession. My second profession."

Brett shivered, remembering. "Amalia, his oldest daughter tried to prove I was a prostitute. All three of his children insisted I preyed on his proclivity for sex."

"It was in the record," he told her gently. "But so was the truth. The rest was easy to surmise."

"Not for everyone. There were those who believed because they wanted to believe. Their version made a far more interesting story."

"And of course, the blacker they painted you, the more they degraded Carson's memory. But with money the object, no one cared." With a knuckle, he tapped her chin. "Except you."

"It wasn't at all like they claimed. We met in a park, at an open-air rock concert. Carson was planning a pictorial on the plight of young people with no money, no family and no prospects. I fit the criteria perfectly. I'd lost my job, my money was gone, and I had no family. He approached me and asked me to pose for a portrait. I was leery at first, thinking, yeah, sure, a portrait. But it didn't take long to learn that he was legitimate and that faces were his specialty."

"I never understood what he saw in me then. I suppose, in the beginning, I was his opportunity to play Pygmalion. A creation, just as his photographs were. After a while his reasons didn't matter. He was kind to me, and I thought it was enough."

"Then we fell in love. When he asked me to marry him, his children were violently opposed, but he wouldn't listen. He reminded them he was entitled to a last bit of happiness."

"The fairy tale was complete," Jamie added quietly. "Little girl lost became the young, desirable wife of a successful man."

Brett's eyes narrowed. "I hear how it sounds, and I knew then how it looked. But looks can deceive. These records of yours, the reports that told you so much about me and about

my marriage, did they tell you we were married a week before he came to my bed? Did they tell you I was frightened and he was patient?" There was a thread of anger in her now. "Did they tell you he taught me everything? How to walk. How to talk. What to read. He introduced me to the arts, to photography. And most of all, he showed me a world that was filled with beauty and excellence, not simply a struggle to survive.

"I was a clean slate. I became his creation, and he made me happier than I'd ever been." Her words were composed now, and measured. She did not look away from Jamie's steady gaze. "Then one night he came to my room. He made love to me as tenderly as he always had."

She paused, her dry eyes glittered with pain. "Then..." Her hands were fisted, her nails furrowed her palms. Her tongue moved over rigid lips. "Then he closed his eyes and died in my arms."

Grief flickered in her face, briefly, intensely, then was gone. "Did your reports tell you that?"

"They told me about Carson and about you. But you told me more."

"I?"

"Yes, Brett, you. Every day told me a little more. Haven't you realized that words aren't necessary between us? They weren't from the first. They weren't last night." He touched her, then, gliding his fingertips over the curve of her shoulder to her nape. With a light pressure he kneaded the rigid tendons.

And despite anger and guilt and grief, the look in her eyes softened a second before her lashes fell like a shutter over them.

"We were good, better than good, together. It was never like this for either of us. Not for me." His fingers tangled in her hair. Tilting her face toward his, he waited for her lashes to sweep from her cheeks and her solemn gray gaze to meet his. "And not for you."

"No." Her denial was quick and without conviction.

"Yes. You can lie with your tongue and your mind, but not with your body." He slipped his hands beneath her arms, lifting her against him to the broad balustrade. He didn't release her, didn't let her look away. "Your body can't lie even now,

when I do this." He kissed the hollow of her throat, letting her pulse beat against his lips.

"Or this," he muttered as his mouth traced the slope of her breasts to the cleft between them. Crumpling the heavy terry of the robe in his fists, he parted the lapels, exposing one mound of creamy flesh. His mouth was warm and light, brushing over the rising fullness, circling the nipple, never touching. Circling, teasing, until at last the slow rasp of his tongue skimmed over the taut bud, tumbling it in a tiny circle like a pebble caught in the tide.

Brett made a sound that was half sigh, half whimper. Grief and guilt forgotten, her fingers threaded through his hair, her body arched against his marauding mouth, welcoming its tender torture.

"Jamie!" Her cry was a breath cast on the wind as shock wave after stunning shock wave left her shivering and clinging to him.

His mouth left her breast to rise again to her throat, and then her lips. His kiss was a feathery touch, a promise. "Yes, Jamie," he growled, letting her terry-clad body slide down the length of his, the soft nap an abrasion against his nakedness. "Only Jamie."

Brett swayed on her feet, but his grasp at her collar steadied her. Then the robe was parting, falling away from her shoulders, dragged in his tight grasp over her arms. One tug at the belt looped loosely at her waist and the robe was dropped in a heap of brilliant turquoise over the earth-tone tiles at their feet.

The new sun was bright and warm, and in its light her skin glowed like tawny alabaster. Her breasts were full and firm and delicately rose-tipped. One glittered with the moisture of his kiss.

"You're beautiful, Brett," he muttered as he took her hand, drawing her down with him to the turquoise robe. Leaning over her, he smoothed her tousled hair from her face. "You're beautiful because of who you are and what you are. In that, Carson Sumner made himself a lasting part of your life. But he has nothing to do with this.

"He's gone. For eight years you've paid your dues, but no more. It isn't betrayal to live the life he gave you to the fullest." Jamie leaned nearer, his arms forming an arch about her

head. His shadow blocked the sun. "It isn't betrayal to give yourself to me."

"And if in your arms I forget he ever existed? If he was never so exciting, never so . . ." A breath shuddered through her, her head turned, spilling curls in dark contrast over the rich turquoise. "I can't say it." Her face was stricken. "I don't have the words."

"I know." Jamie's heart did a crazy little dance. A curious pain threatened to close his throat. At last! The source of her guilt—what they shared had shattered and diminished a memory.

Letting go would take time. Not to mourn, to accept. He should back away, but the moment when he could was long past. "I can't."

Brett's eyes were slumberous and heavy-lidded with her own desire. Her mouth trembled from his kiss. Searching his face, she discovered it was as he promised, there was no need for words. His thoughts and his need were there, in his taut body, in his burning look.

She couldn't deny him. She couldn't deny herself. Her arms were strong, her hands sure and steady as she reached up to him, bringing his body down to hers. With her teeth grazing his bare shoulder, she whispered an echo, "I know."

Lying on earthen tiles softened by a splash of color rivaling the morning sky, Jamie McLachlan made love to her beneath a rising sun.

Jamie threw the net into the surf, as he had a half dozen times before. If there were fish to catch, or crab, or flotsam, they weren't there anymore. He didn't care. He hadn't cared from the first. His mind and his attention was on the lone figure trudging down the beach—Brett, dressed in a gold lame bikini and a matching scarf.

A salesclerk on the mainland had assured him the suit would be spectacular. Little did that trendy young lady know!

While he couldn't quite dismiss how the gold looked against her darkening skin, nor how low the scarf was knotted at her hip, he was more concerned with the distance she had put between them.

They had been lovers for a week, and she had come to his bed without reservation. Lean and tawny, dark hair tumbling over him, she had made love to him, and with him. And the name she cried was his.

She had laughed with him, walked the shore with him and swam with him. Some nights they talked for hours. Other nights she sat quietly, uttering no sound, listening in rapt delight as he played for her. But no matter if their evening was conversation or quiet music, when they were in his bed, there was always the same wonder, and each time better than the last.

Guilt was never mentioned. Nor was Carson Sumner.

This day had begun much as any other had. Hattie had jangled her way through her chores, the smug smile on her face altering only once. And that into an I-told-you-so grin when Brett refused a mountain of food, tartly pointing out that her bosoms had passed muster after all. When he'd looked up from a sugared grapefruit and asked what that little comment meant, Brett's laughter had rung out over the terrace.

With that lovely sound, from that perfect beginning, without discernible reason, the day had gone downhill. When Hattie departed, with Lucifer having to be physically peeled from Brett, Jamie completed his surveillance checks, made final contact with *The Dancer*, and planned an evening on the beach with Brett.

He hadn't expected it to be this quiet.

Gathering the net from the surf that lapped at his knees, Jamie straightened. A lone fish flopped in the net, but he didn't see it. Brett had stopped at the edge of the water, letting the waves wash over her feet. She stared so intently, he knew she didn't see it.

Jamie wondered if she was thinking of Sumner, and coping with the damnations of remorse. He knew from their days and nights together that if he went to her, with a touch at her breasts and a kiss, she would melt in his arms, forgetting whatever troubled her.

Then how long before the next time? And the next? Turning away abruptly to keep himself from going to her, he noticed the gasping fish. "Sorry, little fellow. I guess we both have our troubles."

Carefully unraveling the tangled strands of the net, he extricated the small silver fish and tossed it back into the water. Wading to shore, he busied himself with untangling and rolling the net, stubbornly forcing his mind from Brett. If she needed time to work through something, she would have it.

If she needed space?

Sitting back on his haunches, staring out at the bobbing sail of *The Dancer*, he asked himself if he could give her that space. Judging from her mood and the distance she'd put between them, he was the last thing she needed. Could he get through the remainder of the evening with some semblance of propriety? Could he walk and talk with her, or play for her, and not end the evening by taking her to his bed?

With the sun just dipping beyond the low-rising ridge at his back, a troubling night stretched endlessly before him.

"No luck?"

Jamie rose from his crouch all in one swift move. Brett was there, smiling at him. A little wanly, but smiling.

"Luck?" Resolving his dilemma?

She gestured at the neatly rolled net. "No fish?"

He sensed a strange mood, yet not the distant one he'd anticipated. "Actually there was one."

"All that time and only one?"

"My mind wasn't on fishing."

"I know. I haven't been very good company for the last hour."

"You've been troubled." She was standing so near he could see the sea spray beading on her skin. A drop trickled from the twist of gold that barely covered her breasts. Like a liquid diamond, it pooled for the blink of an eye in the hollow of her navel, then trickled to the knotted square of cloth.

Only a drop, absorbed, lost, but he couldn't stop thinking of it. He could force himself to look away, but he couldn't forget the shimmering path it had taken.

When he spoke again, his voice was hoarse and ragged. "I thought I could help best by giving you time." *And space, dammit/*

"You thought I might be feeling remorse about Carson."

Jamie held himself very quiet, very still. Only his eyes moved, darting over her face, seeking but not finding the telltale signs

of contrition. His head moved in the barest admission. "It occurred to me."

Brett took a step nearer. One palm lifted to his bare chest. Slowly, because she liked the feel of his skin against hers, she stroked his chest, letting her hand follow the path of the curling pelt that narrowed at his torso. Like an arrow, it drew her fingertips down his body until she encountered the band of his swimming trunks.

Deep in thought, hardly aware that his rigid abdomen flinched at her wandering caress, she traced the path again to his chest, taking comfort in the strength beneath her gliding hand. "I wasn't thinking about Carson," she said at last, shattering the quiet that had seemed to envelop them. "My mood had nothing to do with him."

A captive breath burst from his lungs in a ragged groan. Desire held in check spiraled, at once fueled by elation and tempered by the troubled gravity of her revelation. Catching her hand in his, he stopped her unthinking explorations before he lost his mind. Holding her palm to him, realizing too late his male nipple was nestled in its hollow. Medical evidence, physical science and sex education literature stated bluntly that the male breast and nipple were not sensually responsive. His keening body begged to differ.

"What were you thinking?" He held her palm over his heart.

"I wasn't thinking so much as trying to remember. Sometimes there are little flashes. As if there's something there behind a barrier. I feel I could almost brush it away if I concentrated."

"These flashes, can you pinpoint what triggers them?"

"Not until today. I was developing some shots I'd taken of the children in the garden, and I had an odd feeling. It was right at the edge of my memory and it nagged at me. It's even stranger that while I couldn't remember, I knew it had nothing to do with what I was doing."

She laughed, then said, bitterly, "That's gibberish. It makes no more sense than my thoughts."

"So you've been walking, trying to make sense of it?"

A frown etched lines between her brows. "I've gone through it all, from the plane to the morning I woke at Grayson and found you sitting by my bedside. I've traced and retraced every

step. I've opened the case, and taken out the money, and then the papers. Then everything just stops."

"With the list?"

"Yes."

"And you think this imminent recollection had something to do with it?"

"I don't know. Maybe I'm imagining all of it and it's nothing after all, but I've spent the last hour visualizing blank sheets of paper, much as a picture before it's developed. Then I try to make the list come into focus."

Jamie brushed a finger over her brow, wishing he could brush away the frown. "No luck?"

Brett smiled wanly. "Not even a little."

Jamie knew she could be imagining the nascent recall. She might never remember. Her physicians, Erlinger and Cohen, had warned chances were strong the hours immediately before the concussion were lost to her forever. Weaving his fingers into her hair, he tipped her face toward his. "It doesn't matter, love. If the memory materializes, fine! If it doesn't, it won't be that important in the long run."

"In the long run," Brett echoed. "It wouldn't have to be that if I could remember."

She was sharp, insightful, he'd known it from the first. It was there in her photographs, and in her eyes. "Don't try so hard. What isn't there can't be forced."

"Every minute that's lost means more drugs on the street. Every minute means another child, another man, another woman destroyed. The key is in my brain and I can't unlock it."

"None of it's your fault. If any one person is responsible, that person is Jamie McLachlan."

An agitated move pulled her hair free of his loose grasp. The hand that had lain in his slipped free. "You mustn't feel guilty for what happened to me any more than I should feel that I had betrayed Carson by..." Brett stumbled over her tirade, her eyes were dark, stormy gray and luminous.

By falling in love with Jamie McLachlan?

Shock knotted in her throat. Would that have been the rest of her outburst? Had she fallen in love with him? Those sweet sensations... the shivers as he whispered wonderful, nonsensical words against her skin. The sweet seduction of his kiss, the

pleasure of his body thrusting into hers... Were they more than desire? More than a man's carnal need for a woman. Or hers for him?

Lover. Love. Were they one and the same? Or was it the time, circumstance and Eden?

"Is that it?" Brett was scarcely aware that she had spoken in a whisper. "Have I blocked the memory from my mind because remembering would mean we would leave Eden and this would end?"

Jamie didn't understand, her tortured words were lost in the muffled roar of the surf. But her misgiving was written vividly on her face. Despite her long, lean height that put her nearly as tall as he, she seemed small and defenseless, and more vulnerable even than when she'd lain pale and bruised in the crisp, impersonal bed at Grayson.

She was tired, the day of soul-searching and racking her brain had exacted its price. Wrapping his arms around her, he drew her to him. Stroking her hair as her cheek rested against his chest, he said anything that came to mind. Sense and nonsense as he did when he made love to her.

With the rising tide swirling at their feet, he held her in the waning light. As the last rays of light were lost beyond the ridge, a single star heralded the beginning of night. Gradually, as he watched, one star after another appeared. As he continued his comforting monologue, she began to relax in his embrace.

He had no idea what words he used, his mind was too full of contradictions. Brett was worn with the turmoil of seeking a memory, and, dear God, he would take that burden from her if he could. But there was joy, too, that the thoughts that had driven her from him in a brooding silence had not been of another love.

One more step out of the past. One more toward him. Jamie wanted to shout it to the sky. He wanted to tell her again he loved her.

The words would have to wait. He wouldn't say them again until she was ready to hear them. Until she was ready to believe.

But he could show her.

Without breaking his rhythm, his hand moved from her hair and down her body. In long, languorous strokes, he soothed her and petted her. Her back was like warm satin, the smooth line broken only by the rolled cord that held the top of her bathing suit over her breasts. Her torso was lean, her waist long and small. Her hips flared in an enticing slope, but he resisted, repeating the path he'd blazed in reverse. Then again. And again.

The tide was higher. It churned about their ankles instead of their toes and washed sand from under their feet. The water was soft and warm, not yet cooled by the night. Each breath they drew was full of the sea. And the wind skimming over its waves surrounded them with its music.

She nestled into his embrace slowly and sweetly. Her body was molten honey, a delicious caress as gentle curves yielded to the hard, demanding thrust of his.

"Jamie." His name, whispered against his bare chest. Only his name. There would be no more.

He brought his mouth down on hers. The kiss that began gently blossomed into something as rare and sweet as the night blooming jasmine. He kissed her long and deeply, drinking his fill.

A wave, warning of the rising tide, slapped against his leg, sending a shower of water over them. Jamie lifted his head, laughing as he held her to him. "We have two choices. Run or swim."

"The water's warm."

"It is, isn't it?"

"The stars are out." She hadn't looked anywhere but at him, but as surely as he was marvelous with his hair plastered to his head and neck and his swim trunks molding his body like new skin, there would be stars in the sky.

"I promised you a swim under the stars, didn't I?"

Brett laughed, her brows arching. "Did you?"

"If I didn't, I meant to."

"You can promise me now."

"I promise." He held up three fingers, the Scout's salute.

Another wave burst over them, dragging at her scarf, undermining their equilibrium.

Thinking he must have been an engaging Scout, she grinned. "We're going to have to swim soon or be washed away."

"There's an important matter we need to attend to first."

"There is?"

"Uh-huh." His fingers were on the delicate strap of her top.

"It's this gold stuff. I don't think we should get it wet."

"No." Brett was as grave as he, ignoring that the suit was already soaked. "I don't suppose we should. Though I'm not sure why."

"Oh, it rusts, didn't you know?"

"Goodness, we wouldn't want that, would we?"

"Never." The knot at her back slipped free with his efforts, and in quiet reverence Jamie slipped the gold cloth from her breasts. In the dim light she was topaz and cream... and perfect. Casting it away to be taken by the sea, he skimmed his hands down the sides of her breasts and her ribs and waist to her hips.

"Nor this." The lame was like a serrated barrier as he fumbled with the bulkier knot of the scarf. Then it was fluttering in the wind to join the first. All that remained was a tiny triangle and cords that seemed to be no more than spun gold as they were drawn over her hips in a bow. A golden cache, hiding little, yet too much. His heart was beating in an uneven tempo as he took it from her.

"Now." His voice shook. "There's nothing left to rust."

Neither laughed. Their teasing had gone beyond laughter.

As he looked at her, tall, regal in his sight, the loveliest woman in all the world, he could almost convince himself she was a waking dream. But he touched her, drawing his hand from hip to breast, and she was warm. She was real.

When she shivered and reached for the snap at the band of his suit, he was there before her. Stripping the brief shorts away, he made no more effort to hide from her eyes than she had from him.

From his wide shoulders to his deep chest and corded torso, from flat abdomen to muscled thighs, he was leashed power. He was seething sensuality and hot-blooded passion. He was the woodsman. He was Jamie who had brought the world to it knees and then to its feet.

Brett, not he, took the half step needed to bring her back to his embrace. Rising on tiptoe, she kissed him, unhurriedly, the

taste of the sea and Jamie lingering on her lips long after it was ended.

"I was with Carson the first time I saw you." The words were spoken in one breath, as if it were something that must be said.

Bewildered that she would need to speak of it now, Jamie held her and waited silently.

"He loved what you were, and what you stood for. He loved it that the critics scoffed and called you terrible names. Bull of the Wood, a would-be Paul Bunyan. He laughed when they sneered and said you would do better to move the piano, not play it. He laughed again when they were on their feet, screaming bravo until their lungs threatened to burst. It was a great joke for him to hear the stuffiest of the stuffy claiming they knew all along you would be magnificent."

Foam drifted around them, but she didn't notice. "He could see into people, discovering qualities before anyone else."

In what was almost an aside, she continued. "It's ironic, isn't it, that your first concert was my first, as well? I remember when the lights went down and you walked on stage. The audience was suddenly so quiet. The magic had begun before the first notes. When you began to play, the entire audience was holding its collective breath.

"I didn't know until later how rare it was for Carson to speak during a concert. But on this night he did. He told me to look around, at the faces of the women. There was hardly one who didn't want you. Hardly one who wouldn't have given her soul to be the woman you came to when you left the stage."

When Jamie would have spoken, she shook her head. Framing his face with her hands and brushing his hair from his face, she smiled a bittersweet smile. "I wonder if he knew that someday I would be one of those women who wanted you."

"Brett..."

She stopped his words with a kiss. Her arms twined around his neck, her mouth opened to him.

Want!

When he would speak of love, she spoke of want. With a sudden and guttural snarl, he tore away from her. Want? Then, by God, she would have it.

Sweeping her into his arms, angry and hurt, he crossed the hard-packed sand to the cabana. There, on the mat-strewn

floor, he took her without prelude. Hot, hard and silent. As she clawed at his back and rose up to him, savage need battled with savage need.

And in every devouring kiss, in every fierce thrust, and in quaking climax, there was the love he couldn't speak.

Nine

"Oh, not!"

At Brett's cry, Jamie jerked to a halt and turned back.

"Blast!"

Her mild expletive, or as close as she ever came to one, and a quick assessment of its cause brought a grin to his face. When she said anything stronger he would know she was really angry. Worse than angry, and he might do well to run for cover.

"Don't laugh!" she commanded with one foot on dry land and the other planted thoroughly in the stream they'd just crossed.

"I won't." Crossing his arms over his chest, he leaned against a tree and struggled to obey. "Are you cooling a hot foot, or indulging in a little one-footed wading?"

"You wanna know something?" Brett glared at him, making no effort to remedy her awkward stance. Her hands were on her hips, her camera dangled from her neck by a leather strap.

Jamie didn't miss the way the weight of the camera drew the strap down, pressing her red shirt closer to her body. The silky fabric molded her thrusting nipples perfectly. Beneath his admiring inspection, despite her frustration, they grew hard and round.

He didn't miss any of it. Not one tiny inch, and his mouth watered as he thought of cherries, sweet and firm, nestled in a tangle of silk.

"Sure." His voice was husky, but the grin still lurked at the corners of his mouth. "I wanna know something."

"I think I liked you better when you weren't acting so much like a McLachlan, McLachlan!"

"Oh?" He arched a brow and settled back more comfortably against the tree. "How would you know about the McLachlans?"

"Because you told me." She tried to pull her foot free and succeeded in sinking deeper in the sandy bottom.

He had told her, many times. In the darkness surrounding his bed, but he hadn't exactly been coherent and neither had she. "I told you?" he asked innocently. "When?"

Brett's eyes narrowed. With a huff, she blew a lock of hair that had escaped her hat from her eyes. "You know blasted well when, and you know blasted well where."

She was struggling, trying not to show it. Jamie wondered how long she'd fight before she asked for help. Old habits die hard. Given her fierce independence, his bet was when hell froze over.

He composed his expression in a look of solemn innocence. "Are you sure I should know?"

Brett stopped, the dry foot still dry, the wet foot still under a foot of water, and scorched him with a look that said more than blast. Hell wouldn't freeze today.

"Yeah," he admitted to that blazing gray glare. "I guess I do know." His grin was back as he pushed away from the tree and walked to the bank. The stream was not wide, a man-size leap she'd made with his help, but couldn't alone. "Would you like a hand? Or have you decided to stay there all day?"

She wanted to say no, her need to refuse was nearly palpable. But the sand was deep and with every struggle sucked her foot deeper. After consideration of her options, she offered her hand.

With a powerful tug, Jamie lifted her up and away, hauling her from the stream. When she was on dry ground, before she could get her bearings, he gathered her, drenched and dripping, into his arms.

She didn't fight, but her body was rigid. "I can walk."

"I know," he agreed mildly, but made no move to put her down.

"My foot's wet, not broken."

"Neither is your camera." He grinned down at her. A wicked grin that deepened the single dimple at his right cheek. Guaranteed to cool any anger. "That is what happened, isn't it? When you jumped back over the stream and started sliding, you were too busy protecting your camera to protect yourself. Right?"

Brett sighed and wrapped her arms around his neck. "Right."

At the tree, he sat her down and knelt to remove her boot and sock. Taking his handkerchief from his hip pocket, he dried her foot, massaging it until her toes were pink. "Can't do much about the soaked boot, but I've a pair of dry socks in my pack."

"You carry extra socks everywhere you go?"

"Not everywhere, but long ago Ross taught Mac and me the importance of keeping our feet dry when we were hiking."

Mac, Jamie's left-handed twin, who had no dimple on his cheek. Ross, a pediatrician and dedicated naturalist. Brett was beginning to sort out the brothers, matching each unique McLachlan with his name. "As a matter of curiosity, have you always done what Ross said?"

"When he was right."

"And if he wasn't?"

"No." He looked up from his task of pulling a white tube sock over her ankle. "It made for some interesting family situations."

"I'll just bet it did."

"There!" He kissed her knee above the top of the sock. "That looks real pretty matched up with your anklet. I'll give you the other sock, then you can have another pair just like these."

"Thanks, I can hardly wait."

"Speaking of waiting. We're only a little way from the checkpoint. Why don't you sit here and play at being lazy while I go the rest of the way? When I get back your boot will still be wet, but not quite so wet."

"A profound statement," Brett drawled as he stood.

"It was, wasn't it?" He tugged her hat over her eyes. "Sit tight, my beauty, and I'll be back before you know it."

He set off in a lope, and was swallowed up by the thick undergrowth before Brett could see again. Taking her camera from her neck and tossing her hat aside, with a smile playing over her lips, she leaned back against the slick bark and listened.

A fish flopped in the stream. A red-winged blackbird sang as he balanced on a reed that should have been too slender to bear his weight. A distance away, the egret she'd backtracked to the stream to photograph, made no sound at all as it waded along the bank. On the low-rising ridge at her back, Jamie's footsteps faded.

She could get up and make the shot now from another angle as the bird obligingly posed on one toothpick leg. But she was too comfortable and there were dozens of photographs of egrets in her portfolio of the island already.

It seemed strange to pass up even one shot. Then, maybe not, considering the changes in her once controlled and prudent life.

Nothing had been as it was since the night in the cabana. The night they had been more than man and woman. When two opposing elemental forces had merged in a violent storm of fiery passion. When emotions ripped free of the most desperate constraint, running rampant and barbaric, leaving no room in her fevered mind and body for anything or anyone but Jamie. Jamie, and the joy he gave her.

There were fading bruises on her wrists and her body, and healing scratches over his back. Evidence for both of them of the fiercely shared passion no barrier could withstand.

She had expected to be unnerved in the aftermath of complete abandon. She dreaded that apologetic tension he hated when she faced him in the unforgiving light of morning. Her apprehension was groundless. There was, instead, a naturalness and easy comfort that was new and steady and real. In stripping bare every emotion, they had become friends as well as lovers.

"Hi, Sleeping Beauty." Jamie crouched by her.

"I wasn't sleeping."

"Your eyes were closed."

"Were they?" Brett didn't remember closing them, and hadn't realized until then that she had drifted to the fringe of sleep.

She made a lovely picture drowsing in the broken light, with shadows falling in lacy patterns over her scarlet shirt. Tousled and sloe-eyed, she was earthy and guileless, and damnably irresistible.

With a light, brief touch at her throat, he asked, "Tired?"

"Just thinking." Turning her head lazily against the tree, she smiled. "I didn't hear you coming. You walk like an Indian."

"No." He sprawled at her side. "Just a Scot."

"A stubborn Scot."

"We've all been called that a time or two." He plucked a blade of grass, rolling it back and forth between his fingers. "Did you get the picture?"

"What picture?"

"The one you were after when you fell in the stream."

Brett laughed. "You know me pretty well, don't you?"

"Not as well as I'd like." In a move as natural as breathing, he stretched out on the ground, resting his head in her lap. With his arms crossed and one booted foot propped over the other, he grinned up at her. His gaze traveled over her face and throat, and down the plunging vee of her shirt. "Not nearly as well as I'd like."

"Gracious! How much better could you know me!" To her horror, a blush burned her face.

"You'd be surprised."

Hating the flags of color in her cheeks as much as Jamie hated apologies, Brett changed to an innocuous subject. "Hadn't we better be going back to the house?"

"Not yet. The launch must be running late. Hattie hasn't gone. That is why you wanted to come with me today, isn't it? To avoid Hattie's zealous ministrations."

Brett stroked his hair, grown longer and shaggier in their time on the island. The brown strands were so rich and dark they were nearly black. "She's an amazing woman and she means well, but avoiding her today was one reason I came with you."

"The other reason being that you wanted to be with me."

"My, my, my, aren't you the conceited one?"

The blade of grass in his hand brushed over her cheek and her lips. In a long, slow sweep, he drew it down her throat to the first button of her shirt. The tiny blade was like velvet moving in languid, teasing strokes at the cleft of her breasts. "Am I, my love?"

Her chest lifted as her lungs demanded a breath. The act inadvertently offering a better perspective of what he had accomplished with a blade of grass. "Conceited? Heavens, yes," she muttered, then tugged at his hair. "But not unjustifiably."

A cocky, satisfied smile quirked his lips as he flicked the stem of grass away. Settling his head more comfortably in her lap, he folded his hands over his chest again and closed his eyes.

It was easy to suspend thought, to lie in the shimmering shade, listening to the babble of the stream and the song of the blackbird. Cooled by the constant breeze, and savoring the pleasant weight of his body sprawling over hers, it was natural to drift to the past, and wonder about the future.

But her past was another life. Finished, forgotten, or resolved. Beyond her days at Eden, she had no future.

No past, no future, but today was hers.

"I lied before."

Jamie opened his eyes. They were as unfathomable as a midnight sky. "Did you, now?"

"I think I like you, after all, McLachlan."

Like, not love. A drop of water for a thirsting man. But a drop was better than nothing. Jamie would take what he was given, bide his time carefully, and hope for more.

"I'm glad," he said as impersonally as he might have said he was glad the sun was shining or the tide was rising. In a lazy voice, as he closed his eyes, he added, "The whole McLachlan clan is glad."

"Oh, are they?" she drawled. "Are they, indeed?"

"Sure they are. Like one of us, you like us all." On that little nonsequitur, with his eyes still closed, he skimmed searching fingers over the ground until he found her discarded hat. "Mind if I catch a few winks? I had a hard night. Wake me up in five minutes. By then your boot will be dry enough not to squish when you walk."

Before she could answer or object, he dropped her hat over his face and lay still. Brett was confounded by his unconcern.

She'd been teasing about not liking him and he knew it. But she'd expected more reaction than this to her confession. She expected him to care.

Surely he cared.

"Jamie?"

"Hmm?"

"What are you thinking?"

"Cherries."

"What?"

"I'm thinking about cherries."

"Cherries?"

"Uh-huh."

She expected an explanation, an elaboration, something. Instead, with his mild, lazy response, he left her hanging. She couldn't stand the illogical turn of conversation. Frustrated by his indolence and the cryptic reference, she snatched the hat from his face. "We weren't speaking of cherries," she informed him sternly as if he might've forgotten. "So why would you think of them? It makes no sense, for heaven's sake."

"It does to me." He was solemn for a moment. Too solemn. Then he winked at her, and grinned, and took the hat from her fingers. "Five minutes," he reminded as he dropped it over his face again.

Brett barely resisted pushing the hat into the smug look she was sure it hid. For the space of a heartbeat she'd thought there was more than humor burning in the sleepy gaze that had looked back at her. The wink and the lazy, tongue-in-cheek drawl proved her mistake. She recognized stonewalling when she ran into it full-tilt. He was tantalizing her with a private joke she might never understand.

Admitting defeat, she leaned back against the tree again. If this were Wonderland and she its grown-up Alice, then she'd fallen in love with the Mad Hatter.

Love.

This time the thought of loving Jamie didn't shock. The truth she'd tried to deny on the beach had blazed hot and untamed and unconditional in the cabana. To deny it now would be a travesty, a mockery of a glorious moment. A moment that would never come again no matter how long she lived.

Since then she'd carried the truth in her heart, a quiet, treasured secret even from herself. Until today, when she'd sat under a live oak with one boot on and one off, pillowing his arrogant head in her lap. Until today when she'd set it free.

Folding her hand over his, she closed her eyes. To the song of the blackbird and the chuckle of the stream, a new sound was added. Listening to the deep drone that signaled the arrival of the launch, she wondered if life could ever be the same after loving Jamie on Eden.

Brett lay on a chaise on the terrace, trying to rally some semblance of guilt. Shooed from the kitchen by Hattie immediately after lunch, leaving dishes and food to be dealt with, her conscience wanted to feel like a lazy slug, but she couldn't summon the energy. Settling deeper into plush cushions, she decided she would not feel guilty for not feeling guilty.

Hattie sang in the kitchen. Her words were slurred with broad vowels and lost consonants. The rhythm was primitive, ancient as the dialect spoken by the island people before civilization had drawn them into the modern world. The song was like the singer, exotic, intriguing, with whispers of another culture. As the smoky contralto rose in a haunting melody, Brett wondered if civilization had done them a favor.

She hadn't gone with Jamie on his daily trek to his checkpoints. In part because she knew she slowed him down, making a difficult task more difficult. And in part because she had surprised herself by missing Hattie. "I think I'm spoiled." As Lucifer looked up from his grooming, she laughed. "You're part of it, too. I missed having my shadow with me."

The monkey had literally become her shadow on Hattie's days on the island. Where Brett went, he was never far behind. When she worked in her darkroom, a place he was never allowed, he sulked.

Brett's original plan for the afternoon had been to spend a few hours in the darkroom. And then some more time evaluating the pictures she'd shot in South America. Hattie wouldn't hear of it.

Hands on hips, earrings clanging, she'd demanded, "What do you mean, you're going to lock yourself up in that little black room?"

Brett had informed her she had work to do.

"And it will get done. I have no fear of that, but not today," Hattie insisted. "Today you're going to rest and get some sun. You're beginning to look like a sickly city girl again."

Reminded that Brett was from the city, that she wasn't a girl, and that indiscriminate exposure to the sun caused cancer, Hattie had huffed and puffed in indignation, ending with a caustic observation. "Doesn't everything, if we wait long enough?" And finishing with, "Who said anything about indiscriminate. I'm not talking bake or fry. I'm talking color. Healthy color, that makes gray eyes look like smoke and cheeks like the blush of love."

Brett knew when it was futile to argue. On that provocative observation, she left the kitchen, shedding her kimono as ordered, and settled down for an afternoon of sloth and sun.

The blue-spangled maillot she wore was like the gold lame" lost to the sea, a covering, but only barely. Definitely not one she would wear on a public beach. Nor for any eyes but Jamie's.

With Lucifer at her side, chittering occasionally, she drowsed the afternoon away. As the cant of the sun changed and shadows grew long, she roused enough to fret over Jamie. She hadn't seen him since morning. He hadn't come in for lunch, nor any other of the usual times. It had happened before, but rarely. When he didn't, it meant something was not as he liked, requiring further inspection. Yet he always laughed off his long days, regaling her with tales of floating logs and nervous birds that proved to be innocent.

But the stress was always there. In the lines about his eyes, deepened by hours of squinting in the bright light, and by the furrows left by unconscious grimaces of worry. Lately, despite his assurance in the past that weapons were not part of his job description, the gun she'd seen lying on his bedside table was never far from his hand.

Only a precaution, he'd promised her when she questioned him. But a necessary one once word spread that the island was occupied, in spite of every effort to avoid it. The inhabitants of nearby islands called in regularly now. In the face of every discouragement they came to sell their wares, the produce from their gardens, or the catch of the day. Jamie was never dis-

courteous, he never bargained. Though it was never visible, the deadly weapon was never beyond his reach.

As word spread, he grew more watchful, more guarded. He was ever the tender lover, the gallant friend. He stilled teased her and laughed with her, but with each passing day the humor and the laughter seemed more forced. When he thought she wouldn't notice, he was grave and quiet.

Brett wanted to believe it was solely concern for the increased traffic to the island, that the daily routine was wearing and he was tired. She made up dozens of excuses, but there was always the suspicion that he brooded over something she had done.

Immersed in her work, or when she was with him, she could block the suspicion from her mind. In the quiet time, when she was alone, an unexpected thought or act would remind her something was amiss.

Suddenly restless, rising from the chaise, she reached for her robe, then discarded the notion. The day was too warm, and no one was around. Going to the railing in her skimpy suit, she looked toward the beach. Lifting a shading hand, she strained to see if Jamie walked the shore or the paths.

Lucifer hopped to the rail, then wrapped his little body around hers. He seemed as nervous and edgy as she. Ceasing her fruitless search, she hugged the hairy body close. "What's the matter, boy? Are you taking your cue from me, or is something else bothering you?"

Lucifer screeched and stiffened in her arms. "Hey! What is it? What's wrong?"

The screech sank to a whimper as he leapt from her arms and scurried off in the direction of Hattie's voice. Brett wondered what on earth could have come over him. Then she remembered, only one person made him act like that.

A stealthy step at the top of the terrace stairs sent her whirling about.

"LaMar!" Brett's hand flew to her chest in an unconscious effort to still a somersaulting heart. "What are you doing here? How long have you been there?"

Her questions tumbled over each other and the tall, sallow-skinned man stood motionless at the edge of the terrace. As his pale, lightless eyes ranged over her, she wished desperately she

hadn't left the kimono draped over the chaise. Retrieving it would mean crossing the terrace under his avid stare.

Gathering her composure, and stubbornly intent on forgetting she was nearly naked, she drew herself up to the last regal inch. "I asked what you're doing here."

He made a mocking bow, his tightly curled hair gleaming like sugar sands in the light. When he spoke, his voice was hoarse. The vowels were broad, the last consonants lost. Reminiscent of the dialect of Hattie's song, yet subtly different. He was troubled by the letter *s*. Hissing more than pronouncing it. "I'm sorry, miss. I didn't mean to frighten you."

Frightening her might not have been his intent, but his look said now that he had he was enjoying it. "You startled me," Brett said levelly, "but you didn't frighten me."

His mouth formed a contrite smile, but there was no contrition in the hot stare that moved over her again. "Then I'm sorry I startled you."

It took every shred of strength not to run for the kimono, to shield herself from the probing gaze that was pleased as much by her malaise as her skimpy clothing. Brett didn't know why that made this all the more unpalatable. It wouldn't bear analyzing. "I asked you what you're doing here."

"Why, missy, you know I come for my aunt twice weekly."

He was playing at hurt innocence and it made her skin crawl. "You don't normally leave the dock and you don't come at this hour." Something else occurred to her, something that struck a sense of foreboding. She hadn't heard the launch. "How did you get here?"

He arched a brow and pursed his mouth. His laugh was almost soundless, like the click of dead leaves scraping over concrete. "The launch, of course. How else?"

"Why didn't I hear it?" Brett fought back a shiver. Where was Jamie? Why hadn't he heard it and come to check?

"I don't know why you didn't hear it, missy." He flicked a finger in the direction Lucifer had gone. "Mayhap because the creature was making too much noise."

"Don't call me missy." She hadn't intended her outburst. But his tongue thrusting like a pallid worm as he enunciated the *s* made her stomach lurch.

"What would you have me call you, then...missy?" The sound of dry leaves over concrete issued again from his long throat in the deliberate hesitation. There was a threat in the obsequious mockery, more frightening than anything Brett had ever encountered.

"LaMar!" His name boomed over the terrace. Hattie stood only a few feet beyond Brett. "What the devil are you doing here?"

The change was astounding. Arrogance seeped out of him, like hot air from a leaky balloon. His shoulders hunched, his skin paled, turning the sallowness of it putty gray. Pale eyes that had been hungry and derisive were closed and flat. Only the timbre of his voice didn't change, but coupled with the other changes, what had seemed mockery now sounded servile and tentative. "I came for you, Aunt Hattie."

The man was in his late thirties, perhaps his forties, and he was acting like a child.

"You don't come to the main house, LaMar."

"But Aunt Hattie—"

"Don't!" Hattie raised a hand to stop him. "Don't whine. Have you been anywhere else on the island? Have you seen Mr. McLachlan?"

"No, ma'am."

Hattie grimaced at the servility and turned her attention to Brett. Taking up the kimono, the older woman crossed to her, draping it over shoulders as rigid as stone. "Go back to the launch," Hattie commanded LaMar without looking at him. "Wait there and don't even think to leave the dock. Lucifer and I will be along shortly."

Hattie didn't turn for an answer nor see the aberrant pleasure in LaMar's smile. A smile that left Brett shuddering as his footsteps descended the stairs. She hadn't wanted to look at him, but he was like a snake, repulsive and mesmerizing at once.

"I'm sorry he startled you, sweet girl. What did he say?"

Brett shook her head. What could she explain? His words taken alone were innocuous. How could she describe the looks, the innuendo?

"Never mind. I don't much like him myself." Hattie was walking with her to the house. "Maybe we should take a page

out of Lucifer's book. He hates the man with everything that's in him."

Brett wasn't listening. "Where's Jamie? Do you suppose...?"

"That LaMar hurt him?" Hattie was back to her old habits of completing sentences for others. "Not a chance. First of all, LaMar is too cowardly to do more than back stab."

At Brett's quick gasp, Hattie led her to a chair, patting her hand as she collapsed into it. "Now, now. Jamie's too smart for the likes of LaMar. Anyway, what reason would he have for hurting Jamie? He hasn't a clue who you are, or why you're here. Why did he come to the main house? Curiosity? Maybe to see what he might steal?

"Oh, yes," she answered in response to Brett's quick look. "I haven't a doubt he's a thief. I suspect that's why he's back in the islands. Hiding from some rap. But hurt Jamie? He couldn't, and he wouldn't have the nerve if he could."

Hattie chuckled at her convoluted reasoning. "Think about it. It will make sense eventually."

"Where is Jamie?"

"I don't know, but I'm sure he's fine. In fact, he should surely be in at any time. Would you like me to wait?"

The sooner Hattie left, the sooner LaMar, with his sepulchral laugh, would be gone. "I'll be all right. I was just startled and I overreacted."

"You're sure?"

Brett gathered her dignity and her courage to look with false calm into Hattie's worried gaze. "Jamie will be here soon."

The drone of the launch had been swallowed by the sea before Brett went to her room. Stripping off the maillot, she tossed it in the trash. It wouldn't be worn again. Feverishly, she changed into jeans and was drawing on her shirt when he stepped into her room.

"Jamie!"

He didn't speak at first. Standing just inside her open door, he held himself in check while his hard gaze moved over her. Brett waited. Beyond his name, she didn't speak again.

"Are you all right? I know LaMar didn't touch you, I would have killed him if he had." When she still didn't speak, he

turned anxious and demanding. "Tell me you're all right, Brett."

"Yes. Yes!" Jamie would have been better concerned for himself. His shirt was torn, his jeans were stained and powdered by dried salt, his face was haggard and hollow-eyed. Brett's concern was so riveted on him, she didn't remember her breasts were bare, or think to cover herself. "But you? Are you injured?"

"I'm not hurt." He smiled ruefully and touched the tear at his shoulder. "I tangled with a vine and took a tumble. Hurt my dignity more than anything." His grin was a caricature, but he tried. "I don't think even my dignity would hurt if I could hold you."

Brett had been frozen where she stood. Now she flew to him, her feet barely touching the floor. She didn't throw herself in his arms as she was desperate to do, for he looked as if the slightest jolt would send him tumbling again. Wrapping her arms around him, she drew him to her, holding him.

"Dear Lord," she cried as she felt the tremors in his arms. "You're exhausted."

"Tough day," he admitted tersely, and buried his face in her hair. "If you'll stand here and keep your arms around me, I'll be right as rain in a minute."

"No, you won't." Brett drew away enough to look him over carefully. "But you will be as soon as you soak a while in a hot tub."

"I'm a shower man, I don't soak in tubs," Jamie protested.

"Today you do." Brett was adamant as she led him to her bath. While the tub was filling, she undressed him, brushing away his hands when he would help. First to go was his shirt, then, with a firm hand at his shoulder, she guided him to the edge of the tub. When he was seated she knelt to unlace his boots, pulling them off along with his socks. Getting him back to his feet was a chore. Once she had, she made quick work of his belt and the snap of his jeans. When they slipped from his thighs and over his ankles, and he was completely naked, she inspected him for injury.

"I'm not a horse or a side of beef, you know."

Brett forced a grin. "I know." Sliding her palms down his side, she assured herself his ribs were not broken. The only

lasting evidence from his fall were new scratches converging with the old. Remembering how he'd gotten the first marks across his back, she murmured, "I know very well."

He reached for her and she danced away. "Oh, no, you don't. We have more important things to attend to than your libido."

"We do?"

"Yes!" She was emphatic as she guided him into the tub. "You're so tired you can't think straight. You're walking proof that man can't play the consummate lover every night into the wee hours, then transform into the wily, omnipresent guardian by day."

"I can't?"

"Shall I get a mirror and show you?" With great relief that this was only a profound exhaustion, she knelt at the side of the tub. Taking up a cloth, she began to bath him.

"Sweetheart." A tense muscle flickered in his jaw. "You're dead right about one thing, I can't think straight, and we have a lot of thinking to do. So, would you do me a favor?"

Brett sat back on her heels. "Anything."

The muscles flickered again, his voice was rasping. "Just so we don't have to deal with my libido, would you hand me that cloth and button your damn shirt?"

Brett laughed, deciding as she complied, that he wasn't so tired, after all.

"*The Dancer's* out of touch." This bit of information was delivered dispassionately, but Jamie's even tone couldn't hide the grim cast of his features. Folding a hand around his second iced drink, he looked through the waning light toward the sea. "She was there at first contact and all was well. Then, without warning, nothing."

"What are you thinking?" Brett sat across from him, poised to get another drink if he needed more to replenish the fluids his exacting day had sucked from his body.

"I don't know what I'm thinking." His fingers raked through his damp hair, leaving it tousled and falling over his forehead. "These are Simon's best people, nothing gets past them. Yet it's as if they've vanished."

"You spent the day ranging over the island, watching alone, waiting to reestablish contact." No wonder he was weary. But he was quick to recover. Already, his hand was steady and his color better. Brett knew he was a man who could ask the impossible of himself, and with a few minutes' rest be ready to go again.

"I was on the ridge when LaMar came with his engine running half speed. He didn't hurry up to the house, so I had time to be near before he walked up on you. I heard and I saw." Distaste and anger thinned his mouth. "Then he was all innocence with Hattie as they left. I watched from cover until they were out of sight, but I didn't like his prowling around. Maybe it's nothing and I'm just jumpy because of *The Dancer*. Maybe not."

"As ugly as his visit was, it jogged my memory. I know what bothered me in my studio the other day. LaMar isn't Hattie's usual transportation. Another nephew, who's done it for years, broke his leg. LaMar stepped in."

"When?" Jamie was alert, his eyes narrowed.

"I'd asked Hattie and had forgotten. She assured me this happened months before we came. That means there's no possible connection, doesn't it?"

"I don't know." To the men of The Watch, no act was insignificant, or innocent, until proven so. "Some things begin one way and with opportunity, become another." He walked to the edge of the terrace. His jeans and navy shirt were fresh. Dark clothing, that suited the man and the times he faced.

Staring at his broad back, she asked, "What now?"

Jamie wheeled about. "I have to go out again. Whatever problems *The Dancer* was experiencing may be ended. Or they may not."

Brett knew the latter meant trouble. Jamie had already briefed her on what could happen, and what must be done, until she was well versed and prepared for any circumstance. After his bath, he'd ranged through the house, closing it down, giving security systems a final inspection. As he went, with Brett always only a step behind, he had gathered supplies and talked.

The time for talk had ended.

"Keep the doors closed. This could be nothing. LaMar's behavior and *The Dancer's* disappearance may be coincidence. But assume it isn't. You know what to do?"

At her assent, he moved to her, taking her face in his hands. "You won't see me, but I'll never be far away. If they come..." He didn't finish. Didn't speculate on who *they* might be. "I'll be here first. Trust me."

"Yes."

He kissed her quickly and backed away. "Go inside."

Brett stood, storing away the sight of him for the hours to come. "Be careful."

"Always."

When the door closed behind her, he seemed a world apart, sealed away by panes of heavy glass. She clicked the last locks into place. He smiled, touched his forehead in a salute of farewell, and faded into the twilight.

Brett sat for hours, not moving, hearing every sound, flinching at rustling shadows. Her shoulders ached, her arms, her body, her legs. But she didn't move. She dared not move.

It was midnight when they came, but as he promised, Jamie was there before them.

Ten

Brett had never seen anyone lie so still. Through night and dawn and into the morning, Jamie had lain on a small hillock that jutted from the side of the ridge. He spoke to her periodically, quietly, but he hadn't looked away from the house. His concentration channeled in one direction, he'd become a living laser. All mental and physical energies fused into a single wavelength. A single concern.

Trespassers in Eden. Men of unconscionable principles, who searched for them.

There were six, each dressed in dark clothing as Jamie was. As she was. Skilled and practiced, they had come silently with a military certainty, finding for their efforts an abandoned house. For the luck of a moonless night had given cover to the escape of a canny adversary.

While they were still at the dock, moving like ghosts, Jamie led her quickly and in a random course through dense underbrush. The ridge, unique to the island and once a barren dune, teemed with life. Insects swarmed. Small nocturnal animals skittered away from her step. Palmetto spikes sawed at her, twisted myrtle clawed and clung. The rotting leaves of live oak

turned slippery under her feet. And when she fell, a dusting of sand cut as viciously as glass.

But Jamie was always there. Guiding, reinforcing her strength with his, encouraging with the reminder that the ridge meant sanctuary.

At the end of an arduous journey, when she'd begun to realize the scope and size of the island, she'd seen the result of his day. The explanation for his enervating fatigue. Among his other duties he'd taken time to build a lean-to of palms and ferns and natural brush. The structure was small, a crawl space, the width of their bodies only if they touched, and giving Jamie a half foot beyond his height.

It wasn't pretty, it wasn't comfortable, but it served. Most crucial of all, from a short distance it blended into the terrain and became invisible. An unsuspecting tracker could walk within a few feet of it and never be the wiser. So long as he hadn't the benefit of a canine nose.

But there were only men tramping the forest and stalking the beach. Only men turning Jordana McCallum's quiet gardens and beautiful home into an armed camp. Men who had counted on surprise and only themselves to capture their prey.

Prey. Brett shivered in her hiding place. An ugly word, inferring vulnerability, defenseless victims. But Jamie was not vulnerable, and not defenseless, and in his care neither was she.

Now the sun lifted above the trees, bearing down unmercifully, without bias. It was midday, and beyond sipping tepid bottled water, he had lain without respite since dawn.

Remembering her own rigid stillness the night before, the cramping and the pain, Brett marveled at his endurance.

"Brett." His low tone was only a ripple in the undisturbed quiet and he didn't wait for her response. "There's a ship on the horizon. Take the glasses, go to the thicket facing the beach, try to read her name. Stay well back in the shade. Keep the light from the lens. If it isn't *The Dancer*, we don't want whoever's out there to know we're looking looking at them."

From the cache Jamie had prudently brought before he knew it would be needed, Brett took out the glasses. She didn't have to be told that she must go cautiously. One false move, one glimpse, and all of Jamie's efforts would be wasted.

In the thicket the air was sultry, the little cool its murky shade might offer was lost as the wind faltered. Sweat beaded her forehead and trickled in her eyes. She wiped it away in a subtle move and felt another form in its place. Her shirt was soaked and clinging as Jamie's had been for hours.

Lifting the glasses to stinging eyes, she swept them over the sea until the small ship came into focus. The name was not readily visible. She had to wait until the vessel came about. Deciphering its name, she invested a few more minutes assessing the crew before returning to Jamie.

"It isn't *The Dancer*," he said before she could, as she slipped down beside him.

"*Lazy Daze*, a deep-sea fishing charter."

Jamie caught back a sigh. "She was by a few days ago."

"Legitimate?"

"I think so."

"Could we signal them? Have them call for help?"

"All it would do is give our position away. The new tenants at the house would be all over us before help arrived."

"Then do we stay and wait, hoping *The Dancer* or someone from The Watch will show?"

"You stay, you wait." He turned to her. "I'm going down."

Her first reaction was disbelief. The second, panic. "You can't! They'll kill you." *They* had faces now, blurred from her distant vantage point. But enough to recognize they were hard, grizzled Anglo-Saxons. Soldiers of fortune? An elite cadre of the drug legion? Who knew? Who cared? All Brett knew or cared for was that he would be in danger. Her voice dropped to a raw plea. "Please, don't."

"I'm not going for tea, or to chat. With luck, they won't know I'm there. But I have to go."

"Why?" She forced an outward calm, but panic fluttered in her chest. "Tell me why."

"Sweetheart, I wouldn't go if there was another choice. If they can, Jeb and Matthew and Mitch will come to us, but we can't wait. We've bought twenty-four hours here. Thirty-six hours, tops. We can't push it much longer."

"What are you going to do?"

"Disable their radio and their boat, so they can't call for help, or follow when you and I take a boat ride."

"They haven't smashed Patrick's boats?"

"To smithereens," Jamie said almost jauntily. He didn't take their situation lightly, nor the destruction of Patrick's prime seagoing vessels, but after the hours of inactivity he was looking forward to moving, to doing something positive.

"Then what..." To her horror, Brett's voice broke. Fear and confusion that had lurked in her eyes for hours, nearly paralyzed her throat. Jamie had too much to contend with to have an hysterical woman on his hands. An emphatic breath shuddered through her as she regained control. Her face was ashen, but her voice was steady. "What do you plan to do?"

"There's a johnboat in the edge of the marsh, a derelict that slipped anchor in some storm. It's caught in debris beyond the point." He knew he needn't explain the johnboat was a small skiff used to fish in shallow waters. Or that the point was the end of the island where the shore curved from the sea toward the waterway. "It's seaworthy, but only just. The best I can say for it is it won't sink."

Brett didn't argue. She'd come to know Jamie so well, she knew he'd chosen this hazardous strategy because it was their best recourse. Perhaps their only recourse. "When will you go?"

"At midnight."

"And in the meantime?"

"In the meantime, I'll brief you, prepare you for our jaunt over the island and our little cruise. Once that's accomplished, if you'll take the watch, I'll get some sleep."

"Of course I will." Brett didn't trust herself to say more.

"Beyond resting and keeping your eyes and ears open, there'll be little for you to do until I get back. But, just in case I don't." He hadn't been looking at her, his attention had remained riveted on the house and the grounds. Now he faced her.

The last shred of color drained from Brett's face. In the sultry heat, she looked shriveled with cold.

"Hey." He touched a palm to her cheek, his thumb brushing over the bruised shadow beneath her eye. "It won't happen. I'll make sure it doesn't. But—"

"Just in case," she finished for him.

He took his hand away, closing it into an impotent fist. His bleak gaze returned to the house below. "Then you'll have to go out alone."

The next hour was filled with instruction. Though there was not that much to tell, he went over and over it. As if by pounding it into her, he could insure her success and her safety. "All right," he finished at last. "You know the way? You won't forget the landmarks?"

"I know them."

"You know what to take, and what to wear?"

"Yes, Jamie."

"You'll go at first light? You won't wait?"

When Brett hesitated, he reared up, forgetting his watch, grasping her by the shoulders. "You won't wait! Say it! Promise."

His fingers dug into her shoulders, but Brett didn't care. Tonelessly, she did as he asked. "I won't wait. I promise."

Jamie sighed and released her. "Good girl."

"I haven't been a girl in a long time." Her inane remark brought a travesty of a smile to his lips.

"No, you haven't," he agreed, the smile fading. "You're a magnificent woman, Brett Sumner. You've proven it on Eden."

Brett had no answer for him. Her throat, taut against the threat of tears, would not allow more than a soft moan. Battling her own weakness, she slipped away to wait in the shelter, facing the nightmarish possibilities of his venture alone.

Hours later, when he called, she went to him, teeth clenched, body inflexible, and anguish hidden deep in her heart. Taking up the watch, she listened to familiar sounds in an unfamiliar place—Jamie settling down to sleep. The soft, weary sigh as he stretched out in the lean-to. His slow, even breathing. His stillness as he slept at last.

The men who violated Eden were gathering on the terrace by the kitchen. Two had stayed at the house throughout the day, while four combed the beach and the marsh for scent of their quarry. Now they sat on the terrace, drinking, smoking, plundering Hattie's immaculate kitchen. With Patrick's boats smashed and contact with the mainline cut off, they were smug and sure, willing to taunt those they sought with their nonchalance.

Tomorrow they would search the ridge.

"But that's tomorrow," Brett muttered. Tomorrow there would be no one-on the ridge.

She looked into a fiery sky. The sun was setting. Before it was fully risen again, she would be leaving the island.

With Jamie, or without him.

Before she could wake him at the appointed time, he was there by her side. "Anything new?"

"Nothing."

"They're an arrogant bunch, sure they have us cornered. We can make that work for us." He had dressed in fresh, dark clothes. His boots had been discarded for moccasins. A gift from Matthew.

The pistol was tucked in his belt within easy reach.

When he was ready, he lifted her face to his in the starlight. "You know what to do."

It wasn't a question, but she answered. "To the last detail."

"And you will?"

"I won't break my promise."

"I'll be back."

"I know." Please God! Brett pleaded.

He kissed her, touching only her lips. A poignant kiss, sweeter than any they'd shared. "Take care."

Brett started to speak, then with a desperate shake of her head, rose on tiptoe and wound her arms around his neck to kiss him again. Drawing away, she touched his face, keeping her fingertips at his lips. "I'll be waiting."

Jamie tried a smile and lost it. "Only till dawn."

"Only until then."

"I'll be back long before." He tugged a tangled curl lying at her nape and walked to the head of the hidden path he would take.

He was nearly swallowed by the lush growth when she called out to him. "Jamie."

He stopped. Waited. Hoping she would say the words he needed.

Silence spun like a web between them. Unbroken gossamer.

Brett fought back the gentle and overwhelming tenderness that prompted her outburst. If she began, she wouldn't stop.

This was not the time to speak from the heart. Jamie didn't need any more emotional baggage to deal with.

"Brett?"

"I only wanted to wish you luck."

In the gloom he bowed his head, acknowledging her wish, hiding his disappointment. "Thanks."

In a step, he disappeared, absorbed by the undergrowth and the night. The longest hours Brett would ever know had begun.

The house was ablaze with lights. If anyone slept it was not in darkness. A sentry paced the dock, another the terraces. The latter was a shadow in the light spilling from unshuttered doors. Each time either turned, or paused to light a cigarette, or spoke to a comrade, Brett froze, certain Jamie had been discovered.

He'd been gone for hours, but she had seen no sign of him. There was no indication he had succeeded in his mission. Neither had an alarm been raised, and she was grateful.

The sky was still dark, but the first thread of muted crimson lay over the sea.

Dawn.

"Not yet," Brett cried in a whisper, wishing she could take back her promise.

Her eyes were tired, grainy with the strain of searching through the darkness. The intruders' boat rode low in the water, as it had from the first. Nothing had changed. But had she missed something? Had Jamie been taken? Were they waiting for her to move?

Could she go without him?

Doubt stabbed through her, shredding her conscience. Promises aside, what good was her life if she abandoned the one responsible for keeping it?

"I can't." Rising from her knees, she kicked aside the pack she would've carried to the skiff. The way she turned, the direction her steps took her, was not toward the point.

"Where the hell do you think you're going?"

The whispered growl cracked like an angry shot over the ridge. Brett spun, smothering her outcry.

Jamie stood under the twisted branch of an oak, his posture as angry as his voice. "Unless you've moved the johnboat, you're going in the wrong direction."

"You're back!" She didn't care how stupid it sounded. All she knew was that Jamie was here.

"I kept my promise, but you seem to have forgotten yours." He took a step closer. "Shall I tell you where you were going, and why?"

"It doesn't matter now."

"Planning a little trade? Your faulty memory for my life?"

"I don't know." Brett's arms hung helplessly at her sides. Her fisted hands drove her nails into her palms. "But I couldn't leave without you."

"Little fool." A step and he drew her roughly into his arms. "Damn you." Then, in a low rumble as he kissed her, "Brave little fool."

Brett wound her arms around his waist, holding him as close as she could, listening to the pounding of his heart against her cheek. "Call me whatever you like, I'm too happy to have you back to care."

He put her from him, reluctantly. "We have to move out. Now."

"The radio? The boat?"

"Disabled and sinking."

"But I didn't see you!"

"Sweetheart, Simon didn't train me to be seen." Jamie shrugged into the pack that was his, and held Brett's for her. When it was adjusted to please him, he glanced at the sky. "We have a couple of hours before full daylight. By then, because the tide is with us, we should be beyond their reach."

"Ready?" He bent nearer as he asked, and in the red wash of the sky, Brett saw new scratches across his cheek.

"I'm ready." She made no comment on his injury. She wondered if he knew he had it.

"One last thing." He walked to the lean-to. In seconds, with its supporting poles removed, it lay on the ground. Jamie scattered the boughs over the hillock, covering the trampled grass where they'd sat and walked. The camouflage wouldn't bear close inspection, but every second it bought them would count.

Their race across the crest of the ridge was swift and unhampered. Jamie knew every inch of the island. In a land that was always changing, his knowledge was phenomenal, and it explained the long hours he'd been away from the house. The way he took her had been scouted as recently as the day before. With total familiarity and night vision surpassed only by Matthew Sky, he led her with ease where others could not have gone.

Brett stumbled, Jamie was there to pick her up and kiss her abraded hands. Then they were running again. A race with the sun.

She lost track of time. All her efforts were concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other and keeping Jamie in her sight. Her head was down, her legs protesting, when he stopped her with a hand on her shoulder. Lifting her head, Brett saw for the first time that they had left the ridge and traversed a dune, and were on level ground. The point was only a few feet beyond them.

"Wait here, I'll get the skiff." He moved away, scanning the deserted beach before he began to run again.

This small part of the shore, separated from the main beach by a stone jetty, was seldom used. Scattered hulks of driftwood lifted skeletal arms in stark relief against the sky. Shells lay in profusion over the sand, their creamy surfaces catching the rosy first light.

Jamie was nowhere in sight. Brett was alone on the shore. Sinking down to a salt-weathered log, she rested, letting herself be seduced by this lonesome place. Lulled by its peace, she could forget there was danger and ignore her leaden limbs.

The hand that clamped over her mouth, and the burly arm that snaked around her body, came out of the darkness. His stealthy footsteps over the dune had been hidden by the wash of the surf.

"Well, now! What have we here?" He jerked her back hard against him, brutal fingers sealing her nose as well as her mouth as she started to struggle. He spoke in the sinister, guttural rasp of vocal chords irreparably damaged and left nearly voiceless. "Oh, baby!" His free hand ranged over her in indecent invasions, leaving pain and ignominy in its wake.

"Baby! Baby!" A chuckle as lewd as it was vicious, turned her blood to ice. "And the bastard at the house said there wasn't no reward in walking off insomnia."

His breath was hot at her ear. In the millisecond before he'd grabbed her, she'd smelted the rankness of him. But too late. Too late to cry out. To give warning. Now there was neither odor to sicken nor oxygen for her starving lungs. No strength for warning. As Brett shook her head and clawed at his arms, trying to dislodge him, tasting the salt of her own blood on her tongue, the vague and faceless was real. Evil kept at bay by The Watch was upon her. Threatening her.

Sinking into an airless world, she grew muddled, perceptions surreal. In the downward spiraling vortex cries of a frightened animal reverberated in her head. Stifled whimpers of horror and helplessness, the mindless terror of a frenzied creature caught in a pitiless trap. Pitting the last of waning, suffocated strength against one far superior, she realized the anguish was her own.

"A fighter, by God!" He shook her like a rag doll, laughing at deep gouges striating his forearms, spilling his own blood. "We'll like that. The harder you fight, the longer you'll last. Maybe long enough for all of us. Even several times for me. For Webber.

"First there's the little matter of your boyfriend. But once that's settled..." His hand clamped over her breast, squeezing until new pain penetrated the gray haze washing over Brett.

Jamie! In a mind nearly beyond coherence, he rose tall and proud and good. This animal must not have him. He must not! Reaching to a core of strength never tapped, she pried her mouth open. Elated with this little success, and pitifully grateful for the wisp of air, she snarled like the animal whose cries still echoed in her head. Clamping her teeth over the meaty base of his thumb, she bit him, tearing viciously at him with all the force her jaws could exert.

Webber screamed, a barbaric shriek scouring his brutalized throat.

Until its agony, transcending the whispering rush of the tide, their struggle had been nearly silent. Until then, Jamie didn't know.

His head jerked up. Frozen in horror, his first thought was of Brett, his second an animal. Before the ululation howl ended, hackles rising, he knew it was a man. Flinging aside the rope he'd used to beach the skiff, he sprinted in a frenzy to where he'd left Brett.

The specter that rose from the moonlit darkness was a nightmare from hell. Brett flailed weakly at a snarling, cursing monster of a man who meant to strangle her. Jamie's hand went by instinct to the revolver at his waist. But he had no shot. In the weak light, the struggling bodies intertwined and merged into one writhing shape.

He couldn't risk Brett, or raise an alarm. Slinging the weapon aside, he launched himself at them, his body and its impetus sent them sprawling. Brett in one direction, her attacker another.

Rolling with his momentum, Jamie was first on his feet. His heart skipped a beat as he saw Brett stagger to her feet. He would be thankful she was alive, later, when there was time. As a brutal hand closed over his ankle, dragging him back to the sand, he feared there would be no later.

He was huge, and strong, and unwashed, this man that in seconds had been dubbed the monster. His arms were enormous, his hands, hammers. He was as intent on smothering Jamie in the sand while he beat him to death as he'd been in throttling Brett.

Straining to find air with mouth and nose buried, Jamie knew he was dealing with sheer ruthlessness. This would be kill or maim, or be killed. And worse for Brett.

A wild buck and a butting head took the monster by surprise, heaving him from Jamie's back. Before he could scramble away, Jamie was on his feet, following through with a savage backhand. The big man tumbled again, but this time he was not caught by surprise. He didn't underestimate his opponent. With startling agility, he was up on cat's feet, racing for Jamie's fallen revolver. Brett was there before him, snatching it from his fingertips.

With an open palm, he swatted her aside like a moth. Cursing when she kept her hold on the gun, he spun toward Jamie. Grinning, he curled his fingers, taunting the smaller, lighter,

man. "Come on, then, pretty boy. A fight it is. We'll see how pretty you are when Webber finishes with you."

He taunted Jamie, but he was a seasoned mercenary who knew danger when it looked him coldly in the eye. "What's the matter?" He cocked his head. "You don't want to play? I do. With your girlfriend."

Disappointed when Jamie stood impervious to his bating, Webber began to move. Skimming through frothy breakers and sand in a half crouch, long arms nearly touching the ground, he circled his quarry. Once, twice around, as Jamie turned slowly, calmly, with him.

With an impatient snort, Webber lowered his bullish head and charged. Jamie danced away, taking a glancing blow at his thigh that folded his leg beneath him like a breached hinge. Webber was quick, but in spite of his bruises, Jamie was quicker. As the brute was slowing his charge and turning, Jamie was on his feet and ready.

When the massive, unwashed body lurched at him, Jamie's fists were closed, not open. The blows were brutal with strength fueled by rage at the threat to Brett. With all that he had, Jamie hit him. Webber staggered and came back for more. Jamie dodged, struck savagely, and felt the bones break in his hand.

The blow did not stop the man. He wouldn't stop. Jamie hit him again. Sidestepped and hit again. And then again. Bones already broken, shattered.

Webber stood, head hanging, arms swinging limply from his shoulders. Jamie cradled his hand in the bend of an elbow, swaying as he braced for more.

Brett scrambled to her feet and started to him.

"Stay back," Jamie barked, his riveted stare never turning.

The monster snarled, took a shambling step, collapsed in the surf and lay still. Shuddering in relief, warding Brett off with an abrupt shake of his head, Jamie slumped where he stood. But there was no time to rest. No chance to recover. Staggering to Webber, he grasped his collar and dragged him from the water. The effort drove Jamie to his knees. He knelt there, shivering in the lowering tide.

Slowly he climbed to his feet. In a dragging step, he went to Brett, taking the sand-covered pistol from her fist. The safety, too tense for her wet, shaking fingers, was still engaged. "What

were you going to do with this, sweetheart? Club him to death?"

Brett lifted a gaze that glittered with unshed tears, her chin tilted ever so fiercely. "If I had to."

Jamie's laugh was a hurting sound. "You would, wouldn't you?"

"Don't laugh!" Brett cried. "Don't even pretend to laugh."

"No." Touching her jaw with the back of a battered, shattered hand, he winced. More in regret for the trickle of blood and the swelling that marred her face than from his own pain. "I won't laugh. Not ever."

With his arms, he drew her to him. They needed to go. The tide was right, and Webber wouldn't be out much longer. But he needed a minute, only a minute to hold her.

"We have to go." He muttered the seemingly endless litany into her hair.

Brett stepped out of Jamie's embrace, careful not to bump his broken, misshapen hand and useless fingers. Struggling with tears that threatened to choke her, she kept her eyes averted. There was so much she wanted to say to him. Yet there was nothing she could. Nothing he would listen to.

The rush of the receding tide enveloped them in its constant rhythm. The sky bathed them in reflected crimson, a harbinger of the sun that would soon be rising. It was time.

"I'm ready." Brett looked at his hands, one bruised, one broken, sparing herself nothing. Swallowing hard, her voice was strong but unsteady when she spoke again. "I'll get the supplies."

Jamie didn't argue, but he was by her side when she used a length of rope and a belt to tie Webber to a clump of driftwood. And when it was time to take the loaded skiff into deep water, it was Jamie who guided it and Brett who held back a sob with each effort he made.

The tide was running hard and swift, and with them. By the time the sun had fully risen, they were a distant speck in the vast blue sea.

The hunted, beyond the wrath of the hunter.

"It won't be long." Jamie sat perfectly still, his hand in his lap. Nothing could keep the gentle rocking motion of the wa-

ter from sending shards of agony lancing to his shoulder, but bracing the distorted, discolored horror that had been his right hand against his body helped a bit. There was no aid that could be given, for now his injury was better left alone.

The sun beat down, and though he'd insisted on hats and sun-screen, time was not on their side.

"Simon has already sent an investigative team on its way. He wouldn't let either *The Dancer* or the island be out of touch long."

Brett didn't comment. She'd said no more than a few words for hours. She couldn't think of Simon or the crew of *The Dancer*. She couldn't think of rescue. She didn't feel the burning heat, nor notice that her feet were soaked in three inches of seawater. She couldn't think of anything but Jamie. She didn't need to be a medic to know that the fingers that had wrung tears and laughter from the piano, would never move with such awesome heart-stopping skill over the keys again.

She had done this to him. If she hadn't taken that particular plane from South America. If she hadn't dawdled in the terminal, composing a photo of an intriguing stranger. If she hadn't forgotten her luggage. If she could remember.

If!

So many ifs, and because of them Jamie had lost something precious.

"Hey!" he said softly. "Are you all right? You've been quiet for hours."

"Just thinking."

"Want to talk about it?"

"There's nothing to talk about."

Though he wanted to know what had kept her brooding for so long, Jamie didn't push. Turning from her, he scanned the endless water. Simon would come, but finding one tiny john-boat drifting with the whim of the current wouldn't be simple.

When the tide turned, with Brett's help at the oars, he would steer toward the waterway. The expanse offered miles with no land or safe harbor in sight, but better than the open sea or being caught in active shipping lanes.

Hour stretched into tedious hour and they spoke little. There was food among their supplies, but as they rocked like flotsam beneath the baking sun, neither took more than water. Brett

slumped deeper into lethargy, and finally drowsed. And despite pain that had become a constant, so did Jamie.

They were drifting, bobbing like a cork in the turning tide, when the sound of distant thunder woke them. Brett roused instantly and Jamie much slower.

"A storm?" She looked at a crystal-clear sky.

Jamie moved ponderously, the gaze he turned to the sky was glazed with fever. But even to his muddled thoughts, the sound that beat at the air was too regular. Squinting into the light, he waited for synapses to reconnect, telling his brain what his eyes should see. Slowly the speck that seemed to rise out of distant Eden took a dragonfly shape.

"Helicopter." He identified tersely through cracked lips.

Like decoys in a gallery, they sat while the monstrous machine ranged so low that spray churned by its rotors splashed against it. As it maneuvered, dipping and rising, honing at last on the little boat, Jamie opened his arms, waiting until Brett came into them. "Pray," he muttered as the great machine bore down on them. "Pray that it's Simon."

Brett would never forget what it was to have a prayer answered. She would never forget the familiar, grizzled face of the leader of The Watch peering down on them, first in concern, then with a smile. Jeb Tanner had never been so dashing as when he'd clambered over the side of the johnboat after dropping from the hovering helicopter into the frothy sea.

With a drenched arm around her shoulders and a shout barely heard above the rotors, he took command. "Jamie first," he told her as he signaled for help. "Then you."

Matthew was next from the helicopter, returning with Jamie cradled in his arms. Then Brett was lifted into its gaping maw, followed by Jeb.

It was Simon who peeled the harness from her. Simon who sat with her while Matthew worked over an unconscious Jamie.

"Is it serious?" Simon's voice thickened with worry.

Matthew sat back on his haunches, a helpless look on his face. "Damnably serious, but not life-threatening. He passed out in my arms, finally, from the pain." Eyes like lasers swept toward the island, then a chilling snarl promised vengeance. "Webber."

"Later," Simon agreed bleakly. Then as Jeb joined Mitch at the controls of the helicopter, he gave the order to head for the mainland.

In the droning backwash of the engines, the cockpit was silent. No one spoke of Jamie's hands.

Once Brett roused herself from her huddled despair. "How did you know?"

"Hattie." Simon replied gruffly. "Her suspicions of her nephew finally coalesced into something concrete. She called Patrick. Patrick called me."

"LaMar," Brett said certainly. "Lucifer never liked him."

"Smart monkey. Once we hit the island, Webber sang like a canary. He knew about the skiff. The rest is time and history."

There was more. More to tell. More to hear. But her mind couldn't take it in. Her thoughts were too filled with Jamie. Matthew came to her from the jump seat by Jamie's stretcher. She waved him away. "I'm fine."

Before he'd given priority to Jamie, Matthew's keen, intuitive gaze had swept over her, arriving at the same conclusion. Returning to Jamie, he laid a palm over his fevered forehead. "The injection I gave him has taken effect. He'll sleep, but if you'd like to sit with him, I think he'd know you were here."

"No," Brett said too quickly. "I put him there, Matthew. I did this to him. Now there's nothing I can do for him. He needs you far more than he would ever need me."

Matthew was too wise to contradict her. As she turned toward the mainland looming before them, his gaze met Simon's.

They were men whose lives were fraught with tragedy and suffering. Men who knew the dark abyss of unreasoning guilt. No one knew better than they that one day she must face it and deal with it, but in her own way.

In the renewed silence that descended between them, neither young eyes nor old held the answer Brett must find for herself.

Eleven

"We have the briefcase. Mitch Ryan retrieved it an hour ago."

"Then it's over?" Brett smoothed a crease from the sleeve of her navy dressing gown. Frowning at the burgundy logo on the cuff, she tried to absorb what Simon was saying.

"Ironically or stupidly, the damning list hadn't been destroyed. In a matter of a few days, it will have passed through the hands of a select few." There was the air of a man redeemed about Simon. "Affording all of us the safety of numbers."

Brett was bewildered. Everything had moved too fast and too calmly. Less than twenty-four hours ago she'd stood on the shore of Eden, caught in a life-or-death struggle. Now the window at her back framed the grounds of Grayson House, as familiar and tranquil as this room where she'd first met Simon.

Where she'd wakened with a part of her memory missing and found Jamie by her bedside, standing guard as he had from the first. As he had to the end, risking everything and losing something beyond price.

Brett stopped herself. She couldn't think of that. Not if she intended to survive this meeting. In an agitated gesture, she tugged the belt at her waist tighter, clinging to a thin thread of composure. By keeping her attention riveted on Simon, she could avoid looking at Jamie. But nothing could erase her first unprepared glimpse of the man who had been her friend and her lover.

The tap at the door was supposed to have been the nurse with a change of clothes. It *should* have been the nurse, not Jamie in an identical navy dressing gown with the same logo emblazoned on the cuff tucked in the sling that supported his right hand.

She wasn't ready to face him. Not so soon. Yet he'd stood there with Simon by his side, leaving her no recourse but to ask him in.

In the evasive chitchat that followed, bruises and sunburn and dehydration were dismissed. They established by omission that everyone was fine. Brett was fine. Jamie was fine. Simon was fine. The whole blasted world was fine!

And Jamie's hand was not destroyed.

Lies! All lies! The horror of their careful fencing was sickening and Brett was wretchedly grateful when Simon had ended the farce with his customary candor.

"We have the list," he said now with satisfaction. "You'll be free to go as soon as the doctors release you."

"Free? Just like that, you walk in and calmly tell me everything is resolved and I can go?" Her voice quavered and thinned.

"Just like that," Simon acknowledged.

"I don't know if I expected blazing guns or what, but certainly nothing this simple."

Simon could have told her of blazing guns in the retaking of the island by The Black Watch. But he would leave that for another day. "LaMar was the key. He isn't part of the cartel, but he is a two bit thief who knows the value of information. Your presence on the island was just mysterious enough that he thought it might have some value to someone, somewhere."

"He was looking for a way to turn it into a buck when *The Dancer* came in to his village for repairs." Jamie took up the narrative. "There was no way to keep word of her quiet, the

scuttlebutt of a deep-sea fishing vessel with powerful radio equipment spread like wildfire. He wasn't sure the situations were connected, but it made for a better story, driving up the price of his information."

Brett flinched when Jamie spoke. He saw her back stiffen and muscles in her jaw flicker over clenched teeth. He didn't understand the change in her any more than he had the stilted and polite little conversation moments before. He wanted to shake her and make her explain, but dread of the revulsion he might see restrained him.

"Information is only valuable when there's a market." Brett addressed Simon as if Jamie hadn't spoken. "Of all the possible places, how did the cartel happen to choose Eden?"

"That's a long story of hate and vengeance. And it didn't just happen." Simon came to stand by her. He was as perplexed by Brett's brittle manner as Jamie. Maybe more. He'd witnessed her paralyzing terror as Jamie had lain unconscious on a stretcher in a helicopter. What he'd seen had gone far beyond gratitude or guilty concern.

"Wouldn't you like to sit down, Brett?" Touching her shoulder was like coming in contact with a low-voltage wire. She was taut, with every nerve thrumming. Simon knew she could come apart at any provocation. "This could take a while."

Brett didn't bend. She dared not. "I'm all right as I am."

Simon wouldn't push. In this fragile state she couldn't stand much pushing. "Jamie?"

Jamie hardly heard Simon as he willed Brett to look at him. When she turned to stare out the window instead, grief etched his face. "I'll stand."

"Then we all will." Resisting the urge to knock their heads together and force them to kiss and make up like quarreling children, Simon began his story. "There's a man called Thomas Jeter. Once, his consuming purpose was to bring down The Watch and, thereby, Simon McKinzie. He was a government whiz kid operating behind the scenes, with connections in South America.

"He was caught, convicted and sent to prison as a traitor years ago. I won't go into his crimes, or the reasons for his hatred beyond that they were political. I became his obsession

and he knew me as only one who was obsessed could. He amassed a file on who I knew, who knew me, and in what capacities."

Brett had been drawn from her blind regard of the grounds. She frowned at Simon, not certain how something that occurred so long ago could apply now.

"Old hatreds don't die easily," Simon addressed her misgiving. "In obsession, the memory grows sharper, the need for revenge greater."

"Are you suggesting someone from the cartel got to this Jeter in prison and he told them about Patrick's island?"

"I don't have to suggest, Brett, that's how it happened. It isn't as farfetched as it sounds. Their cue was Jamie. He was recognized at the airport. A music lover among our criminal element, no doubt." Simon turned a bitter smile toward the man who stood silently by him. "In all the years he served, he was never connected to The Watch until what should have been his last mission."

"He—Jamie—was recognized, and then?" She was anxious to know, to understand, to have done with it.

"From our past history Jeter made the connection between the McLachlans and me. He came up with other names we had in common. Other Scots. Patrick's was one of them."

Brett was still incredulous. "This sounds like a fairy tale."

"It tells how worried those involved with the cartel were and how far-reaching their sources are. No lead was too small. No investigative effort was too great. Patrick's wasn't the only name that surfaced, his connection wasn't the only one to be probed. That's why it took the weeks to find you. For that matter, Eden wasn't the only property of Patrick's that was checked. There were intrusions on his ranch in Arizona, but Eden had one factor that turned the tide."

"LaMar." Jamie confirmed all her suspicions.

"Bingo!" Simon held up a hand, fingers splayed in an habitual gesture. "We have Jamie at the airport." A finger pointed and dropped. "We have Jeter's knowledge and his hatred for me. We have Patrick and his connection to members of The Watch and to me. And we have LaMar with information for sale." After the last he folded his thumb and his fist

was dosed. "Cunning and connections and fear, not coincidence, led them to Eden."

It sent a chill down her spine to hear how thorough and pervasive the tentacles of the cartel had been. If she hadn't seen differently, she would believe them invincible. And she would despair for the world were it not for organizations like The Watch, and people like Jeb, Mitch, Matthew and Jamie.

She backed away again. She couldn't let herself think of Jamie. "What happened to *The Dancer*?"

Jamie started to explain, remembered he was the last person she wanted hear or see, and kept his own counsel.

Simon answered in his stead. "LaMar. Again."

For Brett this was becoming harder and harder to assimilate. A part of it was that this was intrigue beyond any she'd imagined. But most disturbing was Jamie, standing so close.

So still. So silent. Yet, no matter how she tried to forget, she was keenly conscious of the slightest nuance. The whisper of a deeply drawn breath, the rare shifting of a foot. The scent of evergreen drifting subtly beneath the medicinal. Pallor beneath the burn of the sun and features drawn in pain he couldn't hide.

Plaster and bandages that marked an ending.

Brett forced her mind again from thoughts she couldn't bear. If she meant to keep back the tears and hold her dignity, she had to resort to tunnel vision. She must concentrate solely on Simon and keep a firm grasp on his tangled narration. Massaging tender temples with the tips of her fingers, she closed her eyes, trying to remember. LaMar? Hadn't they been speaking of LaMar?

She lifted her desolate gaze to Simon's. "How could LaMar have disabled *The Dancer*?"

"Sounds impossible, doesn't it? But he did, so to speak. First you must understand as he does that there is no more territorial human being than the coastal fisherman. No one is more protective of his space. With a carefully planted rumor that *The Dancer* was poisoning the water, he turned these territorial men into his own private army."

"He led the islanders against *The Dancer*?"

"He sent them, Brett. At the appointed time." Jamie risked her aversion, addressing her doubt. "Like most cowards, he

was the mastermind sending his dupes while he pocketed the money from the cartel. The crew of *The Dancer* had no reason to suspect men who had always been friendly. In the equivalent of a drive-by shooting, *The Dancer* was attacked, taking out the radio and her engine. Matthew's sixth sense warned them at the last minute, in time to take cover."

Brett traced the logo at her wrist. Jeb and Matthew had come into the water to take them from the johnboat. Mitch was at the controls of the helicopter. That left Alexis Charles, the woman who had taken her place aboard *The Dancer*. "What happened to Alexis?"

"No one was hurt," Jamie reassured her. "Alexis is with Hattie."

Brett nodded, but didn't look up from the embroidered cuff. Jamie wanted to make her look at him and confront what was troubling her. Instead he continued his explanation. "*The Dancer* was dead in the water for some time. Mitch finally coaxed some life into the engine, but they were hours making the closest port. By then, Hattie had become suspicious of her nephew's behavior and called Patrick."

"Then Patrick called Simon."

Simon had been content to listen and observe, but joined in now. "His call came in only minutes before Jeb called from shore."

Bitterness for things that needn't have been surfaced in Brett. "So, this charade was for nothing. No one believed the fabrication of the hit and run."

"They believed," Simon disputed quietly. "After the incident at your apartment, they weren't actively looking for you, Brett, they were looking for Jamie. He was seen with you at the airport, then again coming to your apartment. The cartel couldn't know whether or not he'd been with you in the meantime. It was safer to assume he had, and that he'd seen the list. In their minds you might have been colleagues and Jamie had given you the case deliberately. Neither of you were safe from the moment Mendoza chose the wrong briefcase."

"How can you be so certain that we are now?"

"Because I wasn't being cute when I said Webber sang like a canary. For that matter, so did Jeter. The list was a priority for your safety. Now we have cogent information that goes even

farther and draws the noose around the necks of some very key people."

"Just like that, it really is over," Brett murmured.

"Really," Simon guaranteed. "Now, I'll leave the two of you alone. You must have a lot to discuss." A pat on Brett's shoulder accompanied the admonition that she should take care. A look told Jamie to be in touch, and before either could delay him, Simon was away.

The door banged in an awkward silence. Trapped in misery, neither spoke, neither moved. They were tense and nervous strangers.

Jamie was shaken, asking himself if that was what Brett wanted? To be strangers again, pretending he'd never held her and made love to her? Was there another answer? He touched her shoulder, wanting to know he was wrong.

"Don't!" Brett recoiled from him. The bandaged hand on her shoulder brought it all down on her—everything she'd brow beaten her doctors to know—the hours the best orthopedist in the country had spent on Jamie's hand, the question of limited recovery.

Limited. The word and what it would mean nauseated her. She clutched at her sides to still her trembling. "Please, don't touch me!"

Jamie's free hand hovered where Brett had been. Slowly his fingers folded into his palm. If the shattering of bones was agony, it was nothing like this. No injury inflicted by Webber compared to Brett's look of disgust.

Her behavior made no sense, but he was forced to admit it was more than a mood or an aberrant whim. The withdrawal had begun the moment they'd left Eden.

He had his answer. The mythical magic of Eden hadn't been so mythical, after all. For a time Brett had suspended reality. Fool that he was, he had seen it, encouraged it. Then he'd forgotten magic didn't always last in the real world. "Simon was mistaken. We don't have anything to discuss, after all, do we, Brett?"

Her back was toward him, the static grounds of Grayson were inordinately fascinating again. "What is there to discuss?"

She was dismissing him as easily as the stranger she was pretending he'd become. "I see. I suppose I've been a fool, but now I realize there is nothing." His voice dropped to a guttural snarl. "Nothing at all."

He wheeled about violently, the force of his move banging his sling against his body, draining the little color left in his face. He didn't care that agony speared up his arm to his chest. Nothing mattered but that he escape.

"Jamie." Only a whisper, stopping him with the power of a shout.

His hand was at the brass doorknob, all he had to do was turn it and step out. He was tense, poised for flight. Even as he tried to force himself to go, he was turning.

She had turned, as well. As her gaze moved over him, touching reluctantly on the sling at his neck, he thought he saw pity, or perhaps, revulsion. It didn't matter which. One was as abhorrent as the other. "You decided there was nothing to discuss, Brett, so what do you want now?"

"I..." The sturdy fabric of the robe was nearly ripped at the waist with the force of her grasp.

Jamie waited, remembering another time on a wild island ridge when he'd waited, hoping for three simple words that would have made his life what he'd always wanted it to be. He waited now, but he didn't hope. He told himself he didn't hope. "Well, Brett?"

Running an agitated hand through her free-flowing hair, she fought back a shiver. "I wanted to thank you for all you've done."

Jamie laughed, a rough, mocking staccato. "I won't pretend it was my pleasure, sweetheart, but since I was responsible for drawing you into this, what choice did I have?"

Brett had no answer. Jamie McLachlan, with honor and integrity instilled in him by a family of brothers he adored, would have no other choice.

"You were fortunate in Carson, Brett. As he was in you. You were close, you loved each other, but I think even he would find his grave a little crowded with both of you there. Join the living, sweetheart," he said softly. "And have a good life."

Then she was staring at the blank panel of the closing door. She hadn't realized until Jamie stepped out of her life, that she hadn't thought of Carson Sumner in days.

Jamie assumed this was about Carson and the commitment she'd nurtured for so long. Wouldn't it be better this way? Wouldn't it be easier for both of them if she just left Grayson as soon as she could?

He'd said he loved her. She hadn't forgotten. She would never forget. His love was something she could take with her. Something she could keep. In her memories and in her heart it could always stay the same. Then she wouldn't have to watch it die a little each time he realized how much she'd cost him.

"It's better this way. Better for both of us." Her whisper echoed in the loneliness that enveloped her.

It was later, as she looked about the room for one last time, that her tears began to fall.

Brett Sumner hitched her camera higher on her shoulder and threaded her way through the crowded concourse. She was tired. More than she could ever remember being. This was the first assignment she'd accepted in nearly a year, and her first trip out of the country. She wanted to tell herself she was only out of condition, out of the habit of traveling. First she had to block out the lethargy of the past months, then forget that her perfect and orderly life had been empty and lonely. Then she might succeed.

An attractive man with a carry-on too large to carry on obstructed her path. His blithely flirtatious smile faltered as she sidestepped him with a withering glare. Once her irritation would have been rare, but of late it was a perpetual state. A smile was all he wanted, tacit forgiveness for his preening male pride.

No harm done and a smile should have been as easy as a glare. Tugging her hat a notch lower, Brett quieted her conscience and moved down the concourse, falling into an old habit of studying the faces of those she met. Composing them as subjects for an imaginary camera.

A fussy background for a tiny, elderly woman overdressed in frills and furbelows. *Camouflage.*

Crisscrosses of shadow and illumination to delineate the muscular magnificence of a golden beach boy. *Narcissus*.

Openness and space to contain the massiveness of...*Simon!*

Brett's knees nearly betrayed her. Wondering if she'd stumbled into the middle of another operation, she glanced feverishly around. Looking for familiar faces of The Black Watch.

Looking for Jamie.

There was only Simon. With a melancholy smile and a skewed sense of *deja vu*, she regarded him as he strode through the crowd, purposeful, imposing. Certainly a man unconcerned with secrecy and discretion, and incredibly, headed directly for her.

"Hello, Brett," he said as he swung an arm around her shoulders and kissed her forehead. "Nice trip?"

Brett swallowed and nodded stiffly as he took her camera and briefcase. "Hello, Simon."

Taking her arm, he led her down the concourse. "Give me your claim check." Before she could speak, he plucked a yellow card from a pocket of her camera case. "Here it is."

Jeb Tanner appeared out of nowhere, offering her a wink and a smile. Taking the check from Simon, he melted away.

"That was Jeb." Dazed, Brett stated the obvious.

"It was, wasn't it?" Simon guided her around a group of children welcoming their grandmother to Atlanta. "I have your book of photos on the poverty of drug-rich countries of South America. Terrific! It's a blessing the negatives weren't lost on Eden."

He didn't give her time to say thanks or anything else for that matter as he hustled her along.

"Simon!" she protested finally. "Where are you taking me? Is something wrong?" She was seized by fear. "Is it Jamie? Is he hurt?"

"I'm taking you home, Brett, and Jamie's fine."

Brett had tossed her hat aside and sat sipping from a glass of fruit juice while Simon prowled her living room. He'd gone from chattering like a squirrel to stony silence. She waited. Simon was not a man one hurried.

"So," he began at last. "You got on with your life."

Brett shrugged. A few friends had been elated that she was still among the living. But beyond being a three-day wonder in the news, and a few accolades for what was perceived as her part in destroying the cartel, no one seemed to care.

"You didn't remember."

"No. Now that it has been this long, the doctors are almost certain I never will. But it isn't a problem for me now, Simon."

"That much sounds good." Simon stopped his pacing. "You didn't write the real story of the island."

An eyewitness exclusive and she'd produced a book of seascapes and island scenes instead. Brett set her glass aside, carefully, slowly. "It was too personal."

"I've known him all his life."

Brett made a questioning gesture. "Him?"

"Jamie. Who else have we been thinking of?"

"Of course," Brett admitted quietly. "Jamie."

"When I recruited him, he was just out of college. He was reluctant, but he had that indefinable quality that made him one of the best. Once he was done, he deserved better than a gimp wing and a broken heart. We've fixed the wing." Simon shot her a piercing look. "I'm here to see to the other."

She hadn't heard more than the first of his comment. "What did you say about fixing the... the gimp wing?"

"Broken bones mend. Damaged tendons can be repaired."

"Jamie can play?"

"Not as good as before, but better than anyone else."

"Thank God!" Brett's relief was borne on a sigh.

"I said he could play, not that he does."

"What do you mean?"

"He never touches a piano. But don't pretend you care."

She was shocked by his remark. "Care! Of course, I care."

"You have a funny way of showing it. Checking out of Grayson without a word. Not even a goodbye. Was your career and your morbid loyalty to Carson Sumner so important that you couldn't spare Jamie a little of your precious time?"

"I didn't leave because of my career, or Carson. And my time hasn't been precious for a long while."

"Then tell me why."

Biett leapt to her feet, ignoring the glass as it shattered on the floor. She was ashen. "I left because I had to. Because I couldn't bear seeing what I'd done to him, what I'd caused."

"How did you cause this, Brett?" Simon's tone was gentle now.

"How? I couldn't recall the list. I didn't remember to warn him about LaMar." Tears were coursing down her cheeks. "I couldn't release the safety on the damn gun!" With an angry sweep of her hand, she brushed the tears away. "Jamie loved me, and I couldn't stand to see it turn to hate. That's why I left him."

Simon was there, taking her into his arms. Brett tried to push him away. "You didn't deserve that tirade, Simon. I'm sorry."

"I'm not." He held her tighter. When she was quiet, he lifted her chin with his thumb. "Do you love him?"

"Yes."

"Do you want him?"

Brett hesitated.

"Do you want him?"

"Yes." She couldn't think, she could only feel. "Yes."

Simon smiled. "Then let me tell you what we're going to do."

There was dew on the grass as Brett climbed the steep slope. In the early light the forest was a glittering wonderland. The air was crisp and cool on this Saturday morning, with autumn only a promise away. A scent of newly cut evergreen drifted on a breeze. The chop of an ax echoed from the crest of the hill.

Moving in her long-legged stride, she scrambled over ledge and stone, following the sound. In a copse of trees a little to her left three men worked with a coal black horse, snaking logs through a difficult pass. As she topped the rise, first one and then the other stopped his work.

They were too distant for conversation, but neither seemed surprised nor concerned with this sudden appearance of a strange woman on their land. The elder, with distinguished flourishes of silver shining at his temple, smiled a silent greeting. A second bowed, the third, Jamie's twin, grinned and waved her on in the direction of the sound of the ax. A strange meeting, but Brett had never felt more welcomed than she had been by Dare and Ross and Mac. The brothers Jamie loved.

The ax drew her on. With a final wave to them, she followed the sound. As the forest grew thicker, the steady rhythm was her beacon. A tremendous crack and an earth-shaking thud signaled the fall of a tree, and as she stepped into the small clearing, Jamie stood, ax over his shoulder, surveying the result of his labor.

"You really are Paul Bunyan."

Jamie spun on a booted heel. If he was surprised to see Brett leaning against a tree, arms crossed over her breasts, watching him beneath the brim of her hat, his impassive face didn't show it. If he wondered why she was in North Carolina instead of Atlanta, or Mongolia, or wherever, it made no dent in his stony composure. If he was angry or glad that she was only a few steps and an arm's length away after almost a year apart from him, it didn't change his frigid regard.

"Simon said you would be working apart from your brothers." Jamie didn't respond by so much as the flicker of an eyelash. "He said you were practically a recluse in the midst of your family. He said your brothers were worried." Still no response. "Simon said you worked like a demon in the forest and never touched the piano."

"Simon says, Simon says. Is this a game? Should I say, 'May I?'"

Brett straightened from the tree. "Simon says you don't hate me. That you don't blame me for your hand."

"What happened was one of the risks of my job. It could have been my head, or my leg, or my foot as easily."

"You saved my life."

Jamie shrugged. "I was saving my own, as well."

"You will allow me the luxury of gratitude, won't you?"

"I never wanted your gratitude, Brett. What I wanted..." He stopped, clamping his teeth on the words. "It doesn't matter now."

A tiny crack threatened his composure. Only a little one, but Brett was elated. "Simon says you want me."

He didn't answer. In the morning sun his face was stark, with lines about his eyes and furrows at the corners of his mouth. He was leaner and darker, honed to muscles and sinew by his labor in the forest, and tanned by long hours in the wind and the sun. His hands were callused and scarred, but his fingers were

straight and true. As he gripped the handle of the ax, she saw their strength.

She wondered how those dark, hard hands would be moving over the keys of a piano. How they would feel touching her body. With a tilt of her chin, she dared what she'd come to say. "Simon says you love me."

"Simon says too damn much."

"Does he lie?"

Jamie flung the ax aside and walked away. His broad back was turned to her. His sweat-soaked shirt clung to his shoulders and ribs with each ragged breath.

Brett crossed the clearing, stopping a step behind him. "Is it a lie that you still want me and that you've never stopped loving me?" The broad infuriating back didn't move. "Damn you, McLachlan!" She grasped his arm, forcing him to face her. "Answer me. You wanted me to climb out of the grave and rejoin the living. Well, here I am. So, what are you going to do about it?"

His gaze ranged over her. She was thinner, her mouth looked as if she rarely smiled. The year hadn't been kind, but she was the most beautiful sight he'd ever seen. "I used to think that if you ever got angry enough to say anything stronger than blast, I should run."

"Are you going to?"

"No." He snaked an arm around her waist and hauled her against him. "I'm going to do this." His mouth was hard and demanding on hers, seeking retribution for the long, lonely year. He gave no quarter, he wanted none as her hand twined in his hair, tugging him closer.

Releasing his grip on her waist, he found the buttons of her shirt, touching her breasts. As if he'd been burned, he jerked away. "I'm covered in wood chips and wet with sweat. I know Carson only visited your bed, always the immaculate, gentleman lover." At the look on her face, Jamie knew he'd been right long ago. Before him, Brett had never truly shared a man's bed. "I'm not immaculate. And right now I don't feel much like a gentleman. Tell me to go away, Brett, and I will."

"You're beautiful." Brett rose to kiss him again. "One gentleman lover in my life is enough. And one of us has already gone away once, like a fool."

"But never again?"

"Not until you send me."

Brett's shirt floated to the ground. Her boots were tossed aside and with them her jeans. Jamie's clothes were not far behind. "I'll never send you away," he murmured as he came down to her on a bed of moss. "Never."

In the distance, three brothers paused in their work, listened to a silence unmarred by the furious wielding of the ax. Smiles broke into grins, then into delighted laughter. God willing, and with Simon's help, they had their mischievous brother back.

Brett sat in the shadows, listening. Jamie's fingers moved over the keys like flowing water. "Moonlight Sonata" drifted softly, like a gift through the night. If he'd lost even a bit of his agility, only the rare savant would know. His music was still passionate, still tender, still uniquely his.

When the sonata was done and he rose from the piano, she went to him, catching his fingers in hers, drawing them to her lips. "Your hand, is it truly all right?"

Jamie breathed an impatient expletive concerning his hand, then sighed. "I had a good surgeon. If I lost motion, it's too little for a retired piano player to agonize over."

"I thought you would be bitter."

"A few shattered bones were a small price to pay for our lives, why should I be bitter?"

"If you hadn't had me to deal with, this wouldn't have happened."

"Stop!" His fingers convulsed in hers, a reflection of the agitation in his voice. "Stop right there." His voice lost its harshness but none of its command. "I'm only going to say this once, then we won't discuss it again. Not ever. You're not to blame for this. Instead, if it weren't for you I would have lost more than some small use of this hand."

"You heard Simon, Brett. You heard him say the cartel was looking for me, not you. We had no reason to know that and if it weren't for you I would never have gone to ground. I would've been a walking target, and the cartel wouldn't have missed. Now, do you really want to talk about who should be grateful to whom? Don't we have better things to say to each other?"

Brett's throat ached with the threat of tears, but she wouldn't cry. Not now, not yet, not even happy tears. Jamie had given her the greatest gift—absolution, by seeing no need for it. He was strong and honorable. He'd fought his own battle with guilt and resolved it. She traced the line of a scar over a knuckle, a smooth, pale striation that only served to accentuate his strength. He seemed whole and healed, but was he? "Simon said you never played."

"There was no joy in it."

Joy. That was the secret that set his music apart. When Jamie played, there was joy. Something in his expression, something deep in his dark fathomless eyes, moved her to ask, "And now?"

"You're my joy, Brett Sumner." The timbre of his voice was thoughtful, his declaration gentle. "I didn't know how much, until you were gone."

Brett's heart filled with its own joy. He had given her so much, now this. And she had so little to give. Only one thing. "I love you, Jamie."

As his lips came down on hers, the flash of silver burning in midnight eyes told her it was enough.

Jamie was shaken when he drew away. He'd waited a lifetime for this woman. A lifetime for her love, and he couldn't let her go again. He brushed her cheek with the back of his hand. Satin.

"You'll like my family." As he spoke the first sensible thought that came to mind, he was already seeing her among them. His woman, the forever girl he'd dreamed of, making the McLachlan clan complete.

"I like them already." Kissing his chest, bared by a carelessly buttoned shirt, she smiled up at him. "They made you what you are. They made you Jamie, the man I've loved for a long, long time. The man I will love forever."

Forever. A promise.

When he lifted his mouth from hers a long while later, he laughed. A teasing sound.

"So, I'm funny now, am I?" She tugged at a lock of shaggy hair that brushed his neck.

"No, love. I was thinking of two women who must come to our wedding."

"Our wedding?"

"Surely you don't intend to live in sin with me?" He grinned and skimmed his mouth over hers as if he could never have enough of her. "What will our children say?" Then, without missing a beat, "Four is a nice number, isn't it?"

Brett knew he was thinking of his own family. Four brothers who had forged a bond like few others. "To avoid a scandal, I suppose my answer had better be yes."

"And because I love you."

Latent laughter flickered away. Drawing a shaky breath, she rose to her toes to kiss him again. "Yes," she murmured against his lips, "because you love me."

When he let her go, when her feet were firmly on the floor again, she moved deeper into his embrace. "Now," she whispered against his throat, "about all the other women in your life?"

"Hattie, sweetheart, and Madame Zara. Wait until you meet *her*. The two of them have a lot in common. By the time the wedding's over they'll both be telling us how many children we'll have and what gender." He was undressing her, kissing each new revelation, muttering nonsense even he didn't hear. "You haven't met Hunter and Beth, or David and Raven. Not even Patrick and Jordana. And don't forget Jacinda and Antonia and Jennifer, my sisters-in-law."

Hours later, when every problem was resolved, when he knew that Carson Sumner was only a treasured memory, when he understood that she'd truly let go of a ghost on an island called Eden, when he knew that love, and fear of losing it had driven her away, when he believed she was truly his forever, Jamie slept.

Holding his shattered hand to her breast, Brett smiled through tears that fell at last. If angels were brave, if they were honorable and stubborn, if they were wicked and gentle, and if they loved with all their hearts, then surely she held the hand of an angel.

* * * * *