

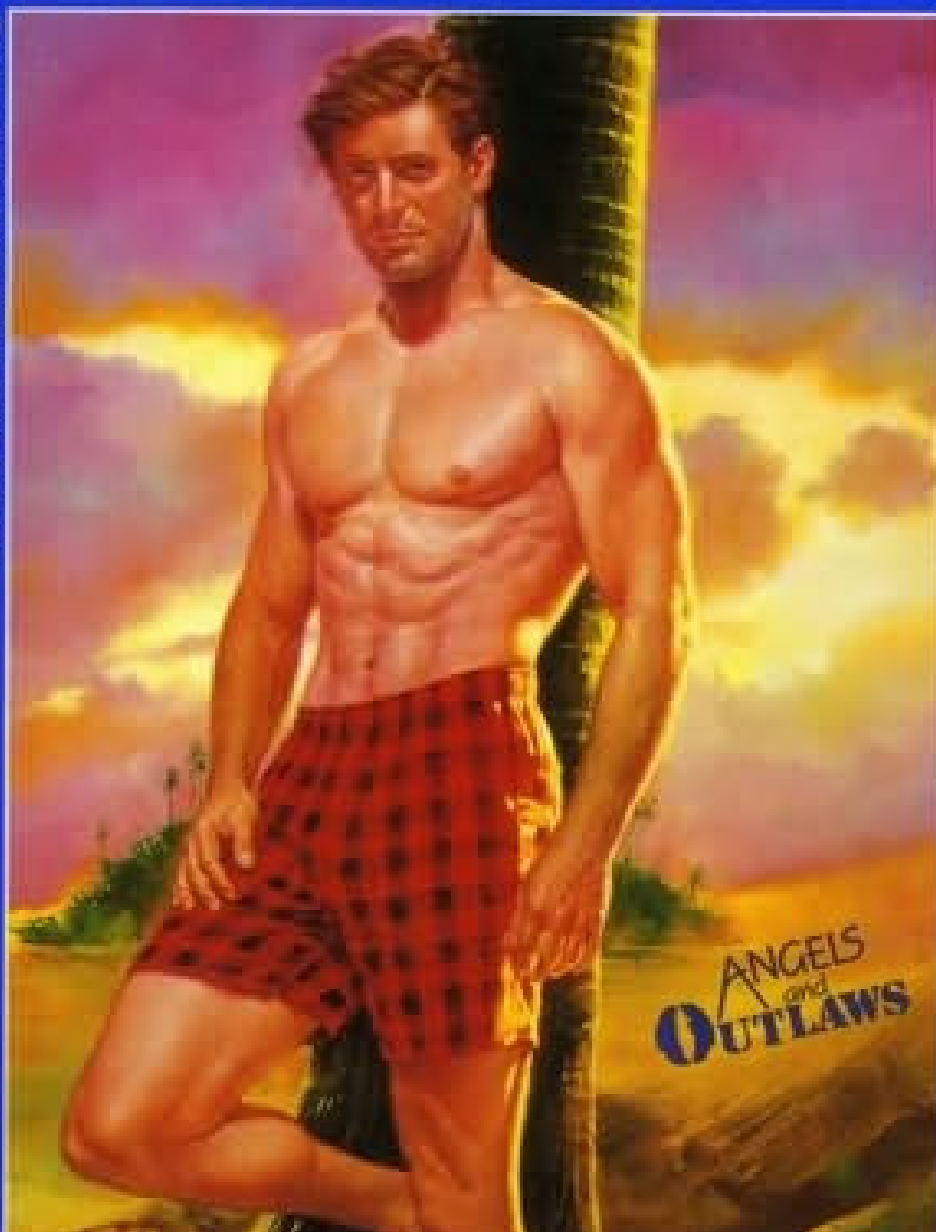
Loveswept⁶⁷⁷

LINDA WARREN

Body and Soul



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ANGELS
and
OUTLAWS

"DON'T BUTTON IT," ZEKE SAID MOVING toward her across the floor.

Chelsea's fingers froze on her open silk blouse. She managed a barely voiced "What?" before he flung his jacket across the sofa and reached for her. His strong hands tipped her face up, and his mouth came down hard over hers in answer and demand.

Unprepared, Chelsea let her mouth open under his. Zeke's tongue filled the warm feminine recess of her mouth with urgent demand, staking a claim that sent heat searing through her body and stole her breath. When he broke off the kiss, she raised her hand to his throat and the heat of his skin burned through her.

He didn't want this. She knew the sheer determination with which he'd fought it. But he's lost the fight, and she knew that, too--lost from the moment he'd stood outside her door in a driving rain and refused, against all common sense, to come in...

Body and Soul

Linda Warren

ONE

Any man who didn't feel a fire in his blood when Chelsea Connors played music was either deaf or dead, Zeke North reflected as the last notes of the piano shimmered in the smoky air of the nightclub. She had a touch on the keys that was so rich and subtle, he could feel the contact with the ivory. What she coaxed from the baby grand in the center of the stage evoked sensual fantasies the like of which he hadn't felt since he was a green kid like Billy. He could feel them now, burning through his mind like summer heat.

It explained a lot.

Zeke turned his head away from the stage, deliberately breaking the spell, and scanned the attentive, well-dressed audience crowding the room. Billy wasn't there. Zeke frowned, wondering if his kid brother would show up at all tonight. He hadn't said he would, but then, he hadn't said a lot of things about the trouble he was in after he'd explained he was quitting school. In his 3:00 A.M. call Billy had stammered out a story that didn't quite make sense and hung up on his brother's questions, leaving a puzzled Zeke with a load of worry and very few facts. But having heard Chelsea Connors weaving fantasies with her music, he had a strong feeling one of the missing pieces was a raven-haired jazz musician who played piano like an angel and wove spells like a witch.

There's this woman ... she plays piano

Billy hadn't told him her name, but Chelsea Connors's lush, sensual music had been saying it all night. To a would-be sax player like Billy, the message would be irresistible.

The applause that started after the last piano notes faded away into the dark swelled in a tide of appreciation for the black-haired siren who adorned the stage. Chelsea Connors was the current toast of the New England jazz scene, with top billing at the upcoming Saratoga Springs Jazz Festival. Most of her rapt fans looked ready to hand over their souls on a platter, just like Billy.

Zeke would be damned if he'd join the banquet.

Deliberately, he sipped at his scotch. He let the whiskey burn through him and studied Chelsea Connors with the steady, level gaze of a man who didn't deal in illusions.

She's not what you think, Billy had said. If you heard her play, if you listened to her music, you'd know

The raven-haired woman at the piano looked up from the keyboard and glanced around the room in graceful, practiced acknowledgment of the applause. Her gaze flicked over the crowd, moved toward Zeke's center-front table, then stopped there.

He was the only man in the room not applauding, Zeke realized abruptly. And that minor difference was the only thing that separated him from the rest of the bewitched listeners in this posh room.

Irritated by his susceptibility to Chelsea Connors' art, Zeke held himself still, long legs stretched in front of him, hands loose and careless around the drink he had propped on his thigh, and ignored the urge to join in the accolade.

The applause finally subsided into a low, satisfied buzz of conversation. Chelsea Connors rose, closed the keyboard, and stepped off the stage. Zeke watched her approach--a slim, whiteclothed figure with the invisible yet unmistakable aura of talent polished in the spotlight until it glowed--and wondered with vivid curiosity what it would be like to make love to the woman who created that kind of music.

She stopped in front of his table. Around them, heads turned, conversations hushed, attention focused on the woman who even without the spotlight held every eye in the place.

Ignoring the buzz of reaction, the admiration around her, she seemed oblivious to anything but Zeke's intense gaze. Her green eyes met his for a moment without blinking, then a flicker of unexpected amusement lightened the changeable depths.

"If you're looking for the Handel and Haydn Society," she said, "the Performing Arts Complex is just down the street. It might be more to your liking."

Caught off guard by that flicker of humor, Zeke met the curious, amused gaze and felt a swift, arresting jolt--some vital, palpable person-to-person connection that rearranged his reactions as deftly as her music. *A prima donna with a sense of humor.*

It would be damned easy to forget who she was and why he was here. "I didn't wander into a nightclub looking for classical music," he said. "I'm here looking for you, as a matter of fact."

"Me?" A brief, bemused silence followed the single word. Chelsea Connors frowned at him, and the thought crossed his mind that she really didn't seem to know that half the listeners in the room were here looking for her--her image, her magic, the fantasies she wove with piano notes. "Me?" she repeated.

He didn't answer.

"Do we know each other?"

Zeke studied her, eyes narrowed. "We do now," he said. "I'm Billy North's older brother."

She blinked, then the green eyes made a quick, involuntary survey, shoulders to toes, as if looking for a resemblance to Billy. She frowned. "You're Zeke? You own the forestry business?"

He let his gaze drift over her in a slow version of the once-over she had given him, admiring the feminine curves beneath the knock-out white dress, hair like black silk, eyes green as new growth in a hemlock forest.

Lord, it was no wonder his kid brother had fallen so hard.

"Is Billy expecting you here?"

"No," Zeke said.

Her eyebrows drew together again, and she crossed her arms in front of her, those classic features

still as marble for a moment as she studied him. She wasn't as tall as she made herself look by her walk and her carriage. It was stage presence, he told himself, and it was no great revelation that Chelsea Connors had it. What was a revelation was the genuine, vital intelligence that reached out to him as palpably as if she'd touched him.

"Your brother's mentioned you. Quite a few times. To hear him talk, you'd think the sun rises and sets on your shoulders."

"You've got it backward," he said with a wry lift of one side of his mouth. "I'm not the one in this conversation that Billy's sun rises and sets on."

Her green gaze darkened at the tone of his voice, and wariness shadowed her expression. Zeke watched a series of emotions flicker over her face. "What do you mean by that?" she asked him, her candor inspiring in him a spontaneous admiration.

She deserved an honest answer in return, though he didn't particularly like having to be the one to give it to her. Annoyance at his kid brother and the situation made his voice gruff. His own unwanted reaction to the woman he'd come here looking for made it gravelly and raw. "Nothing too hard to explain," Zeke told her. "My brother thinks he's in love with you."

Chelsea Connors took in the short, impossible statement, stared at the man with the cool golden-brown gaze who had delivered it, and felt a flutter of something electric and unsettling race along her nerve endings.

Billy North was in love with her?

The idea was so jarring, it took her a moment to process the thought and dismiss it.

Zeke North must be mistaken. But the straight, dark hair combed carelessly back from an outdoors man's face, unironed khakis worn with indifference that bordered on arrogance, scuffed boots that looked as though he'd owned them since he became a man didn't promote the idea that Zeke North was given to impossible pipe dreams. He sat absolutely still, immovable as oak, while his gaze bored into her with enough intensity to make her feel transparent.

She shook her head, gathered her composure, and uttered an automatic, disbelieving denial. "No. You must have it wrong. Billy's not--"

He cut off her protest with a single, burning look that seemed to probe through any defenses she might have. "Yes, prima donna," he said softly. "He is. He's in as deep as it gets. Hearts and flowers. Forever. Trips to the altar."

Chelsea was too shocked by the statement to contradict it, and too unsettled by the man himself to object to the unflattering name he'd called her. "Billy *said* that?" she asked finally, her voice husky enough to sound breathless even to her own ears.

Zeke North studied her for a moment, his light brown eyes assessing something more than her words; then he leaned across the table, reluctantly, to pull out a chair. "You'd better sit down."

It was more an order than an invitation, but Chelsea didn't argue. She sat, studying the man across the table from her, trying to make sense of his brusque pronouncement.

"Billy's in trouble," he said curtly.

"In trouble?"

"He called me yesterday with some garbled story I don't quite understand, but the gist of it was he's in deep water. He didn't want to tell me that. He didn't want to ask for help, but he was desperate. He said he was afraid some of his trouble was going to fall into your lap."

"Into my--" Chelsea broke off, then shut her eyes for a moment, hoping that blocking out the image of Zeke North would somehow dilute that force of masculine will she wanted badly to dismiss. Closing her eyes didn't work. Everything about Zeke North--his words, his manner, the deep timbre of his voice--suggested he knew what he was talking about. But she couldn't, on instant demand, reconcile her opinion of Billy North and his easygoing, devil-may-care charm with the idea of trouble, desperation, and misplaced infatuation. She leaned her elbows on the table and pressed her fingers against her temples as she stared at his brother in wary puzzlement. "What kind of trouble?" she asked finally.

"I don't know." When I pushed him for details, he just said he was quitting school, and he'd pay me back for the semester. Then he hung up on me. That's not like Billy. So I drove down to Albany, where he's supposed to be in school this summer."

"In school?" she murmured, confused. "Billy never said anything about being in school this summer."

The left corner of Zeke North's mouth kicked up again in grim irony.

"What was he studying?"

"The economics of timber management was what he was supposed to be studying. But it's pretty clear he had something else in mind. What I found out in Albany was that Billy hasn't been there for the last month. He's been spending his time in Saratoga Springs and talking about the piano player he met up here." Zeke leaned toward her across the table and reached for his drink. "He left all his books behind, but he took your CDs and tapes with him, Ms. Connors. He owns all of them."

Chelsea went still except for a slight tightening of the skin across her cheekbones. The words of denial were half-formed on her tongue, but she didn't say them. Was it possible?

She pressed her fingers against her temples again as Billy North's charming, boyish face flickered across her mind. "Look," she said slowly, "Billy's put in a lot of time here. He's hung around a lot, spent a couple of weekends at Ray's cottage"

"Weekends?" His eyebrows rose, and the scotch stopped halfway to his mouth.

His knowing question made her suddenly defensive. "He *is* part of the band, Mr. North." Her voice was a little too clipped to escape notice. Around them, conversations stopped.

"What band?" he said sharply into the silence.

Chelsea took a breath, trying to get a grip on her self-control. When she spoke, her voice was even, but she felt as though she were admitting to a crime in front of a roomful of witnesses. "I gave him a job in the band I play with. He's been working for me since the beginning of July."

"All summer?"

She nodded. "Two nights a week of it, anyway. In addition to that, we practice a couple of times

a week at Ray Malone's cottage."

"Ray Malone's cottage," he repeated, deadpan.

"He's the owner of this club, besides being a good friend. We've all spent time there."

He lowered the scotch to the table, then pushed it away as if he'd suddenly lost his taste for it. "Must be a cozy little group."

"It is," she said levelly, ignoring the wash of heat she felt across her cheeks. "Jazz musicians do tend to form cozy little groups, in case you've never noticed."

"I haven't had any reason to notice," he said. "Until now."

She didn't need to justify her professional associations, she told herself. Least of all to the irrational male prejudice of a rangy, arrogant, tawny outdoors man who looked as if the last place he wanted to be was in a sophisticated Saratoga Springs jazz club, and as if she herself were the Devil in a white dress.

Chelsea's infrequent temper flared to sudden heat. "All right, kemo sabe. The idea that you don't like having to come riding to your brother's rescue is registered. So why don't you just let me know exactly what I can do for you, and then you can Hi-ho Silver and ride back into the sunset."

A long, taut silence sang in the air between them. When that unnerving golden gaze narrowed on her face, Chelsea's stomach went hollow with a feeling she associated with strange concert halls and long walks across the stage.

"I don't think there's anything you can do for me, prima donna," he murmured softly. "I think maybe you've already done enough."

She made a quick, impatient gesture of exasperation. Zeke ignored it. His eyes flicked, for just a moment, down to her shoulder, the V of her dress, her breasts, then moved back to her face. It wasn't a blatant suggestion, but Chelsea felt the unmistakable rush of awareness all the way to the pit of her stomach. There was a sudden, curious dryness in the back of her throat, and she was reminded abruptly of just why Zeke North was a threat to her emotional equilibrium.

She pushed back the chair and stood up. From the doorway the club's security man was scowling at them, but Chelsea gave him no more than a passing glance before she snapped her attention back to the man still sitting in front of her. "I'm not going to argue with you, Mr. North. If Billy's in trouble, I want to know it. And I'll find out by talking to him myself."

Zeke North's hand closed around her wrist as she moved to step by him, and Chelsea made a slight, surprised sound of protest. She felt the impact of that sudden, intimate touch in a rushing connection that sent shivers racing along nerve endings alive to nuances that made her breath catch. Her eyes locked with Zeke's, and for a few seconds the air between them was taut with unspoken challenge.

"Is there a problem here, Ms. Connors?" The voice of the club's doorman cut off the charged

connection that tied her to Zeke North. She looked up into the frowning, vigilant gaze of Eddie Wilkins, the bouncer. He loomed over Zeke's chair, close enough to get across the idea of unmistakable menace, big enough to intimidate any potential troublemaker he might encounter.

Zeke gave the bouncer no more than a single casual glance before his eyes went back to Chelsea. His fingers loosened around her wrist until he was barely touching her, but the gaze held her with as much force as any grip he could have used.

Chelsea's hand was tightened into a fist. She made herself relax it, flexing the tight muscles in her palm, then glanced up toward the bouncer. "No problem, Eddie," she said. "Thank: you."

Eddie sent Zeke a silent warning, gave Chelsea another long look, then turned and headed back to his post at the door.

Zeke watched him go, then looked back at Chelsea and indicated the chair in front of her with a nod. She pulled her wrist back and kept standing.

He let go of her, "I should have said please?" he muttered softly.

"Yes." Her voice was too husky, too breathless, for the impression she wanted to convey, but she lacked the control to change it.

His mouth quirked up. "I would have, if your personal bodyguard had given me a chance."

"Eddie works for the club, not for me."

Eddie would let the club fall down around his ears if he thought you needed him elsewhere . You're the premier asset around here. Eddie knows it."

Chelsea shut her eyes for a moment, hoping to calm the tension she felt singing across her nerves like a drawn-out blues phrase. "I'm a musician, Mr. North. It's what I do for a living. And Eddie has to do *his* job. It's not personal."

He didn't take his eyes from her. That golden brown gaze watched her with the compelling tenacity of a Coltrane improvisation, impossible to forget, impossible not to listen to. "No," he said finally. "You're not just a musician. You're a star." He flicked his eyes around the room. "Ask anyone of the star-struck listeners here."

Chelsea felt a wash of heat across her face. On Zeke North's lips the words sounded like a condemnation rather than a compliment. It didn't matter, she told herself. She'd learned to deal with the fact that she couldn't reach everyone who listened to her. But Zeke North's casual disdain loosened something deep in her psyche that she usually allowed out only when she sat at a keyboard. "I play music because I can reach people with it," she told him. "Because I can make a connection. Because--" She broke off, aware that there were emotions in her voice she hadn't meant to show. "Never mind," she said with a dismissive wave of her hand. "I doubt that you'd understand, anyway."

With a steady, level gaze Zeke studied her in silence,. "You could try me," he said quietly.

She blinked, taken aback by the unexpected answer, unbalanced, once again, by her own unsettling reaction to the man. "Look, Mr. North," she started. "I'm sorry my music doesn't move you, but that's not--"

He set his scotch down on the black-topped table. When he glanced up at her again, there was an intensity in his expression that stopped her in midsentence. "The day your music doesn't move me," he said softly, "I'll pack it in and give up the ghost."

A backwash of unchanneled, suddenly redirected emotion sluiced through her: Gratification, confusion, satisfaction, underlined by an acute sense of her own emotional vulnerability in the face of his cool gaze and the iron-hard opinions he expressed.

If he liked her music, why had he sat like a statue when she'd finished her set? An old ache--the one that had made her a musician in the first place--tightened in her chest. *There is something you can do about it, kiddo, when things get rough*, Ray's voice murmured in the back of her head. *You can play music. Play it for them.*

Chelsea let her hands drop loosely by her sides, facing Zeke North the way she'd learned to face her own feelings, without illusions and without defensiveness. "Thank you," she managed after a moment.

"You're welcome," he said carefully. *Reluctantly.*

"I don't think so."

He gave her a sharp glance.

"I don't think I'm welcome to any compliments you have about my music. I think you would have been happier if you hadn't liked it."

The gaze was steady, unwavering, unreadable. "Maybe you're right," he said, letting out a breath. "This process would have been a lot simpler if I didn't like the way you play the piano."

"What process?"

He didn't answer her directly. He reached for his drink, sipped from it, then stared at the amber liquid in the glass for a moment before he spoke. "I dragged my old man out of enough honky-tonks to realize it wasn't the music that got him into trouble." One corner of his mouth kicked up in an expression that held grim humor and far too much worldly resignation. "I never let Billy go along. Maybe I should have."

She stared at him, bemused. "Why?" she asked him.

"Maybe he would have learned something about trouble."

Chelsea took in the undertone of regret that shaded the words and felt a small, unpredicted response--a shifting of emotions she couldn't yet sort out. "Look," she said tentatively. "I think. I can help. I could make some calls, find out what's wrong."

He leaned back in the chair and took a long breath. "No."

She blinked, taken off guard by the blunt one-syllable rebuff. "Billy's a friend," she said. "Not just an employee. He'll talk to me."

Zeke reached for his scotch, then balanced it on his thigh, still watching her. "Thanks," he said softly, with a hesitation that touched some chord of feeling she couldn't control, "but no. My brother's in trouble. I don't know what kind or how deep he's in it, or how much of a chance there is that his ... friend ... will get dragged in with him. But I'm going to do my best to make sure it doesn't fall into your lap. I'm the one who looked you up, not the other way around. This isn't your problem. Stay out of it."

"But--I know something about your brother's habits. Where he goes, who he hangs out with ... who his friends are."

"What you know about is playing the piano like an angel and smiling for the spotlight and making your fans fall in love with you. Don't do Billy any more favors. Go back to the piano and forget about him."

The tough, uncompromising renunciation was beyond logical argument, but Chelsea's reaction wasn't ruled by logic. It was ruled by the tightness in her throat, the burning ache behind her eyes, and the stinging rejection of her offered help.

"That's not the way I treat my friends, Mr. North."

He returned her glare while she felt her cheeks color and Zeke's cool golden gaze take it in. Finally he repeated, softly, "Don't do my brother any more favors, Ms. Connors."

She swallowed hard; then, with immense effort of will, she stood, drew herself up straight, and lifted her chin. "I don't think you have to worry about my doing your brother any more favors, Mr. North. I won't lead him down any primrose paths or seduce him with jazz or commit any other sin you can think of to prevent my seeing him again. And you can stop worrying about my influence. I wouldn't dream of becoming your sister-in-law."

She spun around, jerked her gaze away from the table, and stared straight into the shocked, incredulous eyes of Billy North.

TWO

"Billy ..."

The name was a bare thread of sound, but Chelsea knew Billy heard it. A flash of hurt crossed his boyish face, replaced swiftly by transparently defensive anger. He lashed out at his brother, behind her at the table. "What the hell," Billy muttered, the words low and furious. "What the hell have you been telling her?"

Zeke stood, facing his brother, pulling out a chair for him. "Bill--"

Billy batted the chair away. "Where do you come off tellin' her to forget about me? What the hell are you talkin' about, huh?"

The words were slurred, the emotion too volatile. "Billy," Chelsea said, "I introduced myself " She hesitated. "Zeke didn't start this. I recognized him--" She broke off.

Billy understood too well. He took a belligerent step toward Zeke, his chin jutting out, his temper out of control. "What'd you say?" he demanded. "I told you I wanted to leave her out of it. It's not her fault. What'd you tell her?"

Zeke let out a breath. "Come on, Bill. Let's get out of here. We can talk outside."

"I'm not goin' with you!" He gestured in Zeke's face, his voice rising, hurt, ashamed, angry, and looking for someone to blame. From the corner of her eye Chelsea caught sight of the bouncer threading his way through the tables toward them, aggressively alert to any threat that involved her.

"Billy," Chelsea said. "Please ... just listen."

He ignored her.

"Come on, Brother," Zeke made a gesture toward the door.

Billy's fist shot out without warning and connected with Zeke's jaw. A chair toppled to the floor as Zeke banged against it, and Chelsea let out a dismayed gasp. Eddie clamped one big hand around Billy's shoulder, spun him toward the door, and pulled him away from the fracas. "Let's go, buddy." Billy was quick-marched toward the door, struggling and swearing.

Chelsea shot Zeke an incredulous, desperate glance as he stood motionless by the table, then she dashed after Billy, dodging and excusing her way through the murmuring onlookers.

She just made it to the door to see Billy, furious and unreasonable, take a swing at the bouncer. The big man blocked it, gave Billy North a shove that propelled him ten feet down the sidewalk, and watched while his ill-matched opponent recovered his balance and his sense of self-protection and backed off, muttering.

"Billy!" Chelsea moved toward the door as he stumbled on the edge of the curb.

A hand closed around her shoulder, then Zeke North's wide chest blocked her way. "Let him go."

"But--"

"He's angry. And he's out of control. He'll get over it."

A bruise was swelling on the side of Zeke's jaw, but his face was calm, the shoulders that filled the doorway steady and untensed. He could have knocked his brother halfway into tomorrow, she realized, if he'd let go of his own rigid control. But Zeke North was nothing if not controlled. His hand on her shoulder exerted no pressure. He restrained her with only a touch and a few words.

Billy's fury was telegraphed toward the two of them with one burning glance, and Chelsea felt guilt and sympathy slice through her conscience.

"Forget it," Zeke said again. "You can't help."

A protest rose into her throat at the harsh words, but Chelsea's glance at Zeke's face stopped her from saying it. Zeke's concern for his brother was etched into the lines of worry in his expression, and his face betrayed feelings he hadn't put into words.

Billy turned and stalked away, and Chelsea felt her own helplessness and frustration as a strained lump in her throat. She wasn't aware she'd reached out, fingers extended, until she felt the direction of Zeke's eyes. He was frowning at the gesture. She pulled her hand back and folded her arms across her stomach, tucking her hands under her elbows.

Zeke's gaze held hers for a long moment, unreadable and intense, and Chelsea felt, suddenly, the heat of his fingers on her upper arms. As if she'd somehow missed a beat in a complex rhythm, she had a quick, anomalous flash of what she would have felt if she had seen that heat reflected in his gaze.

Abruptly, he dropped his hands from her, turned his back, and stalked off after his brother, his long strides attacking the pavement as if it were an enemy.

Shaken, Chelsea watched him go, fighting back her irrational feeling of responsibility. *Forget it*, she told herself. Zeke North was right. She wasn't responsible for Billy's assumptions, his anger, his refusal to talk to his brother or to her. And she had other responsibilities to think about. She had another set to play tonight. In one week she had a concert to perform, and that performance meant too much to put aside. She'd need all her energy to prepare for it.

Sighing, Chelsea shut her eyes, then pressed her fingertips against her face.

"You okay, Ms. Connors?"

The big bouncer was looking at her with concern. She forced a smile. "Yes, Eddie. I'm fine. Thanks."

"Okay, then ... " The words were doubtful.

He'd let the club fall down around his ears if he thought you needed him elsewhere. Chelsea forced the remembered words out of her mind, furious with herself for letting the masculine disdain in Zeke North's conclusions bother her so much.

She leaned her back against the door for a moment, then forced herself to count measures of six-eight time until she'd retrieved her composure. She straightened away from the door. Zeke North was just one man. One arrogant, opinionated, judgmental man who didn't want to like her music. No doubt there would be others like him in her future listeners. So what?

But a snatch of melody was playing through her mind as she walked back into the club and glanced toward the piano. She felt a quick, wry flicker of humor as she identified the message from her subconscious. "Unforgettable" was the melody.

Rain poured down the Jeep's windshield in a steady sheet, slapped aside by the brief, rhythmic clearing of the wipers. Zeke peered out at the flooded road--the turnoff to Ray Malone's cottage. If the directions he'd conned out of a gullible bartender hadn't led him wrong, he'd find Chelsea Connors a couple of miles up that muddy, winding road.

The Jeep plowed through six inches of water, then skidded to the side, toward the treacherous shoulder. Zeke wrestled the vehicle back on course, cursing. He hadn't counted on tracking Chelsea Connors down at the edge of the Adirondack wilderness in a remote cottage twenty miles from Saratoga Springs. He spent most of his days flying over tracts of uninhabited forest looking for evidence of spruce budworm or fire damage, not playing private eye to an errant brother and an independent, high-nosed piano player who, if she hadn't led Billy into trouble, seemed hell-bent on biting off more for herself than she could handle.

His detective skills had grown in direct, uneasy proportion to what he'd learned in the past twenty-four hours. His brother needed money, badly enough to try to borrow it from his fellow band members, from workers at the Metro, the nightclub where Chelsea performed, from all the legitimate loan agencies in Saratoga. Badly enough, finally, to pawn his sax to a disreputable loan shark with crooked teeth and an ugly leer.

The loan shark no longer had the sax. He'd sold it to a dark-haired woman, "a real looker," the man had drawled, grinning over a big glass of cheap whiskey. Luke had turned his back and left, but not soon enough to avoid the comment about how lucky Billy was to have a good-looking, high-roller girlfriend willing to bail him out ... in case he needed it in the near future. The man's

insinuating voice had spelled out something far more dangerous than Zeke had wanted to believe from Billy's single, fragmented phone call.

I don't want any of this to fall in her lap

A flash of lightning split the sky, followed too closely by an explosion of thunder. Zeke swore again as he jagged to avoid a fallen limb in the road. He'd counted on Chelsea Connors to stay behind the piano, in the spotlight at the Metro, under the watchful eye of Big Eddie and a few hundred admiring fans, one of whom would be Billy. She hadn't done that. She'd been ahead of him every step of the way in following Billy's trail, and she'd given Zeke a hell of a run for his money when he decided to track her down.

Zeke gripped the wheel, fighting anger, irritation, and annoyance as unwelcome as the storm flooding the road and slowing his progress. He should have been giving the road his full attention. He wasn't. He hadn't given anything his full attention since he'd walked into the Metro the night before and been knocked off course by a black-haired, piano-playing angel.

She was trouble. He'd known that before he walked in. But his libido hadn't gotten the message. He'd spent the past twenty-four hours thinking about Chelsea Connors, with her sweet, sensual, untouchable music and her warm, luminous, eminently touchable skin.

She got to him. Her unguarded honesty, her willingness to let her emotions show, that gesture she'd made toward Billy ... it touched a core of reaction in Zeke that went deeper than ordinary protectiveness or male interest or the tangled, murky way she was involved in Billy's troubles.

She got to him in a way no woman had since he'd been eight years old and in love with the young, blond, sweet-faced social worker who'd promised him she could make everything all right if he and his brother spent a few weeks in another foster home.

Zeke scowled at the road, banishing the memory, dismissing the complex emotions he shouldn't have let himself feel. He knew what happened when you risked your soul on emotion. You lost it.

A gust of wind whipped a branch against the Jeep, and Luke clenched his jaw, irritated with the rain, his brother, his own dark thoughts, and the woman who'd initiated them.

This wasn't so complex, at bottom. He knew what he needed to do: Concentrate on guiding the Jeep along the last mile of muddy track toward the cottage, find out what the hell his brother needed money for, get him out of trouble, and use the lesson to talk some sense into him.

Maybe he'd benefit from the talk himself.

The Jeep's headlights slid over a break in the trees. An iron gateway, adorned with the name MALONE, opened onto a winding, uphill driveway. Zeke took the turn.

A redwood-and-stone cottage stood in a landscaped clearing at the top of the drive. Zeke pulled up the Jeep beside a foreign-made silver sedan, peering out at the darkened house. There was no sign of Billy's rattletrap station wagon in the driveway, and the obvious conclusion was that Chelsea--if it was Chelsea Connors whose expensive sedan was parked beside his Jeep--was sound asleep.

So where the hell did that leave him?

Zeke sucked in a deep breath, killed the engine, and cut the Jeep's headlights.

When he did, he heard the piano music.

There was a faint, flickering light through one of the windows. Along with the quick realization that the power was out came an image so intensely sensual, Luke felt his muscles tighten in response. Chelsea Connors was sitting in a dark house, alone, playing piano by candlelight.

Zeke let out a long breath, stepped out into the rain, and slogged toward the dark sliding glass entryway of the cottage.

A knock on the door in the middle of the night during a storm had to be someone who needed help, Chelsea decided instantly, her fingers halting over the keyboard of Ray Malone's grand piano. *Someone like Billy North.*

Chelsea headed for the door. She'd had Billy on her mind all day, hoping he'd come by, thinking about what she'd say to him.

The image on the security camera stopped her in her tracks. Surprised and disbelieving, she pulled open the door, then stood, one hand on the glass slider, staring at him while the wind drove in around her ankles and rain dampened the welcome rug.

He stared back at her from the flagstone deck, appraising her in exactly the way he had watched her after her set at the Metro--as if no reaction was required. His scuffed, laced boots looked rugged enough to stand on her doorstep until hell froze over. He wore no foul-weather gear, despite the rain drenching his shoulders and his hair. The sleeves of his canvas shirt were rolled up just past his strong, tanned wrists, which disappeared into his pockets with the casual assurance of a man who knew absolutely that he had a right to be there.

"Pardon the midnight visit," he said finally, with no discernible apology in his voice. "I'm looking for my brother."

Chelsea found her voice. "I know. I thought that's who you might be."

His gaze narrowed for a moment while it played over her face, and a muscle at the side of his jaw tightened, revealing the bruise where his brother had hit him. "Are you expecting him?"

The question wasn't quite neutral. Chelsea's hand tightened on the door. She made herself loosen her fingers, then pushed the slider open a little farther and stepped back to invite Zeke North in out of the rain. "No, I can't say I'm expecting him."

Zeke North didn't answer, nor did he come in. He didn't thank her for the information, turn around, and walk away either, she reflected wryly.

The cool golden eyes slid from her face to the darkened interior of the house behind her. He frowned--more of a scowl, really--and scanned the room, taking his time, as if he had every right to check out her living quarters. It was in character, she reflected. The same way he'd taken hold of her wrist the night before, touching her with casual authority that made her pulse race. The thought of that touch raised her heartbeat a notch now and sent a sudden shiver down her spine, disorienting and unexpected.

Exasperated, Chelsea pushed the door open wide and stepped back to give him an unobstructed view. "Your brother's not here, Mr. North. No one's here, as you could see for yourself if you came in out of the rain. And I'm not expecting anyone."

His steady, disturbing gaze moved back to her, then played over her loose-knit cotton cardigan and leggings. The outfit wasn't provocative in any sense, but Chelsea had to stop herself from pulling the sweater closed, as if she'd been caught in her nightgown and robe. The impulse irritated her. "I wasn't expecting *you*, either," she snapped.

"You always open the door in the middle of the night to anyone who knocks, without asking who it is?"

She raised her eyes to the small, battery operated television camera above the inside of the slider. "I recognized you on screen."

He followed her gaze, leaning into the doorway to glance at the television camera.

Chelsea watched him. "Does my security system meet your approval?" she muttered when he'd finished.

"The system's fine." He straightened and ran a hand through his hair, scattering drops of rainwater over his dampening shirt. "But I have a lot of doubts about some of the people you might recognize. Like, for example, that two-bit loan shark you bought my brother's sax from."

Chelsea let out a long breath. Ah, yes. The sax. She should have known why he was here. She'd disobeyed his peremptory instructions to stay out of Billy's problems, and he wasn't happy about it. "What did you expect me to do?" she asked him.

He stood where he was, in the rain, hands on his hips, sure he was right, and asked, "Why did you have to do anything?"

"Because I didn't trust that pawnbroker not to sell Billy's sax before he had a chance to redeem it. I wasn't about to let that happen."

He stared at her through the rain drenching his dark brown hair and pinned her with the piercing eyes that seemed to see all the way through her. "I asked you to stay out of it," he said softly.

"No, you didn't. You didn't *ask* me anything. You instructed, and then demanded, and just assumed I'd follow orders." She raised her chin and squared her shoulders, despite the cold draft that made her want to pull her cardigan around her and shut the door. "You were wrong."

"I sure as hell was. I assumed you knew better than to go sashaying around the back alleys behind Saratoga's racetrack, paying whatever price was demanded by some loan shark who has more crooked angles than a haunted house. I happen to know you shelled out five times what Billy got for that sax. And the word's out now that his girlfriend's a high roller who's willing to bail him out of trouble for the asking. Do you know what that lets you in for, lady?"

Chelsea felt her bravado slide into irritation. "I don't see why it lets me in for anything. We didn't exactly swap phone numbers."

"You didn't have to. Your number's in the book. You didn't have to give him your present address, either. It's old news in Saratoga. You might as well have put up a sign to advertise."

"Maybe I should have! I might get a friendlier class of midnight callers."

"You might get mugged."

"I might get your brother," she shot back. "That's why you're here, isn't it? You thought you might find Billy."

His stony look didn't give her an inch. "I *thought* I'd find a piano-playing angel who doesn't know any better than to stand in front of a truckload of trouble. I didn't count on the fact that you'd have your thumb out to flag it down."

"Look, Mr. North," Chelsea muttered. "I'm not the only one in this conversation who's had a thumb out to flag down trouble. But it seems to me I'm the one who got the saxophone."

His bruised jaw clenched, and a rivulet of rainwater dripped down the side of his face. He reached into his back pocket and pulled out his wallet. "Here's what you're owed for the sax," he said gruffly. "So if you'll just hand it over, I'll take care of things from now on."

Chelsea glanced from the proffered wad of money to his grim expression. "I don't want the money back."

"The North family doesn't need handouts," he said, his voice tight.

Her eyes widened in outrage. "Helping a friend when he's in trouble isn't a *handout*."

"Call it anything you like. I won't take it."

No, she realized, he wouldn't. Not from her. Not even when it was obvious she was the one who knew Billy's habits, his haunts, where he'd gone when he was desperate for money. Not even when it was obvious she could help.

"You don't take handouts," she repeated, her voice tight. "You don't take help. You don't take advice. You don't even want other opinions, do you, Mr. North? What's it like always being right?"

He stared at her a moment, then said succinctly, "Troublesome."

"Has it occurred to you that maybe I can do something about your trouble?"

"Sure you can, Ms. Connors. You can throw a piano at it."

Chelsea's eyes narrowed, and she gave up the battle with her temper. "I don't have to throw a piano at it, Mr. North. I've got a saxophone." She flicked her gaze down to the money he still held in his hand. "And it's not for sale. Neither is my loyalty or my time or my friendship, so you can put

your hand back in your pocket and let me close the door."

Zeke's bruised jaw clenched as if he'd been slapped. For an instant his eyes blazed. "Look--" he said into the explosive silence. "I'm tired, I'm frustrated, I've spent twenty-four hours finding out just how deep my kid brother is in his own hole, and I don't need some overprotected nightclub--"

He broke off, his mouth tight, and swallowed the rest of the sentence whole. "Forget it," he said, his voice drained of all feeling except resignation. "Go ahead. Close the door." He slumped against the wooden railing of the deck and tipped his head back, his eyes shut.

Chelsea's hand gripped the wooden slider, but the anger that had urged her to shut it in his face ebbed away. She took in his slumped posture, the lines of worry etched on his face, the bruise on his jaw. The memory of something Billy had told her--something about one of the foster homes they'd lived in--tightened a knot in her chest with emotion deeper than anger, more fundamental than the animosity between them.

She couldn't reach everyone. She knew that. She *knew* it, damn it. She'd long since learned to make compromises with her impulse to reach out to everyone in need she came across. Zeke North didn't want her help. He didn't want her insights on Billy, he didn't want her contacts, he wouldn't even come in out of the rain when she offered shelter. Didn't she know when to give up, for Pete's sake? She closed her eyes for a moment, trying to sort out her emotions.

A gust of wind and rain whipped in across the deck. She was getting cold and wet, standing in the entryway. Zeke North was soaked, his wet shirt plastered to his broad shoulders and chest, the chinos draped against his thighs, his hair dripping rainwater.

Chelsea let out a long, resigned breath. "I'll close the door," she said finally, her voice a little husky, "if you come in first."

He turned his head, frowning at her as if he couldn't imagine he'd heard right.

Chelsea stepped back. "There's some scotch in the kitchen. I'll make you a drink."

She couldn't read his expression to tell if he'd accept her offer or reject it. When she realized she was holding her breath, tensing against the rejection, she made herself let go of the door and turn toward the kitchen.

Zeke North watched her cross the expanse of hardwood floor in the big room, his brow furrowed. What was with the woman? A minute ago she'd been ready to shut the door in his face. Now she was inviting him in and getting him a drink.

What was with him, for that matter? Why the hell was his gut tied up in knots over an issue that wasn't debatable? He was right, she was wrong. That was all there was to it. He wasn't about to let Chelsea Connors take on the North family troubles.

His eyes narrowed on her retreating figure. The dark hair brushed against her shoulders, and the long sweater shifted across her hips with every step. In the dim, candlelit room the image she made could have been used on the cover of one of her recordings--elusive, enigmatic, rife with the possibilities of fantasy.

Zeke muttered a curse under his breath, then walked into the house and pulled the door shut behind him.

The big main room of the summer house was dominated by a grand piano. The warm, flickering

light from a candelabra above the keyboard played off a solid wall of speakers, recording equipment, and electronics. Music stands and instrument cases filled shelves on the opposite wall. On a stone fireplace across from the door someone had hung a battered saxophone like a Christmas stocking. It looked like the one Billy had learned to play on, before he and Zeke had made the trip to Bangor to buy his good one.

Zeke wandered across the carpeted floor to the piano. Above the keyboard was a stack of notated music and a small silver-framed picture. A woman with Chelsea's dark hair and fair skin smiled behind a microphone. She was holding hands with a trumpet player who watched her with pride. A dapper, dark-haired man had his arm around both of them. Across the bottom was an inscription: *As far as I'm concerned, they can hear every note you play--Ray.*

Ray. Her boss. And that must be her parents with him in the picture? He sat down on the piano stool, swiveled it around, and rested his elbows on the edge of the keyboard behind him, then let his head tip back and shut his eyes.

The clink of ice in a glass testified to the fact she'd found the scotch. Zeke gazed at the dark hallway again, thinking of the scotch, the glass, the image of this woman making him a drink, bringing it to him. He made himself look away.

God, he wasn't much more in control of his emotions than Billy was. It didn't take any great revelation to figure out what was churning in his gut, any more than it took great insight to figure out why Billy had fallen for her.

Chelsea Connors was no one-night infatuation. She had something that made a man want to ask for too much else.

And when you asked for that much, you had to pay for it. Chelsea Connors was a jazz angel, who could weave fantasies with music that made reality seem like a distant dream. A man caught in those fantasies might sell his soul for a chance to make them happen.

Zeke clenched his teeth, feeling the residual ache from his jaw as an alternative to the kind of thoughts that had chased him all through the long drive up here. He didn't like the way she got to him. He didn't like feeling out of control, and he didn't like the voice in the back of his head that told him she was dangerous--that this particular situation had all the elements of something he'd known enough to avoid since he was eight years old. He knew enough to avoid it now. He just had to keep his thoughts on what he was doing and off Chelsea Connors.

"It's bourbon. I couldn't find the scotch."

Her voice cut across his thoughts like electricity on a wet wire. Caught off guard, Zeke opened his eyes and muttered a silent curse at himself.

She was standing in front of him, holding a gold-embossed glass in one slim hand. Her hair, loose and a little tousled, dark as black velvet, brushed across her shoulders as she held the glass out to him.

He took it. "Thank you."

"You know ... " The husky, low voice touched masculine nerve endings all along his body. In her green eyes the reflection of the candlelight made tiny, flickering lights as she watched him. "...I didn't really mean what I said about your trying to buy my .. loyalty. I know you're close to Billy."

It wasn't what he'd expected to hear. The generosity of her assessment left Zeke speechless for a moment; then he let out a long breath. "Not close enough," he said finally.

There was a silence. "You can't blame yourself for Billy's trouble. He's out on his own. You can't know everything about what might happen to him."

He took a sip of the bourbon, then swirled the ice in the glass before he looked up at her again. "Being in trouble's only the tip of the iceberg. He didn't tell me he'd left school, or where he was, what he was doing, how he got a job playing saxophone." He let his eyes drift over her. "And he didn't tell me about you."

In the flickering light he thought he saw her color deepen. She crossed her arms in front of her and took a step toward the piano, then leaned her elbows on it. Rain beat against the windows, muted and distant from the soundproofed room. Chelsea glanced at the windows, then looked back at him.

She wasn't going to deny Billy's infatuation, he realized, admitting a grudging respect for Chelsea's silence. When there was nothing to say, she said nothing. Or she said it with a piano.

Zeke twisted toward her on the piano stool and ran a hand along the keys. "How long have you played?"

She blinked once, surprised. "Since I was eight."

He nodded at the small silver-framed picture in front of her. "Your parents taught you?"

"No. They ... " She hesitated, and he thought she wasn't going to finish the sentence, but she took a breath and went on. "They died when I was young ... before I learned to play. But they taught me to love music, and then when they ... " This time, she trailed off, gazing down at her hands on the dark expanse of the piano. When she spoke again, she changed the subject. ""What will you do now?"

Zeke glanced toward the picture, wondering what she'd been about to say, telling himself it was none of his business, and he had no interest in it. The self-deception didn't last even as long as it took to swallow a mouthful of bourbon, but he made himself answer her question and ignore his own. "I'll go back to Saratoga Springs. Wait. Check out the jazz clubs. Billy's not one to brood by himself. He needs other people around him. Even if I'm not one of them."

Chelsea's steady gaze measured him with undefended honesty. "I think he's lucky to have you," she said. "Even if he's forgotten it for the moment."

A stab of unwanted emotion tightened Zeke's chest. He kept his face impassive, but he could feel the physical response, that thread of connection palpable as a touch. "I'll give you a ride back with me," he said abruptly.

"A ride back with--"

"The road's flooded. You'd never get through without a four-wheel drive. The power's already out here. There's a good chance you'll lose the phone too."

Her eyes widened. "You can't be serious about driving back now? Not in this storm. That's crazy."

He set the drink down on a coaster above the keyboard. "I drove out here. I can drive back. "

She hesitated a moment, watching him, then said, ""Why don't you stay here? There's plenty of

room. If the road's already flooded, it makes a lot more sense to stay than to try to drive through it."

No. Zeke's muscles tightened in involuntary protest as sudden, unleashed male hunger spawned an image he hadn't. summoned. Dark hair loose on white shoulders, candlelight spilling over her breasts, her fingers on his skin ...

He reached for the drink again, wrapping his hands around the cold glass as if he were getting a grip on reality. She wasn't offering any more than casual hospitality, and he knew it. "That's the way things are done around here?" he asked her, his voice tight.

"Yes." She shot him a puzzled glance. "Ray's house is always open to musicians or friends." She shrugged.

Friends. He wondered if any of them had ever shared a bed with Chelsea. He gritted his teeth, reminding himself again it was none of his business.

When he glanced up at her, she was watching him. Something flickered in the green depths of her eyes that made Zeke's pulse race. *No*, he told himself again. There wasn't anything happening here except his imagination and too much time on a dark road listening to late-night jazz and letting it get to him.

She pulled her sweater more closely around her and gave him a quick, polite smile. "I'll check that the room's made up," she said, turning away from the piano.

"No."

"What?"

Luke put the glass down again. "Get your things, Ms. Connors. We're leaving."

Wariness, surprise, and outrage chased each other across her expressive face. Zeke steeled himself for the argument he didn't want to have. "Why?" she asked finally.

"Because I'm right. Because my brother's not going to make it out over those roads. And it's not a good idea for you to stay here alone, especially if you're cut off from help by the storm. I'm not staying, and I'm not leaving you here."

He recognized the stubborn set of her chin and the disbelief in her eyes for pure, mute outrage, but she said nothing while she absorbed his logic and evaluated it. She let out a long, slow breath, and her mouth softened. To Zeke's surprise, she bent and pulled out one of the instrument cases from the shelves along the wall and held it out to him.

"This is Billy's sax," she said levelly. "We may as well bring it along."

THREE

The drive back to Saratoga should normally have taken no more than thirty minutes, but fog that had been thickening during the night slowed the Jeep to a crawl. Zeke gripped the steering wheel as the Jeep lurched over a washout, cursed his own judgment yet again, and reached for the radio, scanning the dial for weather information. A snatch of tune flowed out of the speakers--the all-night jazz station from Saratoga. A slow, sensuous piano solo filled the confines of the Jeep.

He realized abruptly what it was. Chelsea Connors's rendition of the jazz classic *Body and Soul* sounded rich and evocative even through the vehicle's standard speakers.

His eyes flicked toward Chelsea. Her head was resting on the back of the seat, her eyes closed. She'd been asleep since soon after they'd left the cottage. She must have that adaptable road musician's knack for sleeping in the front seat of a car, even lurching over a rough road in a midnight storm. In the faint glow of the dashboard her hair was raven-black, and her fair skin was luminous, smooth as satin sheets on a double bed.

Deliberately, Zeke moved his eyes to the road and his concentration to his driving and clenched his jaw. He'd been conjuring up sensual images for twenty-four hours now, and it took only a few notes of her piano music to summon them all back, hot; beckoning, alluring. The power of Chelsea Connors's talent was something that fascinated him--and the woman herself drew him just as obsessively. Vital, intelligent, passionate--and with something more powerfully alluring than grace or talent or sensuality. That gesture she'd made toward Billy--it had been offered straight from her soul, the way she played music: Every feeling open, every nuance reached. For a brief, unbidden moment Zeke felt that imagined touch across his chest, a brief, shocking sense of heat and velvet that burned straight from the music and the memory into his body.

He gripped the wheel of the Jeep and told himself his mind was playing 2:00 A.M. tricks on him. It wasn't Chelsea Connors who touched him. It was late-night radio on a dark road, fantasy and jazz and that song title that made him feel the connection all the way through his body to his soul. But he knew, even so, how she'd touch him, her hands soft and warm and unafraid, drawing him in with her warmth, her mouth sweet and willing under his, her sweater flowing in a pool around her waist, her body pliant and welcoming

He sucked in a breath. Chelsea murmured something incoherent and turned on the seat, moving a little closer to him. Zeke felt his body heat rise enough to counteract even the cold, driving rain beating against the windshield. The urge to pullover to the side of the road, turn her around, and ease her into his lap broke over him like a flash of truth he'd been waiting for all his life.

How about if I take you parking, Ms. Chelsea Connors, on a flooded road north of East Galway in the middle of a storm? How about if I rest your head against my hands and cover your mouth and slide my tongue between those sweet lips until you make the kind of music I've been thinking about since I met you?

The Jeep shimmied once as he gripped the wheel. The big buck that bolted into the road froze in the headlights at the exact moment Zeke saw it. He slammed on the brakes, uttered a string of curses he didn't bother to censor, jerked the wheel to the right, and sent the Jeep into a sliding skid onto the gravel shoulder of the road.

His arm shot out to hold Chelsea back as they were both thrown forward, but Chelsea's hands came up reflexively as she was shocked into consciousness. Hands outstretched as if she would smash through the window, Chelsea screamed.

The sound was terrified, panicked. Zeke felt adrenaline rush through his system in reaction to the fear in that scream. "Are you all right?" he barked, his heart pounding.

She made a small, throttled sound of sheer terror deep in her throat, and Zeke felt his own reflexes tighten as she struggled to draw a shuddering breath. Without thinking, he reached for her shoulders and pulled her back from the windshield, tucked her groping hands in close to his body, and pulled her head down to his chest.

She was shivering in the aftermath of a fear he couldn't understand, made all the more perplexing by its lack of proportion to the real danger. "No one's hurt," he said. "We're all right."

"The gl-glass--" she gasped. "I c-couldn't break it--"

"No. No, angel. We're fine. No broken glass." His arm tightened around the supple curve of her back. One hand stroked her hair, her neck, her shoulder, giving comfort beyond his words. "It was my fault. I should have been watching for that buck, along this stretch of road."

Chelsea's hand clutched at his shirt, and she drew in a long, shaky breath, held it a moment, then let it out as Zeke felt the effort of her control in the fine shivers that racked her body. She nodded, a brush of her cheek against his chest, and Zeke stroked her spine, spreading his thighs to cradle her in his lap. "It's all ... " Her voice cracked on the words. She drew in another breath, and by small degrees her fist uncurled from Zeke's shirt. "It's all right," she repeated, more strongly. He felt her summoning up strength as if she were facing an audience, focusing on the task she set for herself, pushing back her fear by force of will. "What was it?" she asked finally.

"A deer, a big buck. Ran in front of the Jeep. We missed him."

When she made a movement to sit up, Zeke's arms tightened. "Stay there. God, I was the one that dragged you out here," he muttered, his jaw clenched. "I was the one that told you it wasn't safe to stay in that cottage."

She shook her head. "It wasn't ... "

Zeke's cheek rested against the dark cloud of hair at the crown of her head, and his hand stroked the length of her spine as if she were fine porcelain and a rough touch would shatter her. "It wasn't what?" he murmured.

She didn't speak for a moment, then in a voice that still struggled to stay level, she said, "It wasn't ... your fault."

His hand stopped for a moment, then continued its slow, comforting caress. "What wasn't?"

"Just a ... dream I have sometimes."

"You weren't dreaming. You were waking up."

"Same thing."

His hand stilled, then moved again, stroking, repeating the action. "You want to talk about it?"

For a long moment there was no sound but Chelsea's uneven breath and Zeke's hand caressing the back of her sweater. "I don't talk about it," she said in a low voice. He felt her cheek move against his collarbone, her breasts lift against his chest. "I play music about it. "

Zeke's hold tightened around the woman in his arms. He understood what she meant. If Chelsea Connors dealt with her emotions by creating music, it wasn't his place to interfere with that. But somehow the idea of Chelsea facing some unnamed nightmare by herself made his gut twist with vehement emotion.

"It's all right," he heard himself say, disbelieving it even as he said it. He couldn't make it all right. He knew that. Yet he couldn't prevent himself from holding her, offering the balm of comfort, cradling her head against his chest. He'd seen the range of her emotions when she'd played her music--amusement, passion, independence, but he hadn't seen her scared. And in his arms, the evidence of her panic was all too clear--she was still trembling, despite the effort he felt her expending to control it. In the half-darkness her fair skin looked transparent. Her lower lip had faint marks where she'd bitten down with her teeth. Her hand clutched his shirt as if some danger threatened her and he was her protector.

Zeke felt that compelling surge of protectiveness tighten his arms, even while he told himself he was crazy to let himself feel it. It would be too natural a step to lift her face, trace the satin skin over her cheekbones with his thumb, kiss the corner of her mouth, and then the other corner

Chelsea shivered once in his arms, and Zeke felt an answering shudder pass through him, heating his blood, charging the masculine nerve endings all through his body with sudden, focused purpose. This wasn't the place or the time.

She sighed again and moved her hand infinitesimally, in the barest hint of a caress.

Zeke went rigid, then very, very still. It didn't help. He could feel the blood surging in his veins, in his imagination, in the awakened male parts of his body.

How about if we consider the Jeep parked, angel, and we slide down across the seat and you let me slide into your body the way a hot jazz solo slides into the music?

For an instant he wondered if he'd said the words aloud; then the surge of heat in his body made him wonder if he should. Slowly, carefully, he eased Chelsea off his lap and reached for the door handle, muttering something about the tire.

The rain was coming down in sheets, running in rivulets over the pavement. The Jeep was canted to the far side. Zeke circled it, noting without surprise that the right front tire was flat. He kept going,

then wound down the window at the back of the Jeep and reached inside for his jacket.

"Is everything all right?" Chelsea asked him. "

"It will be in a minute." The jack was stashed behind the wheel hub, the toolbox beside it. Zeke grabbed both and rolled the window up again. He had the jack propped on the gravel shoulder, a long-bodied flashlight tucked under his arm, when the passenger door opened and Chelsea got out into the rain.

He stopped what he was doing, frowning at her.

"The tire's flat?" Chelsea asked.

"Yeah. No problem. I'll have it changed in a few minutes. Get back in."

He turned back to the tire and pumped the jack handle once, twice

She didn't move. In the downpour her hair was already plastered to her forehead, water running onto her shoulders.

"I'll help"

Her voice quavered a little, as if she were still shaky.

"Look, you're already getting wet. I don't need--"

She took a step toward him, reached for the flashlight under his arm, and tugged it out. He let go of it, contemplating her.

"I can hold the light."

In the cone of the flashlight beam her face was pale. The tangled wet hair across her forehead made her look like a wraith, too fragile to be out in the drenching rain flooding the road and running in a muddy, roiling stream along the ditch. But the blaze of brave defiance in her eyes was anything but fragile.

Though the idea of Chelsea helping him, shivering in her cotton sweater and inadequate rain shell, went against the grain, he sensed that she needed to help. It was as though her need to nurture grew with her nightmare and the brief panic she displayed after it. His jaw clenched against the urge to order her back into the Jeep where she belonged, out of the rain, out of reach of the way his gut twisted every time he thought of her unnamed fears and the way she faced them.

He turned back to the jack handle and attacked it, telling himself it was none of his business if Chelsea Connors had her own private, reasons for wanting to get wet and cold holding his flashlight. When the Jeep was lifted clear of the ground, he jerked the lug wrench out of the socket of the jack and jammed the flattened end of it against the edge of the hubcap. The oversized tool slipped out of the groove and banged against the rim.

"You won't get the hubcap off with that," Chelsea said behind him. The light shifted for a moment as she leaned over his toolbox and picked up a screwdriver. "Try this."

Silently, Zeke took the tool from her cold hand. The light shook a little, he noticed, as he pried off the hubcap. He wondered briefly if her own private test of courage would stop. short of hypothermia. He jammed the wrench onto the first lug nut. When he crouched in front of the wheel to unscrew it, the nut dropped from his wet fingers into the mud.

Chelsea switched the beam of the flashlight down to the ground; then she bent to pick up the lug nut and dropped it in the hollow of the hubcap. He thought he heard her teeth chattering before she straightened up.

Zeke muttered a curse under his breath, stood up, and shrugged off his jacket. "Here." He swung the jacket around her shoulders.

"But you--"

He pulled the lapels closed under her startled face and stalked around to the front of the Jeep to get the spare tire.

Chelsea was holding the jacket closed with one hand, her fingers white against the dark canvas, when he rolled the tire back and propped it against the bumper. She let go of the jacket and made a movement as if to shrug it off.

"Just hold the damn light still," he barked at her.

There was a startled, wary silence but the light swung back to the tire and stayed there, steady.

It took only five minutes to get the spare tire in place, jack the truck down, and throw the flat into the back of the Jeep, but to Zeke's taut nerves the interval could have been an hour.

He stalked back to Chelsea, reached for the door and pulled it open. "Okay, we're finished here," he said. "You can get in."

Chelsea's eyes, innocent and puzzled, studied him over the collar of his jacket while a gust of wind hammered rain against the roof of the Jeep. "Here." She held out the flashlight.

Zeke reached for it, but as he touched it, the wet metal slipped through their fingers and the flashlight dropped. Chelsea muttered a curse as the light hit the ground and went out. The word was mild by backwoods standards, but coming from Chelsea's lips it surprised him. He bent to pick up the flashlight.

"Sorry," she said.

"For dropping the flashlight?" he muttered. "Or for swearing?"

"For dropping the light, of course. It didn't occur to me you'd mind the swearing."

"I don't. I just didn't realize you'd use that kind of language, Ms. Connors."

"Why not?" Her eyebrows arched. "You think nightclub musicians never swear?"

"I don't know if you qualify as a 'nightclub musician.' "

She stared at him a moment, then a slight smile touched her mouth, and she shook her head. "You don't know much. about me at all, do you?" She put her hand on his and in a casual, graceful gesture that took the sarcasm out of her words, and in the cold rain Zeke felt instant, searing heat flood through his veins. Standing in front of him in his canvas jacket, her hair plastered around her face, her fingers just brushing his biceps, she sent a surge of desire coursing through him that defied the last vestiges of his common sense. He went rigid, every muscle in his body taut.

She blinked, her eyes wide. She made no move to get into the Jeep, studying him for a moment, then shaking her head. "What's the matter?"

"You," he ground out, "just trying to help. You could have sat in the Jeep and stayed dry. You could have stayed back at the cottage and gotten a good night's sleep." He raked his fingers through his wet hair. "Why the hell are you so damned determined to help?"

She held his gaze, but her voice held a catch of emotion he couldn't define. "I thought you needed my help." Her fingers tightened on his arm.

Zeke felt that touch as if the connection were forged across a span of time and space that couldn't be measured. The faint warmth of her hand, the barest trembling of her fingers, spoke messages that shredded what was left of his control. "What I need," he said gruffly, "isn't your problem."

She made a sudden, incoherent sound almost masked by the drilling rain, but Zeke's taut senses reacted to it instantaneously. Did she want him? Did she also feel the hot rush of desire that coursed through him like fire in the cold rain? If he made a move toward her, would she resist him?

Fighting the temptation with every ounce of will he possessed, Zeke stood unmoving, his fist locked onto the door handle.

She straightened, gathering herself up in that way she had; then, deliberately, she let go of one side of his jacket, slipped it off her shoulders, and held it out to him.

Lightning, diffused by fog, lit the sky in eerie intermittent fireworks, making her fair skin luminous against the black silk of her hair.

With one vicious movement Zeke tossed the dead flashlight into the Jeep, grabbed the jacket from Chelsea's hands, and swept it around her shoulders again. His hands cradled the collar around her jaw, tipping her face up to his as he stepped close to her. "If you don't know what you do to me, I don't think I can tell you any other way."

He brought his mouth down over Chelsea's, tasted cold rain and the faintest trace of lipstick, then twisted his head to fit her mouth to his until he could taste nothing but the warm, unresisting woman in his arms.

She made a startled sound that was lost in the heat of Zeke's kiss, while his hands slid down to hold her by her upper arms, crushing the canvas jacket under his palms. His tongue traced the edges of her lips, prodding, seeking, and Chelsea's mouth opened to it, sweet and willing, allowing the hot, urgent penetration that sought and claimed the vulnerable recesses of her mouth.

Chelsea's arms slipped around Zeke's waist, the imprint of her hands blocking the rain from his back as he pulled her closer, fitting her body to his, warming her with heat that defied the cold rain and the dark night. With a soft sigh of surrender she gave herself to the embrace, welcoming Zeke's heat and strength, letting her tongue twine with his in a heart-tripping, intimate mating that sent shivers of response fluttering through Chelsea's body.

Abruptly, Zeke broke off the kiss, putting her away from him with the iron grip of his hands on her arms. Stunned, Chelsea clutched at the open door of the Jeep as if it would hold her up.

"Get in," he growled at her. She made no movement, and a moment later he shoved his hands into his pockets. "Go ahead," he said more softly. "Get out of the rain."

Her gaze held his for a last, searchingly honest exchange that shook Zeke to the depths of his soul, then she slipped out of his jacket and got into the Jeep.

FOUR

Chelsea stared through the wet windshield, watching Zeke's rain-distorted figure cross in front of the Jeep, making no attempt to sort out her own chaotic feelings. Zeke North's kiss was the last thing she'd expected--the last thing she'd thought she wanted. But she couldn't deny the heat of sensual passion she'd felt in his arms. She'd welcomed it with no thought of consequences or reason.

The driver's door opened, and he got in beside her, splattering her with rainwater from his wet shirt. His face was grim, staring out at the water streaming down the windshield.

He wouldn't look at her. His jaw set, eyes straight ahead, he pushed the key into the ignition and started the Jeep. From the radio, a Miles Davis solo identified the jazz station the dial was tuned to, but Zeke North made no move to touch the radio, his hands clutched around the steering wheel. Seconds ago he'd kissed her with an intensity that had struck them both like the fury of the storm outside. She knew that. He'd felt the impact of that kiss as much as she had. But he hadn't wanted to, hadn't welcomed it ... any more than he'd wanted to respond to her music the night before in the Metro. He was fighting it with all the force of his will.

Disbelief dissolved slowly into resentment. She didn't think of herself as a siren luring unsuspecting males to disastrous fates. She hadn't asked him to kiss her, damn it. But he had. And now he wasn't going to so much as acknowledge that kiss, the sensuality that had blazed between them, the response that was still shimmering through her like fox fire.

When he finally glanced toward her, their eyes locked for an instant, and Chelsea felt a slow, sensual shudder travel down her spine.

"You can turn on the heat."

For a confusion-charged moment she thought he was talking about the kiss, commenting on the swift, hot response she hadn't even tried to deny, casting her into some unmerited role of seductress. Color flooded her face for a split second before she realized that wasn't the meaning he'd intended with his curt statement. She shut her eyes for a moment, let out a breath of disbelief at her own mistake, and reached for the heating lever in the dashboard. "The heat," she muttered. "'Right."

Warm air swirled around her ankles. The front of her sweater was still damp from the imprint of his body where the jacket had hung open. She shivered again, from cold this time, but she wondered wryly how much of the chill was psychological.

She turned up the blower. The sound diffused but didn't completely mask the radio. The windshield was misting with a film of moisture from their damp clothes. "Do you want the defrost on?" Chelsea asked, flicking the lever up before he answered.

"Yeah. Everything in here is damp."

She gave him another look, thinking ironically that the comment was more apt than he knew. His mood was as damp as everything else in the Jeep. "Well. I suppose it will dry."

"Not likely," he muttered. He snapped on the headlights and pulled the Jeep back onto the road. "The rain's leaking in the back window."

Chelsea flicked a glance over her shoulder, then, on a sudden thought, sat up and turned in the seat. "What about Billy's sax? It can't get wet--there's a crack in the case."

"I took care of it. It's covered with a tarp. It's okay."

She stared at his profile for a moment, then settled back in the seat facing forward. The wipers slapped rhythmically at the stream of water flowing down the windshield. A curtain of rain, silvered by the headlights, obscured the road ahead of them. Above the noise of the blower, the radio kept playing classic jazz, the sound lyrical, insistent, oblivious to the tension stretched between them across the front seat.

"You know, I can't figure you at all," she said finally, staring at him. "You don't like jazz, but you have it on the radio. You don't like the fact that Billy quit school to play the sax, but you go to great lengths to get it back when he pawns it, and you take the trouble to keep it dry under a tarp when the window's leaking. You don't want me involved in Billy's problems, but you're driving me back to Saratoga so I won't be left out there without lights and power. And then you--" She stopped, frowning.

She thought for a moment he wouldn't answer her at all, then he glanced at her again, his face carefully neutral, and his hands eased around the steering wheel. "It's not so hard to figure. I bought Billy that sax."

He hadn't finished her sentence either, she noted. But he damn well knew what she'd been getting at, and his deliberate refusal to mention it angered her as much as the fact that he resented wanting her and no doubt regretted kissing her. "Oh?" Her voice was skeptical. "That's what you're doing here? Protecting your investment?"

"And my brother," he snapped.

"And your brother." There was another brief silence. "And what exactly is it that I have to do with all this?"

His jaw clenched. "Let me put it this way," he said, his eyes on the road. "If my brother broke a window when he was twelve, I took responsibility for it. If he's gotten you into some kind of trouble over this mess, whatever it is, I'll take care of that too."

She felt a flash of outrage at the idea that she needed to be taken care of, but she bit it back and said instead, "You take care of everything, don't you? Changing tires, raising your brother and paying for his mistakes, rescuing women from storms." He didn't answer her, and she went on, "Tell me--do you ever get tired of playing the Lone Ranger riding to the rescue?"

He made a sound deep in his throat that held too much skepticism for the truth of her insight. "I'm not trying to play hero."

She studied him. He believed it, she reflected.

That he wasn't trying to play hero. That it was his job to save Billy, deliver Chelsea from the storm, maybe even save her from the feelings he didn't want to have toward her. "Then how do you describe what you're doing?"

"I'm looking for my brother, with no idea where he is." The windshield wipers slapped back and forth while he raked one hand through his hair. "All I know is he's in trouble, he's been looking for help from all the wrong people, and I still don't know if there's a damn thing I can do about it." The look he gave her held a swift intensity that startled her. "And what I'm doing so far is driving through a storm in the middle of the night with the woman he thinks he's in love with."

Chelsea's breath caught in her throat. It was the closest he'd come to mentioning the fact that he'd just kissed her. The nearest thing to a reason for the antagonism she sensed beneath the heat of his attraction. Billy thought he was in love with her, so she was off-limits to his brother. It was simple, straightforward, neat. A good, simple, rule book reason for his refusal to let himself become involved with her.

But somehow she couldn't bring herself to believe it. "Is that why you're trying to argue with me?" she asked him, her voice challenging. "Because Billy thinks he's in love?"

"I'm not trying to--"

Staring at him, she let the statement hang until he spoke again.

"All right," he said, his jaw clenching. "Maybe I am. Maybe it's a situation that deserves a damn good argument."

"You didn't have to choose this situation," she told him. "You didn't have to come looking for me. We didn't have to drive back through this storm. You could have stayed at the cottage for the night."

"No, I couldn't."

"Why not?"

"Because it would have been a lousy idea," he told her through gritted teeth.

"Why?" she snapped, angry. "What do you think would have happened?"

Across the front seat of the Jeep he shot her a look that blazed hot enough to scorch the damp air.

"Do you really want me to spell it out, Chelsea?" he said softly enough to make her wonder, for a moment, if he'd really used her first name.

But he had, and that small, softly spoken intimacy reached through her angry frustration as surely as a thread of melody in an empty room and touched something deeper than anger, deeper than the expectant sexual tension between them.

She let out a long, audible breath that didn't dispel the knots in her stomach, then sank back against the seat and closed her eyes, listening to the squeak and slap of the wipers, the drumming of rain on the metal roof of the Jeep, the hiss of tires on wet pavement.

"I'm sorry," she said finally, quietly. "You're the one trying to drive through this. I shouldn't be making it more difficult."

"Look--I didn't mean--" He broke off, leaving the sentence unfinished. It was unfulfilling to the aching space Chelsea felt inside her, but she let it go.

Zeke North touched something in her that couldn't be easily explained, even in the heat of passion. She wasn't sure what it was. She wasn't sure how she felt about it. She wasn't even sure it was real. But whatever it was that so unsettled her on this midnight journey, she wasn't ready to have it spelled out.

By the time they reached Saratoga Springs the sky had lightened enough to cast a gray ethereal veil over the wooden Victorian houses of Maple Street, and Zeke's outlook had darkened to black in the face of Chelsea's unbroken silence.

Irritated at himself, the storm, and the inarguable logic that he'd started the silence, he clamped his jaw shut and refused to say anything more. Why the hell had he intimated she would have welcomed him into her bed if he'd stayed the night with her?

He was being unreasonable and he knew it, but the way she'd responded to him when he'd kissed her had been a shock. She'd gone through him like lightning--her warmth and acceptance and the soft, willing curves of her graceful body inside his jacket. He'd wanted her just that way, in the rain, with his jacket over her shoulders and his hands inside her sweater, stroking the warm, damp silk of her skin with his palms, claiming her body the way he'd claimed her mouth.

Just the thought of it brought his body to taut awareness and his imagination to overdrive. God, she was warm enough to make him forget all that cold rain, and soft enough to turn hard logic into something that had a hell of a lot more to do with sex than with reason.

She had him tied up in so many knots, he could have been wrapped around her piano stool.

He came close to missing the turn to the only motel where he'd been able to find a room in Saratoga during August--the flat-track, thoroughbred-racing season. Disgusted with his distraction, he stepped on the brakes and maneuvered the Jeep around the corner and into the side lot. He ran a

hand through his hair as he pulled into the parking space in front of the office.

Chelsea pushed herself up straighter in the seat. He glanced toward her. "I'm going to check for messages. Maybe Billy's turned up and we can both stop worrying."

Her eyes regarded him steadily. "And what if he hasn't? Or what if he's left a message someplace else?"

Zeke let out a breath, one hand massaging the back of his neck. "Then I take you home and handle it myself."

You'll handle it?"

"That's right. I'm not going to argue with you. There's no point in it. You don't want to be involved in this."

Her face reflected disbelief and dawning outrage. "I think," she said deliberately, "I can decide for myself what I want to be involved in."

"Right," he growled. "Prima donnas usually do, don't they?"

The disbelief on her face won out for a moment. Zeke shut his eyes before the outrage kicked in. Why the hell couldn't he have a simple conversation with this woman without insulting her?

He considered, briefly, an apology, but he was afraid it might cause more trouble than it would cure. With a single, curt epithet he reached for the door handle. "I'll be right back." He slammed the door behind him.

She was out of the Jeep before he'd walked around the front of it toward the office. Zeke glanced toward her, set his jaw, and said nothing. He might have known she wouldn't wait for him in the Jeep. If nothing else, he thought with growing frustration, she couldn't waste the opportunity to get wet.

Walking beside him, she pulled her sweater closer around her body. He had to stop himself from noticing the way it outlined her breasts and clung to her slim waist. If she pulled it any tighter, it would be molded to her body like the drapery on a Greek statue. He wondered if she had any idea what kind of effect she had on him. Or, more irritating for reasons he didn't want to admit, whether she cared. He opened the door for her, careful not to touch her, and let her walk ahead of him into the office.

The night clerk, a woman who outweighed him by at least fifty pounds, glanced up from the racing form she was poring over and brushed a few gray curls off her forehead. "Don't tell me about this storm," she said by way of greeting. "The track will be a swamp by race time. You looking for a room?"

"I'm already registered," Zeke said.

"Already registered?" She narrowed her eyes at him, glancing from Zeke to Chelsea with shrewd

appraisal. "Are you room thirty-eight?" she said to Zeke.

He frowned. He didn't remember meeting the woman. "Yes."

"Well, then you have a message. From your brother." She reached behind her and snagged a white envelope from a cubbyhole on the back wall. She stared at it curiously for a moment before handing it over. "Did you have a fight with him?"

Zeke took the envelope, ignoring her question.

The woman huffed her own answer. "That trophy on your jaw is a lulu."

"Yeah," Zeke said shortly. The envelope was unsealed. Zeke opened it and took out the folded note inside.

The woman's eyebrows rose in philosophical reaction to Zeke's curtness, and she glanced toward Chelsea. "This is about you, is it, honey?"

To Zeke's annoyance, Chelsea gave the woman a wry smile. "I'm afraid so," she said.

"Well, I wouldn't worry about the kid brother," the desk clerk said to Chelsea. "He'll get over it."

Zeke put his hand on Chelsea's shoulder and turned her toward the door, walking her away from the inquisitive desk clerk before she asked any more personal questions.

"Oh--and you had another call," the woman offered as they crossed the lobby. "From your manager, at the forestry company?" She waited for Zeke to turn back toward her. "He wanted to know when you'd be back. Sounded like he's been working too much overtime, y'know?"

"Thanks," Zeke muttered, wondering if she gave advice on the horses as well. Or took bets.

They made a dash for the Jeep. Once inside, Zeke wiped the rain out of his hair and dropped the note from his brother onto the dashboard.

Chelsea's glance moved from the envelope to his face.

He met her eyes briefly, then looked away.

"Well?" she asked.

He hesitated.

Her mouth tilted in the barest suggestion of a smile. "Are you going to tell me what it says, or do I have to ask the desk clerk?"

"You seemed to get along with her well enough," he muttered. "Is she an old friend of yours?"

"Not yet."

But she probably would be by the time Chelsea had finished exchanging gossip with her, he decided.

He reached for the note, held it a moment, then passed it over to her. "Go ahead and read it."

She took it from his outstretched fingers, unfolded it, then scanned the words. "Dear Zeke There's nothing to say except I dug myself into a bigger hole than I ever planned to." She paused.

Zeke said nothing.

" ... I don't want to drag anyone down with me. You raised me to solve my own problems, and maybe if I do that--"

She broke off, and Zeke glanced at her, knowing the end of the sentence.

She took a breath and went on. " ... maybe if I do that, Chelsea will think better of me. I don't think I can face her until then. I wouldn't be much good in the band now anyway. Billy."

When the wide, expressive green eyes met his, Zeke felt a connection he didn't want to analyze and a nudge of emotion he wouldn't let himself acknowledge.

She pushed a wet strand of hair away from her cheek and wrapped her fingers around the placket of her sweater. "He wants to solve it himself," she said finally.

"Yeah."

"Another Lone Ranger. He wants to be just like you, doesn't he?"

He broke the eye contact as he took back the note. He folded it more carefully than he had to and flipped it onto the dashboard. *Wants to be like you*. They had things in common, all right. Both independent, both strong-willed. Both obsessed with the same woman.

He started the Jeep and pulled out of the parking lot.

He knew where she lived. He'd looked up the address and tried to find her there before he'd gone to the Adirondack cottage. Zeke turned onto the street without asking directions. The number was on the front of a two-story wooden Victorian a block from the Metro. He pulled up to the curb in front of it and shut off the engine.

Chelsea turned toward him, her back to the door, resting her hand along the top of the seat. "You know what I'm going to say," she murmured.

Zeke covered his eyes with one hand, massaging his temples with thumb and fingertips.

"You can't leave Billy to handle this alone," she said. "No matter what he thinks he wants. He's in trouble. Maybe more than he can manage himself. You can't leave him to it."

He dropped his hand to the steering wheel and stared out at the rivulets of rain chasing down the

windshield. "I don't intend to."

There was a short, assessing silence, then Chelsea's voice broke it. "You need my help."

He stared at her.

"Billy needs my help, then. I know this area. I know his friends, the places he might turn up."

He shook his head.

"What makes you think you can do this by yourself?" she demanded. "Where do you intend to even start?"

"I'll handle it."

"You'll handle it? How?"

He made a sound in the back of his throat that was half frustration and half sheer weariness. "This isn't the time to ask those kinds of questions, Chelsea." He shut his eyes and leaned his head back against the headrest. "I'm sick of looking at running water, I feel like I've been dragging the Jeep behind me, and my brain's too tired to hold more than half a thought at one time. I'd like to know where you get the energy to argue about this."

She let out a single, soft gust of laughter. "I'm used to late hours."

He rolled his head to the side to look at her. Her hair was wet again, tousled and slightly curly, dark as wet black silk. Her fair skin showed dark smudges under her eyes, but the green gaze was steady, dark-fringed, candid. Her sweater, damp again, outlined the feminine curves of her body. Her lips were parted just enough to make her look approachable and provocative ... and kissed.

Zeke imposed enough will on himself to turn away from her.

Her soft, husky voice came across the front seat of the Jeep like a caress. "How about a cup of coffee?" she offered.

He heard her sweater whisper against the plastic seat cover as she moved her arm, and for a moment he thought she was going to reach across the seat to touch him, but she merely propped her elbow on the back of the seat and leaned against her hand. Zeke felt his shoulders settle as he glanced toward her again.

"I have one of those instant drip-coffee machines and five different kinds of coffee beans."

His mouth curved wryly. "You know how to make coffee, angel?"

"I know how to make coffee. I could probably even rustle up some breakfast to go with it. I have eggs and bacon in the refrigerator."

Bacon and eggs and coffee. He let out a long breath, aware that his stomach felt hollow and he

would have given half a week's income for a cup of coffee. So. what was he hesitating for? There had been women who had offered him coffee and more than that in the past, and times when he'd taken the offers. What made him so wary of this one?

Because if you take her coffee and her bacon and eggs and her soft, coaxing voice and her transparent green eyes, you won't stop until you've had the rest of her. And you won't get the rest without selling your soul.

He shut his eyes again and tried to concentrate on the sound of the rain on the roof of the Jeep. The rasp of the Jeep's door opening surprised him. Chelsea got out into the rain, walked around the back of the Jeep, and rolled down the back window while Zeke watched her, scowling.

"I'll get the sax," she said from the back, reaching in for it.

He muttered a distinct curse, got out in the rain, and walked back to the window, then reached in around her and picked up the sax. "I'll get it," he said.

She let go, watched him lift the sax out of the Jeep and roll the window back up, then regarded him for a second before her mouth curved in a brief Mona Lisa smile.

"Okay," she said. She led the way toward her door.

FIVE

The key wasn't in its usual place, stuck into the corner of the window box. Chelsea probed her fingers into the dirt behind the geraniums, conscious of Zeke's dubious, security-minded gaze and wishing that whoever had put her key back in its assigned place hadn't felt compelled to stash it under the farthest reaches of the soggy potting soil in the box.

It wasn't there.

She straightened, grimacing as she glanced at the muddy sleeve of her sweater, then leaned down to check the pots of petunias.

Zeke North said nothing, but she could imagine the unspoken commentary that was running in his mind. She glanced back at him. "I keep the key in a plastic container in the window box, but sometimes when people return it, they leave it in a different place," she said without apology.

The key wasn't in the petunias, either.

She reached for the doorknob, turned it, and gave a slight push. The door opened a fraction of an inch.

"What the hell?" Zeke muttered behind her. She gave him a distracted glance. "Someone's unlocked the door, obviously."

"Wait a minute." Zeke's hand closed over her shoulder with purpose that brooked no argument.

Her startled "What?" went unanswered. He stepped in front of her and pushed the door open, then, cautiously, glanced around her living room before he moved aside to let her walk in.

Chelsea stepped into the living room behind him. "Hello?" Her greeting dissolved in the empty air, unanswered.

"And everything's out of place," she said, her voice surprised, her eyes scanning the familiar room. Her newspaper had been picked up from the floor and folded on the sideboard. Sheet music was strewn distractedly across the top of her upright piano. The collection of souvenirs she kept on the fireplace mantel had all been rearranged, haphazardly.

She had a sudden sharp realization of just who must have been here, pacing and distracted,

unthinkingly rearranging her belongings and preoccupied enough to forget where he'd left the key.

Through the kitchen doorway she could see an empty mug on the table. "He must have forgotten to put the key back," she murmured.

He?"

"He must have had ... other things on his mind." She crossed the living room to the kitchen, Zeke following her.

"You're talking about Billy, aren't you?"

Chelsea gave him a distracted glance, surprised he had to ask.

The old teddy bear money jar she kept on her counter hadn't been moved, but when she lifted the lid and peered inside, the money she kept there for communal emergencies was gone. In its place was a short note that read, *IOU--Billy*.

Zeke reached over her shoulder and took the note out of her hand. Chelsea let go of it and turned to face him.

"How much?" he bit out.

She glanced up at him. "Five hundred dollars."

In the taut, stunned silence the sound of Zeke crumpling the IOU in his fist was startling. "My brother took money from you?"

"That's ... what it's for. It's an emergency fund. For my friends ... for anyone who needs it."

He let out an incredulous huff of breath and tossed the crumpled IOU across the counter. Chelsea took in the impatient masculine gesture with wary surprise.

His gaze caught hers for several moments while the rain beat against the windows in a steady, driving rhythm. When he spoke, his voice was husky and a little rough. "You just let anyone waltz into your life and help himself to anything he might need?"

She felt her pulse kick into a higher gear at the implications of that last question. "I haven't figured out yet why I shouldn't do just that," she said evenly.

His strong hands gripped her shoulders, pulling her up to her toes, catching her totally off guard for a moment. "Because it's dangerous and stupid, damn it. Letting everyone you know use your apartment without notice ... keeping money in a cookie jar on the counter...."

"Is that all?" Their eyes locked for a moment, golden-brown to green, then Zeke let out a breath and lowered her down to her feet, though he didn't let go of her shoulders.

She felt the grip of his hands all along her arms, more aware of it than if he'd been holding her

with real force. Her eyes flicked over the wet canvas shirt that outlined every ridge and valley of warm flesh and hard bone. His hair was further darkened by the rain, and his unusual golden-brown eyes were warm and sensual and as riveting as any she'd ever taken the time to look into. More riveting, she admitted to herself. Zeke North appealed to her, sensually, more than any man she'd ever met.

"What'd you plan to offer next?"

She made herself meet his gaze. It was a steady, smoldering burnt umber, dark with sensual possibilities, glittering with some challenge that made her breath catch in her throat. Was she offering more than what their words spelled out? Had she meant to?

"A cup of coffee," she said finally, steadily.

The response to her softly voiced answer flashed across his face, complex and swift and fraught with the ambivalent, undefined relationship that bound them. Silence stretched between them, taut with implications.

"That's not too much to offer," she added, her mouth curving.

His eyes held some intent she couldn't fathom. "Someone could come along and take a hell of a lot more than you're willing to give, Chelsea."

Chelsea's heart quickened, and at his throat she could see the tiny beat of his pulse too.

His shirt smelled like wet cotton and warm skin and the muddy work of changing a tire in a rainstorm. If he kissed her, he would taste like rain and heat and the subtle masculine scent of his body. Remembered awareness raced along her nerve endings with electric promise while she waited for him to kiss her again, her breath caught in her throat.

Slowly, as if the action were a series of separate, deliberate impulses of nerve and muscle, he released her, one hand at a time, his fingers lingering for a moment as if the manner of breaking the contact would portend the future.

"You offered coffee," he murmured. "And I guess I accepted the offer, didn't I?"

She moved, masking her quick, startling disappointment by stepping away from him and turning toward the counter to reach for coffee and filters, moving with brisk and purposeful intent. He watched her fill the coffee machine, set out mugs, check the refrigerator, place the carton of half-and-half on the counter beside him.

He didn't move away from her. Chelsea shut her eyes for a moment. Her hand was shaking, and she was too violently aware of him as a man to ignore the currents of unspoken emotion. That seemed to ebb and flow with every breath. A slow shiver traveled down her spine.

"You're cold," Zeke said abruptly. "You ought to change into dry clothes."

"Yes. I ... "

"You got pretty wet just walking in from the Jeep." There was a gruff note in his voice that her musician's ear picked up and registered like an unexpected variation on a melody.

She glanced at him. He was far wetter than she was, his shirt molded damply to his chest, delineating muscle and bone and flesh. He'd stood in the same rain, changing the tire while she wore his jacket, walked in through the same rain she'd walked through, but he seemed oblivious to cold or damp, the golden-brown eyes watching her with that steady, potent mixture of heat and control.

He wasn't going to let go of that control, even for the span of a single kiss, she acknowledged. Even in the face of that sizzling sensuality that arched between them like the current between opposing poles. Maybe that was what accounted for her compulsion to touch him, she decided, to reach something deeper than the surface acquaintance he'd dictated their relationship would be.

It was dangerous and stupid, just as he'd said. She was asking to be hurt if she tried to reach Zeke North. But the fascination he held for her was far stronger than her caution, and she knew it, just as she knew for a certainty that whatever she would offer or not offer to Zeke North, it wasn't going to end with a simple cup of coffee and a polite good-bye.

"I have a shirt that would probably fit you, if you want it. One of Ray's old shirts."

"Ray? Your boss?"

She nodded.

"The one who keeps a grand piano in his house so you'll have it to play when you stay there?"

There was a certain amount of jealousy in the question. It was the first time in her adult life, she noted wryly, that she'd ever found jealousy flattering, but she did. Zeke North unsettled her in ways she hadn't experienced since she was sixteen. And in ways that had nothing to do with innocent adolescence. "Yes," she said. "That Ray. He's been a friend since I was eight years old. He wouldn't mind if you wore his shirt."

He stared at her a moment, then gave a huff of resigned disbelief and shook his head again. "If you say so."

Chelsea studied his profile, wondering what the answer meant. He didn't believe her? He did? He'd take whatever she offered?

In spite of her own self-warnings, her stomach went hollow at the swift ideas her imagination supplied of what she wanted to offer to this man she'd barely met. She wanted to touch him ... run her fingers along the warm, taut tendons of his forearm, across the ridge of his jaw, press her lips against the purple bruise and brush the rain from his hair.....

She shut her eyes, quelling the images with sharp self-discipline, telling herself sternly to listen to her own common sense. She wasn't even sure he wanted her. She couldn't tell how he'd react if she did offer anything more than coffee or an old shirt. Abruptly, she walked out of the kitchen and into her bedroom.

It took only a moment for her to change into jeans and a green cotton sweater, but she hesitated longer than that over Ray's flannel shirt, hanging on the back of her closet door. Finally, still unsure whether he wanted it or not, she snatched up the red plaid flannel and brought it with her out to the living room.

Zeke North was standing with his back to her, shirtless, his gaze on the dawn-gray window beside her old upright piano. He turned around at the sound of her footsteps, his wet shirt bunched in one hand. The movement, the body language, was casual, natural, perfectly logical in light of the situation, but the slight stiffening of his shoulders as Chelsea stared at his bare chest testified to the physical awareness she could feel spinning between them.

Chelsea's breath seemed stuck in her throat, for reasons she couldn't justify away, even with the undeniable masculine appeal of the muscular, tanned chest, defined with a dusting of black hair and faint scratches that testified to work outdoors in the woods. There was no question that he was, physically speaking, a beautiful man. But anyone of half a dozen good-looking men she knew as friends could have taken off their shirts in her living room and she would have given them barely a glance and no more than half a distracted thought.

Zeke North was more than good-looking. He had a potent aura of leashed virility that made awareness shimmer in her blood like a song.

What I need isn't your problem, he'd said, standing in the rain with the dropped flashlight between them and possibilities sizzling like unconnected wires. She had no right to stare at him with the kind of sensual hunger allotted to lovers. But he did rouse her hunger, she acknowledged silently. The sharp conflict of desire and danger drew her far more compellingly than any blatant come-on could have done.

She took a soundless breath, released it, and held out the shirt, keeping her gaze steadily on his face. "Here it is. It's old and probably the sleeves are too short, but it's dry."

He stepped toward her and took the plaid shirt from her fingers.

A few hours ago he'd held her against his chest, cradled her head, and crooned soothing, meaningless phrases as he stroked her back. He'd treated her with tenderness he would deny to himself, she thought. With an unconscious, unbidden reaction he hadn't quite held under control.

If my brother broke a window, I took responsibility for it. And blame, too, she guessed. Which one of the foster homes he'd been in had taught him that? What would it take to make him unlearn it? She felt something uncurl in the center of her chest, painful and awakening.

Afraid the emotions would show in her face, she spun away from him and walked briskly toward the kitchen, reaching into the refrigerator for eggs, bacon, and vegetables, shutting the door with one hand while she extended the other toward the cabinets, her movements efficient and purposeful and meant as a distraction from her confusing, disturbing thoughts.

Zeke was standing in the doorway, one shoulder against the doorframe.

She forced herself to look at him with nothing more than the casual interest she'd show any guest in her kitchen, wiping her hands on her jeans, tidying her thoughts as she brushed off her palms. "Do you like onion-and-pepper omelets?"

"Yes."

She pulled out the cutting board and got down a knife.

Zeke crossed behind her, picked up the knife, and started on the onions. Chelsea gave him a swift, surprised glance. The pungent smell of fresh onion, sharp and astringent, filled the kitchen.

She deliberately relaxed her shoulders, schooling her reaction to him into acceptable channels. She reached for the carton of eggs and pushed the teddy bear jar back into place under the cabinets. Something metallic scraped across the porcelain.

Curious at the sound, Chelsea tipped the jar to check inside. " ... Ah."

Zeke glanced at her as she reached into the jar.

"My front-door key." She held it up. "Billy must have dropped it in here."

He gave it a long, assessing look, then transferred his attention back to the cutting board. "When he was helping himself to your money," he said.

The knife clicked sharply on the cutting board as he attacked the onion, methodically cutting his anger into little pieces while Chelsea watched.

"Whatever Billy's involved in," she said eventually, "whatever he needed the money for, it's not drugs. I would have known if Billy started using drugs. I played music with him."

He nodded, set the knife down beside the pile of minced onion, then let out a long breath. "I didn't think it would be, but ... thanks for confirming it."

"What do you think it is?"

There was another moment of pensive silence. "I think he might have started gambling. He's always liked cards--poker--easy money. It's not much of a step from that to the horses. And here in Saratoga, during the August flat-racing season ..."

"... he could get in over his head, if he started betting off track."

"That's what I figured."

He didn't offer either excuses or blame for his brother's folly. They worked together in silence, the concerted effort masking deeper currents neither of them would acknowledge, but she was keenly aware of the taut force of tension in his shoulders, the hard line of his jaw.

He didn't speak until they'd brought the plates to the table and shared part of the meal in wary,

unspoken consciousness of each other's presence. Then Zeke looked up from his plate and fixed her with the gaze she'd found so compelling over another table two nights ago.

"It's not too late for you to decide to stay out of it, Chelsea," he said softly.

"I'm not going to decide that."

He leaned back in his chair, his shoulders slumped. "Why?" he demanded. "What makes you such a tough case to convince?"

"Maybe playing the piano for a living isn't so easy. Maybe I'm tougher than you think."

He studied her, assessing her answer, his gaze probing for a moment, then he pushed himself away from the table, stood up, and paced to the kitchen window, his hands jammed into the pockets of his damp chinos. The hair at the nape of his neck curled over the flannel collar of Ray's shirt, the color rich against the faded plaid. "Tell me something," he said without looking at her.

"What?"

"When you woke up last night, when we went off the road, you were dreaming about something." He turned back to her, his eyes wary, reflecting an ambivalence about asking the personal question. "What?"

Chelsea pushed her plate away slowly. "My parents died when I was eight. An accident. Sometimes I ... dream about it."

His face, for a moment, showed something she hadn't expected to see there, and his gaze held a trace of puzzled hesitation at odds with his usual directness.

"A car accident?" he asked her.

She stared at him, feeling her own ambivalence at answering the question. If their situations were reversed, he wouldn't answer her, she knew. For a moment there was no sound except the drumming rain and the faint rattling of the windows. "No," she said. "Not a car accident. We were renting a house outside of Boston. There was a fire. I got out all right. My bedroom was near the back of the house. But they ... didn't."

His throat worked, then he swallowed hard and shut his eyes for a moment while she waited, unsettled and conflicted, for his comment.

He didn't make one. He let more silence spin out between them, then turned toward the living room, disappeared through the door, and reappeared in the doorway with his jacket hooked over his shoulder.

"The track won't be open today," he said. "And none of the off-track places will open before tonight, I'd guess."

She nodded.

"Get some sleep. I'll pick you up at five. We can go from there."

He walked out without a good-bye.

Chelsea listened to his footsteps cross her worn Oriental carpet. The drumming of rain increased for a moment as the door opened, then faded as it clicked shut.

Conscious of some vague, unnamed loss, Chelsea pushed herself away from the table and picked up the plates.

The North family doesn't take handouts, he'd said.

Chelsea stood for a long moment at the sink, staring out at the gray rivulets streaming down the glass, fighting the hollow ache in the middle of her chest, trying to analyze the emotions that tightened her throat and burned behind her eyes.

A snatch of tune started playing in her head before she was consciously aware of it. When she realized what it was, she left the plates in the sink unattended to, and, as she so often did, went to the piano to seek the surest solace she knew.

At 3:46 that afternoon the phone woke Zeke out of a belated, too-brief sleep. He reached for it on the second strident ring and raised his head from the pillow to mouth a disoriented "Hello" into the receiver.

"'Bout time you're awake," muttered the gruff, irritated voice of Pete Tosca, North Brothers' manager, a man who'd worked for Zeke since he started the business. "I've been tryin' to get through to you all damn day."

Zeke slid up on the bed and rubbed a hand over his eyes. "I've been right here, Pete. Haven't left the room since I called you this morning and left a message on the machine."

"I know that," Pete barked. "I've been arguing with some snotty little secretary all day who keeps tellin' me you don't want your beauty sleep disturbed and I can call back later. She finally finished her shift."

"Some snotty little *who*?"

"Secretary, desk clerk, whoever the hell she is."

Zeke let out a long breath and pinched the bridge of his nose between thumb and forefinger as enlightenment dawned. He needed a cup of coffee. "The desk clerk," he muttered. "She comes with the room. No extra charge."

Pete snorted into the phone with the irascible familiarity of an employee who'd long since become a friend. Zeke asked, "What's the problem, Pete?"

"Briarton wants a flyover. He's nervous about the equipment getting in on those loggin' roads after this storm. When are you going to be back?"

"I don't mow." He glanced toward the window. The rain had abated, but foggy drizzle still pooled on the outside of the glass. "You'd better get Robertson to do it."

"He won't fly in this weather."

"Right."

A tight silence followed Zeke's answer, then Pete said stiffly, "North Brothers needs another pilot, Zeke. You can't do it all yourself."

The opinion had been expressed before--often. "It'll get one ... when Billy graduates."

"Yeah. I'm holding my breath." The sentence was packed with Pete's unspoken sentiments about Billy's postponed graduation. "Have you found him yet?"

"No."

"Great. "

"Look, " Zeke said. "Call the air strip. Hire a commercial pilot. You go up with him yourself. You'll be able to tell Briarton anything he should know about the roads."

Me?"

"Why not?"

"All right," Pete said, then added in an exasperated mutter, "This is a hell of a time for you to take a vacation, boss."

"I'll be back when I find my brother."

A tight silence followed the flat statement, then Pete said, "I heard you already found him."

Zeke frowned into the phone for a few seconds before the image of the chatty desk clerk answered the mystery of where Pete had been getting his information. He flipped the covers back from the bed and got to his feet in one smooth, irritated motion.

"Anybody get hurt?" Pete asked gruffly.

"You spent a hell of a lot of time making conversation with that desk clerk," Zeke muttered.

"Let me say something to you, Zeke," Pete ventured. "You want to spend all day not being disturbed, that's your business. But if you get tangled up with some nightclub piano player your brother-"

Zeke's explicit epithet cut him off in mid sentence. There was a sharp, stunned silence at the

explosive reaction from a man who hadn't lost his temper in years, then Zeke let out along breath and said softly, "This subject is closed."

"Whatever you say, boss," came the careful reply. "No offense intended."

The phone clicked off before Zeke could say anything more. Furious with himself for losing his temper at what was essentially the well-meaning interference of an old friend, Zeke slammed the receiver down and stalked into the bathroom.

He spent an inordinate amount of time under the spray of hot water, trying to tell himself his loss of control was a result of too little sleep, too much worry, and an excessively irritating busybody at the front desk of what had looked like a comfortable, well-run motel. The excuses might have been convincing if they'd come from Billy, Zeke reflected sourly. He didn't accept them from himself.

He should have told Pete the desk clerk was mistaken, he hadn't intended to be incommunicado, and he wasn't involved with the piano player.

So why the hell hadn't he?

He'd shut off the water and reached for a towel before he figured out the answer to his own question. There hadn't been any logic in his reaction to Pete's unsolicited advice. The implied slight to Chelsea had called up instant, instinctive fury, fanned by the idea that she was somehow the property of his brother. He knew damn well why he hadn't just calmly stated the facts. The facts didn't take into account the restless hours he'd spent thinking about the way she'd melted against him when he kissed her ... her soft curves and her warm hands and her sweet, generous intelligence, and the complex, completely illogical way he reacted to her.

She'd gotten to him, yesterday in the kitchen, in a way he'd recognized as more dangerous than pure sex.

Reaching for another towel, he stopped for a moment where he was, turning the unexpected thought over in his mind, not sure what he'd meant by it. The remembered image of Chelsea, standing in the rain, her eyes wide and her face pale with the nightmare she'd woken up to brought his blood racing to the surface of his skin. When he'd kissed her, she'd responded as if she'd been waiting for him to do just that, her mouth opening to his, her body soft and pliant.

Just the thought of it brought him to full awareness, blood running thick and hot through his veins. The plaid flannel shirt she'd given him was hanging on the back of the bathroom door. He stared at it, his jaw clenched against the thoughts it aroused.

He could have taken her yesterday. He could have dropped the shirt on the floor behind them and walked her into the bedroom and laid her down across the chenille spread and forgotten everything but the heat in his body and the silken softness of her skin.

He dragged his eyes away from the shirt, flicked the towel around his shoulders, and concentrated on pulling on his pants.

Maybe he was crazy not to have done it. Maybe if he'd spent the day in her bed, he would have

woken up with his body replete and his temper under control and his mind running in well-ordered, logical directions.

Or maybe not.

Maybe the allure she held for him went deeper than joined bodies and heated blood and a few hours of shared pleasure. Maybe he would have handed over his soul to a dark-haired angel with a magic touch on the keyboard and sensual, bewitching fire behind her green eyes.

He wiped a hand through his hair, flung the towel toward the shower rod, and stalked out into the bedroom. Maybe what he was about to do was even crazier than that: Spend another night with her stalking the bars and private clubs of Saratoga. It would make more sense to leave her out of his search, he thought briefly.

The idea died an instantaneous death. He was pretty sure if he didn't pick her up, she'd go out by herself, and he'd spend the night imagining in all-too-vivid scenes what kind of trouble she was headed for.

It occurred to him briefly as he walked out of the motel room that he might do well to worry about the kind of trouble *he* was headed for.

SIX

She didn't answer his knock. Frowning, Zeke tried the knob. It was locked. Wrestling with the quick, alarmed thought that she'd done just what he'd worried about--gone out by herself, he knocked again.

Silence.

Zeke let out an exasperated epithet, scanning the street up and down to where the mist obscured the view. Then, on impulse, he reached behind the geraniums to check the window box. The key had been returned to its designated place. He got it out and let himself into the apartment.

She was asleep on the sofa in the living room, her hair fanned out across the arm of the couch, her feet tucked up under her, Billy's sax clutched against her chest, incongruously, like a teddy bear.

Apparently, he thought, Chelsea hadn't spent any restless hours wanting him. She hadn't even bothered to change out of the clothes she'd had on that morning. She'd fallen asleep like a child, wherever she was, immune to discomfort or distraction. A ray of watery sunlight gleamed for a moment in her dark hair, brightening the gray light from the living-room window, but Chelsea was oblivious to it, too sound asleep to be woken by sunlight.

Not knowing whether he was irritated or charmed, Zeke reached down to take the sax from her arms, then stopped, staring at the fair, delicately tinted skin in the dimming light from the window, seeing the image of her asleep in the front seat of his Jeep the night before. If he shook her awake, would she open her eyes to the kind of startled panic she'd woken to when they went off the road? If she did, would he pick her up slide his hands into her hair and his tongue into her mouth, and kiss her the way he'd kissed her in the rain at the side of the road?

Slowly, he straightened, slid his hands into his pockets, and turned away from her, summing up the tangled feelings she aroused in him with the same succinct word he'd used on Pete.

Chelsea Connors tried his self-control in a way no one had since he was eight years old. He thought he'd known himself. But since he'd met her, he'd discovered conflicts raw enough to tie him in knots, longings deep enough to threaten his soul.

The kitchen had been straightened and left in order, the coffee machine rinsed out, the cookie jar pushed back.

Zeke pulled his wallet out of his back pocket, counted out five hundred dollars, and put the money in the cookie jar. He rubbed the back of his neck, then reached for the wall phone beside the counter and punched out the number for the operator. He read his card numbers off to her, and a moment later Pete's voice answered the ring.

"It's Zeke," he said into the receiver.

"Yeah," Pete said briskly. "Got the plane, boss. It's all arranged. We're goin' up first thing in the morning. I got Sheila to give me some pointers on usin' the camera. It's supposed to clear. Won't be cheap, but the accountant says we can afford it."

Taken aback for a moment by Pete's aggressive efficiency, Zeke let a beat of silence go by before he said, pleased, "Good work."

Pete chuckled. "I haven't been in sole charge of a flyover for years."

The older man's enjoyment of the prospect was evident. Zeke felt his mouth curve. "Who's the pilot?"

Pete mentioned a man Zeke knew by reputation, and he grunted approvingly into the phone. "Good."

"Yeah. Between the two of us, we'll do our best, boss."

"Pete," Zeke said.

There was a slight wary pause. "Yeah?"

"I'm not worried about it."

"Thanks," the manager said.

Zeke hung up the phone.

He'd left the top of the cookie jar on the counter. He picked it up and put it back in place, then turned toward the living room. Chelsea was standing in the doorway watching him, leaning against the frame.

She looked tousled and half-awake, her cheek pink where she'd been lying against the arm of the sofa, her sweater and jeans slightly wrinkled. The green eyes watched him with sleepy acceptance that made him think of oceanside cottages and lazy weekends and domestic intimacies. He regretted, fiercely for a moment, that it wasn't his touch that had awakened her.

"I know," Chelsea said. Her voice was husky and wry and stoked the heat of his reaction with every syllable. "The North family doesn't take handouts."

The image of Chelsea holding out her boss's shirt flickered into his mind. *Try me again, angel.* The thought remained wordless. "Wrong," Zeke said. "Billy already took the handout. I'm just

paying it back." His mouth quirked. "You never know when one of your other friends might need it."

A slight smile flickered over her mouth, then faded into wistful seriousness. "Okay, kemo sabe. You win. You can pay it back." She stretched, one hand on the small of her back, while he watched her. When she met his gaze, she blinked slowly. "So what are you doing roaming around my kitchen?"

"You didn't answer when I knocked," Zeke said. "And the key was in the flowers."

"Mm." She pushed her hair back from her face. "Why didn't you wake me up?"

He considered the question, turning over the possibilities of his answer, feeling his own response to it. "I didn't know what kind of mood you'd be in."

She laughed. "What did you think I'd do?"

He didn't answer, and she waved a hand in front of her. "No, never mind. I guess I don't blame you for wondering, but you've already seen me at my worst."

"Is that so?"

She didn't look away, but her mouth worked, and for a moment Zeke thought she was going to say something with the honesty he hadn't asked for and didn't deserve, but she dropped her eyes and made another gesture with her hand. "And here I've overslept too. I meant to set the alarm, but I ... never made it to the bedroom."

"I noticed."

"Yes," she said. "I guess you did." She sighed. "I don't suppose that's anything you've ever done, is it?"

A corner of his mouth twitched. "Not make it to the bedroom?"

"Never mind," she muttered. "Look--just give me five minutes for a shower. It won't take me long to get dressed." She turned and walked into the bedroom, shutting the door behind her. Zeke stood unmoving, staring at the door until he heard the shower rattle against the tub wall.

Find Billy, get his trouble straightened out, and go back to fighting forest fires and spruce budworm and weather, he told himself. And forget the angelic Chelsea Connors and her music and the way she looks when she's just woken up and whatever she's going to wear and what she looks like before she puts it on.

He turned to the coffee machine, filled it with water and coffee from the can beside it, and considered going out without her. It made a hell of a lot of sense, he decided. It was logical, justifiable, efficient. Most compellingly, it would take him away from temptation and focus his mind on his purpose.

And there was no way in hell he would do it.

The Starting Gate, one of Saratoga's popular watering holes, was elegant, artistically lighted, and redolent with smells from the stables around Saratoga's race course. Chelsea glanced at Zeke as they walked in, about to comment that in Saratoga the smell of horses was a status symbol. One look at his face stopped the words before she got them out.

He'd spoken as little as possible since she'd woken to find him in her apartment. His reaction when she'd walked out of her bedroom dressed for the evening was a slow once-over and a raised eyebrow that couldn't--except in wishful fantasy--be taken as approval. "I guess Saratoga is the only place in the world where you have to dress up to go slumming," he'd commented.

She hadn't had an answer to that, and the sharp disappointment that had sliced through her gave her more insight than she needed into her own motivations. The truth was that in Saratoga's eclectic mix of social groups anything from rags to velvet would have been acceptable. Chelsea had chosen snug designer jeans and a white silk shirt with two buttons undone because she'd wanted Zeke to look at her the way he had when he'd kissed her the night before. As if she were a woman he wanted.

Chelsea shut her eyes for a moment as she felt the heat of his hand on her back, guiding her toward two empty stools at the bar. The touch was impersonal, polite, controlled; Meant, she knew, as a symbolic gesture that she was accounted for in case any of the interested bar patrons might be tempted to think otherwise. He'd treated her with strict courtesy and polite distance in all five of the bars they'd been in so far. There wasn't any reason to assume he'd change in this one. But despite her logic, a sensation of heat rippled down her spine, rich with sensual suggestion, heavy with possibility.

Somebody could take a hell of a lot more than you're willing to give.

Or not take what she wanted to give.

Her gaze slid toward him for a covert moment: The strong line of his neck, the stubborn set of his shoulders, the powerful, long-fingered hands gripping the edge of the bar as he swung his leg across the barstool. The urge to run her fingertips along the back of his knuckles and circle the inside of his wrist made her gaze linger on his hands longer than she would have intended. If she leaned toward him, if he turned to face her and she kissed him, would she feel the same heat she'd felt the last time?

Or would he pull away as he had in her apartment, leaving her cold and disappointed and frustrated and wanting to cry out a protesting *why*?

His hands tightened around the edge of the wooden counter, and Chelsea's glance flicked to his face. He was watching her, she realized.

She turned away. Self-conscious at being caught staring at him, she brushed her hair back from her face, then fastened the second button of her shirt, waiting for the bartender to take their orders and, with more luck than they'd had so far, dish up some information about Billy.

A college-age Asian-American kid with a football player's build moved down the bar with a bar rag and grinned at Chelsea. In the lapel of his Wyatt-Earp-style vest he'd stuck a red geranium that matched those in the pots hanging from the race-course entry. She suspected he'd snatched it on his

way into work. "What'll you have?" he asked her.

She smiled at him and ordered mineral water. He produced the bottle with a flourish and poured the drink into a glass while he raised his chin at Zeke; then, before Zeke could order, the young man turned his glance back to Chelsea, his mouth tipped up at the comers, his eyes narrowed. "I know you, right? You've been in here before?"

"Not enough for you to know me."

"Someplace else, then. The health club? You work out?"

She shook her head again, smiling perfunctorily.

"Yeah, but ... "

"You've seen her on a poster down the street." The words came from a man on Chelsea's left, two stools down the bar, well dressed, middle aged, with a thin, chiseled face and dark hair slicked back into a ponytail. He sat with a cigarette held casually between his fingers, his hooded gaze resting with easy familiarity on Chelsea. "She plays piano at the Metro."

Chelsea glanced toward him, saying nothing, but an instinctive chill ran down her spine from the nape of her neck to the small of her back. Beside her Zeke turned on the stool until he was facing the man who'd spoken. She could feel him tense at the cultured, smooth voice describing her job and her identity.

The man nodded and drew on his cigarette, appraising her with frank and unwelcome approval, his eyes sliding down her body and back up again to her face. Chelsea's hand tightened around her glass.

The young bartender cleared his throat, flicked a glance from Chelsea to the man at the bar, then to Zeke, as if he expected a sudden confrontation and didn't want to be caught flirting with her when it happened. "Oh," he muttered finally to Chelsea. "You're a musician."

It took a beat of silence for Chelsea to ignore the intense scrutiny of the man who had identified her and summon up a smile for the bartender. "Yes. I'm a musician."

She made herself focus her attention on why they were here. "Actually," she added, before the bartender could turn away, "it was another musician who told me about this place. Billy North. Sandy-brown hair--he wears it long--blue eyes, tall and thin. He plays the sax. Do you know him?"

The bartender skittered a glance down the bar, frowning. "I might," he said nervously. "Can't place him, though."

The man with the ponytail made a slight sound in the back of his throat, and Chelsea's head turned automatically toward him. She felt Zeke's hand on her shoulder, unexpected and unsettling. A faint shiver tensed the muscles in her back.

The man seated at the bar ground out his cigarette and picked up the drink in front of him, then

gave Chelsea a cynical, somehow knowing smile that chilled her like the coming of November. "If this young man doesn't know your friend, there are others in the place who will." His lips stopped smiling, but his hooded eyes reflected amusement. "Billy North lost every penny in his pocket one night here when he decided to bet on your horse."

"My horse?"

"Chelsea Morning. Big bay four-year-old." The man shook his head. "Hasn't yet come into his own, as your friend discovered to his ... enlightenment. "

Chelsea drew in a sharp breath that seemed to scrape the nerves all the way down her body. "Billy--" The single strained word was choked off as her throat closed around it. The idea of Billy matched against the likes of this man made her blood run cold. She swallowed hard. Zeke's hand tightened on her shoulder, keeping her silent.

"I'll have scotch," Zeke said calmly into the strained atmosphere that stretched over the mall "Chivas. Rocks."

"Sure thing." The note of relief in the bartender's voice at the excuse for removing himself from the exchange wasn't quite covered by the breezy courtesy. He stepped away and walked down the bar to reach for the bottle of Chivas on the back shelf.

"Billy didn't know much about horses, was that it?" Zeke said to the stranger.

The man shrugged. "I'd say he was working on "--his eyes slid over Chelsea again--"a hunch."

The bartender returned with Zeke's scotch, set it in front of him, and moved off. Zeke ignored the drink.

"Not a good way to gamble," the man drawled. "Not on horses." He tapped another cigarette out of a leather case and lit it. "Not on anything, for that matter."

Chelsea fought back the atavistic fear roused by that smooth, too-soft-spoken voice. It was just a conversation, she told herself. She could handle it.

"Eventually, of course," the suave voice suggested, "Saratoga will have its casinos back. Until then, we have to make do with the horses." He caught Chelsea's gaze, and his mouth curved into a smile. "And private games."

Zeke's hand on her shoulder squeezed slightly, and he leaned toward her. "Let's go," he said into her ear, the words almost inaudible but an order nonetheless. Surprised, Chelsea glanced toward him. She couldn't believe Zeke wanted to walk away from someone who might know where Billy was, or what kind of trouble he was in.

But Zeke's face was set, the muscle in his jaw clearly defined. Chelsea bit her lip, caught between Zeke's tension and her worry about Billy, frustration at their failure to find him, and guilt about her own part in his disappearance. Chelsea Morning. Dear God, had he bet on a horse because it had the same name she did?

She broke from Zeke's gaze and shot a glance toward the man who'd been speaking to them. "Did Billy play cards any better than he played the horses?" she asked him.

The man's gaze didn't move from her face, but his mouth curved a little higher. "About the same way, I would say. Are you looking for him?"

Zeke answered before she could speak. "Just asking about card games," he said evenly.

"I see." A flicker of amusement crossed the thin, ascetic face. Chelsea kept her hands on her drink to stop them from shaking. He knew they were looking for Billy. Why wouldn't he just tell them what he knew? What did he want for the information?

"Tell me, Miss Connors," the man said, as if he'd read her mind. "Do you enjoy an occasional game of chance?"

She felt Zeke move beside her, his hand on her arm exerting a sudden pressure. For a fleeting, hurried moment she almost let him guide her from the stool and walk out without finishing the conversation, but her own instincts wouldn't let her walk away. "Yes," she said to the man.

The flicker of approval in his eyes touched her with uneasy apprehension, but the man looked away from her and said dismissively, "There'll be a game upstairs this evening. The owner's apartment. I'm sure you'd be welcome to sit in." He took a final drink from his glass and stood up. "Perhaps your friend will be there," he said. "Playing blackjack." He walked with leisurely strides toward the side door, stopping for a moment to speak to the bartender before he went out.

Chelsea shut her eyes for a moment, then let out a long, slow breath of relief, feeling fear drain out of her like water, leaving her shaky and unsettled. Zeke said nothing, but slowly, carefully, he released her arm, moved his hand away from her, and gripped the edge of the bar. His silence was taut.

Chelsea glanced at him, absorbing the extent of his anger, wondering how to deal with it. She stared down at the drink she still didn't trust herself to pick up. *Perhaps your friend will be there.* It was the first lead they'd had to Billy's whereabouts. Zeke didn't like the way they'd learned it, but what had he expected her to do? Throw Billy to the wolves because she didn't like the oily insinuations of a man who acted as if hearing her play gave him personal privileges?

"Tell me, Miss Connors," Zeke said finally, his voice tight, his temper controlled, "just how well do you play blackjack?"

She gave a small shrug, and her mouth curved wryly. "Just about the way you suspect."

"Well enough to lose your shirt then." The glittering golden-brown gaze flicked down over the white silk, and the insinuation in that look made Chelsea's breath catch in her throat. Beneath the thin white shirt a shiver of awareness shimmered over her skin, tightening her nipples against the silk.

She raised her chin a fraction of an inch to meet his hard gaze. "We're here to find out where Billy is," she said. "He's obviously been seen around, if he's been ... betting on horses. Maybe he'll

show up at the table. I thought that was the best way to get a lead on him."

There was no answer, and when Chelsea looked up at him, his face held a hint of the ambivalence she felt herself. He was worried about his brother. She knew that. He couldn't help but feel, somewhere under his antagonism, that she'd gotten them closer to their purpose, even if he didn't approve of the method. Her lips curved in a slight, rueful smile. "So how well do *you* play blackjack, Mr. North?"

"Well enough to cover the card playing, with luck."

"Good."

"Well enough to know when I'm getting in over my head too."

The words were sharp, pointed, and meant, Chelsea knew, for her benefit. Her tentative smile gave up the ghost before it had a fleeting chance at life.

Perhaps she was ... incautious, she told herself, staring at Zeke. Perhaps letting herself be susceptible to that gaze was something caution should have prevented from the start.

Maybe the answer she'd just given to some stranger who challenged her was incautious too. And maybe she'd done it partly to prove to Zeke North that he needed her. That she wasn't some spoiled prima donna who didn't know the meaning of real trouble and had never been called upon to deal with it. Carefully, she let go of the glass she was clutching and spread her hands flat on the wooden surface of the bar. And maybe nothing she did or said was ever going to change his mind. "Since when has Zeke North ever gotten in over his head?" she muttered toward the bar.

He didn't answer her, and Chelsea made a dismissive gesture and twisted to slide off the stool. "Never mind," she said. "I don't really expect an answer to that." *Or to any normal personal question.*

He pushed his untouched drink away from him and turned toward her. "We'll do it this way," he said levelly. "I'll play cards, you watch. Got it?"

Meaning stay out of trouble, she thought rebelliously. It wouldn't hurt him to acknowledge her help in getting them this far. "Got it, kemo sabe," she muttered. "Go for it."

SEVEN

Zeke let her walk ahead of him out the side door, gritting his teeth to keep from saying the rest of what he'd wanted to tell her. Men like the one whose eyes had been crawling all over her at the bar weren't going to back off when she snapped her fingers and told them she'd had enough. If she'd had more practice looking beyond the spotlight, she might know that.

An arched entryway led to the apartments upstairs from the Starting Gate. The door was unlocked. Zeke yanked it open, venting not nearly enough frustration, and let Chelsea walk ahead of him into the dim foyer.

Chelsea, as far as he could tell, showed no apprehension of dark hallways and dangerous shadows, just as she hadn't backed down from the encounter in the bar. Or any other potential danger she'd met with. She started up the stairs without so much as a glance over her shoulder, walking into whatever lion's den awaited her with her eyes wide and her hands pushed into the pockets of the tight jeans.

What the hell am I supposed to do with you, angel, when you're too stubborn to take a warning and too gutsy to back down from trouble, and not afraid of anything except some personal nightmare you can 't stand to tell me about?

He stopped for a moment before he put his foot on the next step, feeling a twist in his gut that was becoming familiar. *Or maybe it's that I can't stand to hear about it.*

He put his foot down on the step and pushed the thought from his mind. Cursing steadily and silently, Zeke followed Chelsea's enticing backside up the stairs.

He knocked on the door at the top of the landing, and a voice he didn't know called out, "Just walk in." Zeke shot a glance toward Chelsea. *If I sent you home, would you lock the door and bar the windows and stay out of trouble?*

Green eyes glanced back at him, curious and questioning. Zeke didn't bother to ask the question. He opened the door for her and walked In.

The entry opened into a kitchen bright enough to make Zeke wish for sunglasses, modern enough to seem jarring in contrast to the Victorian exterior of the building. Fluorescent light gleamed on white marble counters and black-enameled cabinets. A round white table littered with cards, money,

and assorted bottles and glasses occupied the center of the room. The four or five men seated around it looked up as the door opened, eyes shifting from Zeke to Chelsea and lingering there. The level of masculine interest rose measurably.

Chelsea moved into the room, poised and graceful, as if she had no idea what thoughts were being processed behind the men's faces. A balding weight lifter with tufts of red hair fanning out over his ears like bat wings broke the short, motionless pause by nodding at her, giving a gap-toothed, sparkling grin and introducing himself as Harry. Chelsea smiled back and acknowledged introductions around the table.

Zeke dragged his gaze away from her to realize he hadn't yet spoken. "Zeke North," he said.

Harry of the bulging muscles indicated two empty chairs. "Sit down," he said. "Make an investment."

Zeke pulled out a chair. Chelsea smiled at the weight lifter, shook her head, then backed up to the counter behind Zeke. He watched her lift herself up to the perch on the white marble where she could oversee the game. She matched the color scheme of the room as if she'd planned it that way. The black jeans on the white counter seemed designed to outline her slim thighs and curved hips. Her hands were curled around the edge of the counter, her shoulders hunched. The white shirt gaped slightly at the neck.

"You any relation to Billy?" Harry said, over a swallow from his can of beer.

Zeke wrenched his attention back to the table. Harry was frowning at him in curiosity while he set the beer down at his elbow and shuffled the deck. "Yeah," Zeke said. "I'm his brother." Chelsea, to his relief, said nothing. He hoped she'd keep it that way. He didn't want it announced to anyone concerned here that she was Billy's girlfriend, boss, or anything else connected to him.

Harry had dealt two cards to everyone at the table except Zeke. He was waiting, deck in hand, for some sort of signal, Zeke realized.

"Five bucks buys the cards," he said to Zeke. Zeke focused his attention on what he knew about the game and reached for his wallet.

Harry grinned. "Yeah, she's a distraction, all right." He shot Chelsea a good-natured look. "You'd better sit behind someone else, honey. There's room over here."

She smiled but shrugged and stayed where she was, her composure unshaken.

Zeke picked up the cards that were dealt to him and stared at them, seeing instead Chelsea's face, the black hair against the white shirt, the shape of her breasts beneath the pockets of the silk shirt.

She was a distraction, all right. Beautiful, gifted, gutsy, exotic. She'd perched herself on that countertop as if she'd spent her life gracing blackjack tables in postmodern Saratoga kitchens. That curious, unique blend of sophistication and vulnerability had kept him off balance since he'd met her and had him off balance now. He'd expected her to have stage presence and musical sophistication and more admiring acquaintances than he'd ever meet in one lifetime. But where the hell had she

learned how to act in a roomful of gamblers eyeing her, in her countertop perch, like the grand prize?

He heard the brush of denim and the whisper of silk. The image of her crossing her legs, leaning forward, glancing over his shoulder at his cards sent a wave of heat through his body that claimed significantly more of his attention than the pair of sevens he held in his hand.

He swore under his breath and tried to concentrate on the game. Three and a half minutes later he'd lost thirteen dollars on the turn of a nine. The winner, a young Hispanic man who called himself Shoe, gave him a grin and raked in a small pile of bills. "You lose just like Billy," Shoe commented.

"Must be a family trait."

Harry the weight lifter gave Zeke an assessing glance, then pulled the cards toward him and shuffled. "He hasn't been around much lately." He cut the deck and dealt out cards around the table, then glanced up at Chelsea. "Got a girlfriend, I think."

Zeke's hand stilled on the cards, but Chelsea's voice sounded as casual as if she'd never considered Billy's love life. "Most men do."

"Not when they see someone like you, sweetheart." He grinned again. "Then we're all single and available."

She didn't answer, but the silk rustled again.

Zeke hoped to hell she was fastening the top button on the shirt. "Did Billy talk about his girlfriend?" she asked. The question was casual, but Zeke heard the emotional underpinning in the husky voice. He felt his shoulders tense with warning. This wasn't the time or place for Chelsea to let it be known she was willing to bankroll Billy's debts. She'd end up an easy mark for any con artist coming down the pike.

"He talked about her enough to let everyone know he was crazy about her."

There was no answer.

Drop it, Zeke thought. The words in his mind were harsh enough that he would have thought she could hear them. Her breath came out in a sigh. Maybe she had heard the warning, he decided. But if she had, she ignored it.

"I wonder if he ever bothered to tell her," she said softly.

Harry raised his eyes from his deck, frowning. Zeke could hear the wheels turning in his head.

Abruptly, Zeke leaned back in his chair and shot Chelsea a sizzling look. "This is a game, angel. Not a gossip session. Got it?"

Disbelief crossed her face, then a flash of hurt so unguarded, it cut through the polished sophistication like fire through snow. A second later it was gone, her face composed, her eyes level. "Sure," she said smoothly.

Zeke cursed again, silently, and let the legs of the chair thump down on the floor. Maybe he hadn't seen that swift vulnerability. Maybe he'd mistaken it for something else.

A moment later her jeans brushed across the counter, and her feet hit the floor. Zeke forced himself not to look at her, but Harry's glance from Chelsea back to Zeke told him she was waiting for him to turn toward her.

When she moved away from the counter, crossed the kitchen, and wandered into the next room, the glances of the men at the table followed her out. Zeke gritted his teeth and played his cards. It was only after he'd done it he realized he'd called for a hit on a hand that already held twenty-one points.

Chelsea paused in the small hallway. She glanced into the bathroom but didn't go in. She didn't need to powder her nose, damn it. She wasn't going to pretend to. The living room, beyond the arched doorway opposite the bathroom, was dimly lit with the same rheostat-controlled track lighting as the kitchen. The furniture was pale and aggressively modern, but against the far wall was a vintage upright piano--the kind that tended to stay wherever it was because moving it cost more than it was worth. Chelsea crossed the room to it and pulled out the bench.

The tuning wasn't perfect, but it was playable. She shut her eyes and let her fingers find the music she wanted. If it interrupted Zeke North's blackjack game, she'd deal with the fallout later.

Caught up in the music, she had no warning of another presence in the room until the man with the ponytail leaned over her, put his drink down on the piano, and laid his hand against the back of her neck.

Startled, Chelsea stopped playing, staring at him as he moved around the piano bench to stand beside her, trailing his hand along her shoulder, examining her with the same cold, hooded gaze that had chilled her when he'd spoken in the bar downstairs. Her heart hammered against her chest, and unreasonable fear knotted her stomach.

He moved his hand away from her and gestured with his cigarette. "Keep playing, he murmured. "I hate interrupting something unfinished." The voice was polite, smoothly inflected, but there was a quality about it that prickled the nerves all along her arms.

She made herself meet his gaze and kept herself from flinching, then glanced back at the keyboard and started playing again, mechanically, her mind unconnected to the music, racing along pathways that seemed suspended between her own apprehension and her questions about Billy.

He watched her, sipping his drink, his mouth curved in a thin, amused smile. Then, without warning, he leaned down to the keyboard and slammed the hinged cover shut with such force she barely had time to snatch her hands back before the wood banged against the key slip.

"You have quick reflexes, Ms. Connors," he said softly. "That's very good. You'd have a hard time playing the piano with broken fingers, wouldn't you?"

Her hands were balled into fists in her lap. Adrenaline rushed through her in a hot wave, and she pushed the piano bench back from the keyboard.

He stopped the bench with the toe of his shoe, leaning over her. Chelsea stared at him, her teeth clenched, her body rigid.

"You might mention that to your friend Billy," he said conversationally. His hand traced the collar of her shirt, then, almost absently, he fingered the material of the placket at the top buttonhole. "You might tell him--

Something slammed against the man's shoulder and pushed him back with such force that the manicured fingers snatched at Chelsea's blouse and tore the buttons from the fragile silk. Zeke backed him against the side of the piano, his fists on the man's lapels, his forearms against his chest. The drink sloshed over the closed keyboard with a tinkle of ice and a faint, atonal vibration from the sound board.

"Tell him what?" Zeke gritted.

For a moment no one moved, and the silence was underscored by the echo of the piano strings and the answer that didn't come; then the man with his back bent over the piano let out a long breath and curled his mouth in a thin, vindictive smile.

She could feel Zeke's anger in the tense muscles, the stretched nerves, the spark of fury infinitesimally close to igniting, but his iron control didn't break. Slowly, muscle by muscle, Zeke released his grip on the jacket, stepped back, and let the man straighten up.

The thin smile faded. The man hooked his thumbs in his lapels, smoothed the jacket, then, starting to straighten, spun his shoulder and slammed his elbow viciously into the side of Zeke's face.

Chelsea gasped as her heart vaulted into her throat and Zeke staggered backward.

The hooded glance flicked over her, speculative and cold. "Don't forget the message," he said softly, then turned away.

Zeke moved toward her, ignoring the man walking away from them, his body blocking out her view of him. Zeke's hands closed around her shoulders, and he lifted her to her feet. Her knees were shaking so badly, she wasn't sure she could have stood up without his help. She was gripping the torn edges of her blouse, clutching the silk like protective armor.

"You all right?" he gritted at her through teeth still clenched with the effort of control.

She nodded, reaching blindly for the support of the piano, twisting her blouse more tightly at her throat. "Are you?"

Zeke touched his face, distractedly, then held her up with one hand as he stripped off his jacket and flung it over her shoulders. "What the hell made you think you could deal with the likes of *that* by yourself?" His voice was rough with the anger he hadn't let himself release. "This isn't a stage show, damn it!"

She fumbled with the jacket. "He just ... was there, all of a sudden "

"So why didn't you yell bloody murder? What the hell did you think you were going to do if he decided you ought to go with him out the back way? Play him a song and change his mind?"

"I thought he had something to say about ... " She swallowed hard and forced her strained voice to function. "About Billy."

"Yeah. And then he tried to break your fingers. Didn't you ever learn how to scream? Or did you just figure Big Eddie was going to be there before you had to?"

She bit her lip. Her teeth were chattering as if she'd been outside in a winter storm. "I thought you didn't want to hear from me," she muttered rebelliously. "You were in a card game, not a conversation."

Zeke swore viciously and pulled the jacket closer over her shoulders. "Put it on," he demanded gruffly. "Put your arms in the sleeves. "

Silently she shifted her shoulders to poke her fists into the sleeves. The jacket covered her hands entirely and hung down around her thighs. "You should have--"

"I shouldn't have let you out of my sight. I should have kept you--"

She shook her head. "No. I mean ... Billy. You should have let him finish about Billy."

His hands tightened on her shoulders in sheer, thwarted frustration, as if he wanted to shake her, then he let out a long breath, pulled the jacket closed across her torn blouse, and buttoned the top button. It was at the level of her waist. "Listen to me," he said, his voice gravelly and raw. "Forget Billy's trouble. This was as close to it as you're going to get. Too damn close."

She shivered involuntarily, and he tucked her in under his arm, holding the jacket around her shoulders. He turned her away from the piano.

In the doorway, a small crowd of male faces from the card game were watching them. Chelsea's startled glance caught the curious eyes of Harry, and he muttered, "What happened?"

Zeke's arm tightened around her. "Nothing," he said gruffly. "Private disagreement, that's all."

It was clearly an evasive answer, but Zeke turned his back on the small group of spectators and walked her to the back door and down the wooden stairs.

She caught her foot at the bottom of the stairs when she stepped out onto the pavement.

Zeke stopped and pulled her closer, his hand caressing her arm through the light wool of the jacket. "It's all right," he said, his voice suddenly gentle and low. "We're out of there. I'm taking you home."

She let him tuck her in close to his side and walk her to the Jeep, drawing in the comfort of his

physical presence, letting the words wash over her like the notes of an uncomposed song, fluid and potential but not yet formed to express the message from the soul.

When he opened the door of the Jeep and handed her in, she felt, distinctly and wrenchingly, the absence of his hard body next to hers, his arm across her shoulders. She glanced toward him when he got into the Jeep, wondering if he felt the same loss of contact, if he might reach for her again.

He didn't. But the line of his neck and shoulders was as tense as it had been when he'd gotten back into the Jeep after kissing her. A muscle in his jaw was clenched so tightly, it stood out against his cheek. She'd seen it before, and the small sign of his conflicted feelings tugged at her emotions and brought a swift, sudden ache to her throat that was unconnected to her own needs.

"Zeke," she said softly, her voice rasping on the word.

There was a hesitation, then his eyes flicked toward her.

"I'm glad you were there."

His shoulders slumped, and he exhaled a long, heavy breath. "If I hadn't brought you, you wouldn't have needed me there. *You* wouldn't have been there."

"Don't be so sure of that."

The muscle in his jaw flexed again. "I'm not. But I can be sure you won't be there again."

Chelsea said nothing, her eyes on the tense line of his shoulders. "'What did he want? Money?'"

She thought for a moment he wouldn't answer, then that he would give her some evasive explanation of why she shouldn't concern herself with it, but he glanced toward her again, and said bluntly, "Yeah. But he looked like he was enjoying his work."

Chelsea felt a residual chill gather in the center of her back. Her mind pictured the hooded eyes, the manicured nails. She pushed the image out of her mind. "Maybe ... if I put more money in the teddy jar ... "

Zeke's voice was harsh. "You think Billy would take more money from you?"

The windshield wipers slapped against the window in the silence that followed as Chelsea studied his profile. "No," she said finally. "Not if you're the one who raised him."

His mouth tightened. "I raised him to depend on himself, if that's what you mean. I didn't want him to land on his face, reaching for something that's not there."

"That isn't necessarily the way--" Chelsea stopped herself, staring at Zeke, knowing that nothing she could say would convince him that trust in the world was wise--or possible. "How did it happen that it was your job to raise Billy?" she asked instead.

She regretted the question as soon as it was out of her mouth. She shouldn't have asked it. Not of

Zeke North. He didn't offer personal information. He would probably think her even asking evidence that she lacked the street-smarts to understand the real world. She wrapped her fingers around the edge of the jacket, folding it into her fists. When he spoke, she looked up at him, startled.

"My old man was a drinker. Not all the time. On and off. But when he was on, he did it up right."

She went still, unwilling to disturb the fragile confidence with any comment of her own.

"After a while he'd check himself into a detox place and be gone for a few weeks."

Chelsea loosened her fists inside the jacket. He'd told her he'd dragged his old man out of enough honky-tonks to know it wasn't music that lured him there. She wondered how many was enough. And why Zeke was the one who had to keep count. ""What about your mother?" she asked him.

Zeke glanced at her, then looked quickly away. "She couldn't handle my old man's bouts," he said briefly.

Chelsea suppressed the urge to reach out and touch him, her own upsetting experience all but forgotten in her compassion for Zeke and her wish that he would say more. "Did she leave him?" she asked.

"No." He slowed for a turn. "But she'd fall apart when my father started drinking--get hysterical sometimes." He let out a cynical breath that couldn't have been called a laugh. "I could never understand it. I'd think she should've known he was going to start drinking again sooner or later. He always did. But every time he dried out, he swore it would be the last time. And she believed him. Every time."

"That must have been ... tough for you to see."

"We didn't have to see it. She'd just ... fall apart, and then she'd be gone. Usually, she'd end up at her sister's house in Connecticut, but there wasn't room for us--Billy and me. They'd send us to a foster home."

The breath of sound that came from her throat was barely audible, but Zeke gave her another long look. "It wasn't that bad," he said. "They always kept us together, anyway."

"But, still ... "

His mouth quirked in an expression that stopped her words. "They can't take your soul if you don't give it to them," he said softly.

It explained a lot. "Why his attitude toward Billy was more parental than brotherly, why he was so unwilling to accept help. "And you hung on to your soul."

"That's right."

"The soul of a loner ... but it's yours?"

He reached toward her and touched her hair, just barely running his knuckles along the dark strands that framed her face, then pulled his hand back. "My mother gave her soul to my old man. He lost his in a bottle. Now Billy's losing his because he wants to follow some ... fantasy.... "

She finished the sentence in her mind. *To take up with a jazz band. Start to gamble. Fall in love with the wrong woman.* "Surely he'll be all right, Zeke," she said softly. "If you just talk to ... that man again, let him know we're willing to pay whatever Billy owes.... "

Zeke's voice was as flat and hard as flint. "He already knows that."

"But how ... ?"

He didn't answer her. He switched on the blinker, made the turn onto her street, and pulled up in front of her apartment, not looking at her.

She waited until he'd shut off the engine and pulled the keys out of the ignition. "You mean because Billy talked about me," she said. "And because I bought back his sax. And because he ... that man ... recognized me at the bar. That's how he knows we'll pay whatever Billy owes."

He stared at the darkened street through the front windshield. "It's just a matter of naming his price. When he gets around to it."

I think he was enjoying his work. There was a sudden pressure in her lungs, as if the air were being squeezed out. "If you hadn't pushed him away from me, we'd already know that, wouldn't we? He wanted me to tell Billy something."

He looked at her, finally. The hard golden gaze rested on her face a moment, then, almost as if it were involuntary, his glance slipped down to the lapels of the jacket she wore over her blouse. The torn silk lapped unevenly over her breasts, unbuttoned within the deep V of the oversize jacket. The sharp breath she drew in made the placket move against her skin. She felt a faint shiver of something anticipatory, a longing to be touched that had to do with playing over the unwanted experience she'd just endured, replacing it with something welcome and right and life-affirming.

Something--someone--like Zeke.

He snapped his gaze away from her, reached for the door handle, and got out of the Jeep. The door slammed so hard, she winced. Biting her lip, she watched him walk around the front of the Jeep. When he pulled her door open, she silently got out, and let him shut it.

She walked in front of him up the stairs to her apartment, her chin raised. He didn't touch her.

He wouldn't, she acknowledged to herself. He didn't allow himself to give in to human needs or desires outside his rigid code of what was permissible. And he'd decided there was no possible future for a man with the soul of a loner and a woman who had tried, and failed, to reach him.

When she reached to get the key from the window box, Zeke moved in front of her, found the key, and unlocked her door. She walked in. Zeke came in after her, closing the door behind him.

His shirt was damp again, clinging to his shoulders and chest. Beneath the smooth wet cotton the suggestion of muscle and tendon was masculine and unmistakable.

He attracted her more than any man she'd ever met. He made her breath catch in her throat and her skin sensitive and aware and her mind eager for the kind of music she wanted to write with him.

She made herself meet his gaze. In the dark living room she couldn't read his eyes, but his mouth was set and stubborn, and she knew the muscle in his jaw would be tense if she reached to touch it.

With a small shrug of resignation, she fumbled with the buttons of the jacket to take it off and give it back to him, but he startled her by spinning on his heel and stalking away from her, toward the kitchen. Frowning, Chelsea watched his retreat, her hand on the buttons, then, with another shrug, slipped off the jacket and dropped it over the back of the sofa. She flicked on a single lamp, then crossed the floor to the bedroom.

She pulled the door partly shut behind her, then stood for a moment in front of her open closet. Should she put on another blouse? Would Zeke go out again looking for Billy? Would he let her come with him? A moment later, exasperated with her own indecision, she snatched out the first garment she laid her hand on, tossed it on the bed, and shut the closet door.

Her white silk shirt was ruined, but it didn't matter. She knew she could never bring herself to wear anything touched by the man from the bar. She balled it up and tossed it toward the wastepaper basket in the corner, then, on the same impulse, unhooked her bra and threw it in the same direction. It caught on the edge of the basket.

The blouse she'd pulled out of the closet and tossed on the bed was too close to the same style. She left it where it was and turned back to her closet.

Zeke was standing in the bedroom doorway, leaning against the sill of the half-opened door, watching her.

She made a slight, startled sound, half lifting her arms to cover her breasts. Then, slowly, she dropped her arms to her sides, straightened her shoulders, and lifted her chin to meet the burning golden-brown gaze straight on.

Zeke's eyes drifted down over her breasts, lingered, caressed, while her nipples tightened to hard, darkened peaks, and a flush of heat brushed over her naked skin.

Beneath the damp khakis Zeke's body gave equal evidence of sensual need. When his eyes moved back to her face, she felt her heart notch into a faster rhythm. Her breasts rose and fell with a single, quick breath, while his eyes burned into hers and she felt the swift, electric rush of desire.

For a long moment they stood unmoving, caught in the pull of ambivalence, emotion, and sexuality; then, with a harsh sound in the back of his throat, Zeke turned his back on her and stalked across the living room out of her sight.

She flinched at the sound of the front door wrenched open, gritting her teeth in anticipation of the slam, but the door closed with a soft, controlled click that would have been soundless if she were not

straining to hear it.

The ache in her throat seemed to fill her chest, a physical longing that wouldn't be soothed, not by logic or reason, not by the tears that stung behind her eyelids, not, for a long time anyway, even by music.

She didn't let herself cry.

EIGHT

Her throat tight, Chelsea reached blindly for the blouse on the bed, pulled it on, and with clumsy, uncaring haste pushed it into the waistband of her jeans. Fingers on the buttons, she walked out into the living room to lock the door.

Zeke North was standing in the small, dimly lit entrance hall, his jacket hooked over two fingers at his shoulder, his body as still and rigid as a statue, but his eyes blazing over her with a message that stopped her in her tracks.

"Don't button it," he said. He moved toward her across the floor.

She managed a barely voiced "What?" before he flung his jacket across the back of the sofa and reached for her. His strong hands tipped her face up, and his mouth came down hard over hers in answer and demand.

Unprepared, Chelsea let her mouth open under his. Zeke's tongue filled the warm, feminine recess of her mouth, repeatedly, with urgent demand, searching out response and compliance, staking a claim that sent heat searing through her body and stole her breath. When he broke off the kiss, lifting his head sharply to stare down at her, her breathing was rushed and strident. But no more so, she realized, than his.

The lace-shaded lamp cast diffused yellow light over his shoulders and across the side of his face, defining the masculine contours of his square jaw and straight nose. His chest rose and fell with each urgent breath, and at the base of his throat the driving beats of his pulse were a measure of the strength of desire that had kept him here.

Still shocked, Chelsea raised her hand to his throat and touched it with her fingertips. The heat of his skin burned through her, and when his gaze met hers, dark with purpose, the raw hunger she saw there caught at something deep inside her and tightened it into an expectant ache.

He didn't want this. She knew the sheer determination with which he'd fought it. But he'd lost the fight, and she knew that too. It had been lost, she thought with sudden insight, from the moment he'd stood outside her door in a driving rain and refused, against all common sense, to come in.

Eyes wide, Chelsea watched the fires of passion flare up in his gaze, in the heat of his body. Deliberately, she raised her face and parted her lips for his kiss.

He took what she offered, twisting his head to claim her mouth once more with fierce and determined purpose. She welcomed the claiming, welcomed the hunger of intent, returned it with a deep, searing hunger of her own.

Zeke twisted his fingers into her hair, cupping the back of her head to control her and hold her captive, tightening his arm around her body to pull her roughly against him, though she made no move to resist. She wrapped her arms around his shoulders and took the length of his hard body against hers in welcome and surrender.

The searching kiss ended when Zeke lifted his mouth from hers. Within the bruising strength of his embrace she could feel the tremors of his body, hardly separate from the trembling of her own. She circled his neck with her hands and let out a long sigh that was a wordless sound of need. Zeke sucked in a breath, and his arms tightened convulsively around her.

"Are you still offering, angel?" he murmured. His voice was a husky, barely distinct rumble that stirred the hair at her temple. "Because if you are, I'm taking," he said.

His palms clasped the sides of her neck, and his thumbs stroked the hollow of her throat for a moment before he moved his hands outward along her shoulders, opening the blouse and pushing it down her arms. The soft material whispered over her breasts as he pulled it open. His warm, hard palms covered her, lifting the weight of her breasts, cupping the resilient softness, pressing his palms against the hardening nipples.

Chelsea made a sound that was half surprise, half pleasure, as sensation rippled through her. Her arms were caught in the silk blouse, restraining her from embracing him. She clung to Zeke's muscled forearms as her knees weakened and she swayed on her feet.

"Are you saying yes?" he murmured roughly.

She nodded.

"Say it out loud. Say it for me."

She opened her eyes, raising a slow, heavy lidded gaze to meet the dark intensity of his. Heat spread through her, from his gaze, from his hands, from the intent she read in his face. "Yes," she said in a husky whisper. "I want you to make love to me. I want ..." Her words trailed off into a soft gasp as Zeke's hands raked down the back of her thighs, and he lifted her, pulling her intimately against the hard ridge of masculinity at the juncture of his thighs. He rocked his hips against her, once, as though the restraint of their clothes would be no hindrance to the burning desire that drove him. Chelsea's fingers tightened around his arms.

He was trembling the way she was, his muscles rippling with the effort of control and barely leashed passion. The realization of his hunger rippled through her like a physical sensation, mixed with the impulses of nerve and muscle that were the physical response of his intimate act, intoxicating as whiskey.

He lifted her higher, bringing her breasts up to his mouth. His lips closed over one rigid crest, and

he drew the nipple into the hot, wet depths, suckling gently, letting her feel the careful grazing of his teeth.

Shimmering pleasure streamed through her, and she arched her back and clasped the nape of his neck. He moved his mouth to her other breast, multiplying the sensations, sending wild streams of pleasure coursing through her.

She wasn't aware of making a sound, but she must have. Zeke's mouth left her breast, and he lowered her to press his lips against her throat, then her jaw. "That's it, baby," he murmured against her skin. "Let me hear what you want. How you want it."

He took her mouth again, delving into it with his tongue, twining them together in an act of passion that stole any words she would have said. Words weren't needed. She showed him what she wanted with her responses, her shivers, her return of his kiss.

He let her slide down the length of his body until she was standing again, and his hands roamed restlessly over her buttocks and her back. Still kissing her, he traced the inner waistband of her jeans around to the front, then in one deft, rough motion, unsnapped and unzipped the placket.

Chelsea's urgency was no less than Zeke's. She shook off the sleeves of her blouse, and her fingers went to the waistband of his pants and unbuttoned them even as he skimmed her jeans down over her hips, catching his thumbs in her lace briefs to pull them off with the jeans.

He lifted her again, his hands on the smooth skin of her buttocks, parting her thighs to bring her against him as he walked her to the sofa and set her on the high, velvet-covered back.

She brushed her palms up the strong, corded muscles of his arms to his shoulders, flattening her hands against his chest, reveling in the texture of hard muscle and strong bone.

The space around them seemed charged with passion. Lamplight gleamed on carved woodwork. The drumming of rain on the roof caught her up the way rhythm caught up music.

Her gaze followed his mouth as he lowered it to the hard peak of her breast. He touched her with his tongue circled the sensitized nipple, shaping her and pleasuring her with consummate skill that brought fierce, liquid torrents of sensation rushing through her. She gave a soft, gasping cry and held him to her, hands clasped around his neck, her thighs clutched around his hips, the most intimate part of her body pressed against his hard arousal.

She murmured his name in a litany of need too broken to make sense, but he understood it nonetheless. He straightened, pulled her against him, and kissed her mouth. Her breasts were crushed against the rough-woven material of his shirt, her legs wrapped around his chino-covered thighs. His hands swept down her back, from her shoulders to her buttocks, propped against the soft velvet of the sofa.

He rocked his hips against her, shocking her with the sensation not of smooth chino but warm, rigid flesh. Her breath caught in her throat. Zeke's tongue penetrated her mouth in deliberate, explicit imitation of the deeper joining he intended. Chelsea clung to him, her body poised in anticipation;

then, slowly, she arched her back, pliant and graceful as a captured melody.

"Yes," he murmured against her mouth. "Open for me, Chelsea ... take me in."

He penetrated her with one smooth, pulsing stroke that joined them deeply and ineradicably. She cried out breathlessly, then sighed and murmured his name. "Zeke ... oh, yes. Yes."

When he retreated, then penetrated her again, she shuddered uncontrollably, buoyed on a wave of pulsing pleasure that caught her up as he started the slow, rhythmic thrusts of their lovemaking. Each thrust was echoed in the sensation of his hands at her back, her breasts abraded against his shirt with each movement, her mouth locked with his.

Pulsing rapture consumed her, radiating out from their joined bodies, binding them in ecstasy so deep, it burned through to the soul and erased the boundaries of their separate bodies. When their driving need built to unbearable pleasure, Chelsea clutched his shoulders convulsively. Zeke made a wordless sound and thrust into her once more, and shimmering consummation rained into her, flooding them both with rippling, dazzling release.

Chelsea gave herself to it body and soul, all that was hers to give, taking back as her right only Zeke's raw cry of possession, an elemental reality that transcended, for the space of time they had made their own, all thought, all reason, any power either of them had to resist it.

The sky was striped with a red band of promise lying over the hills outside the bedroom window when Zeke heard Chelsea stir in the bed behind him. He glanced back toward her. Faint predawn light touched dark hair strewn across the pillow, the fair skin of her soft cheek, the slight, graceful curves of her body beneath the sheet.

He felt his blood heat just, in those brief seconds of looking at her, and he fought the urge to cross the room and lie down beside her. He made himself turn back to the window. He didn't trust himself to touch her without putting his hands all over her and sliding into her sweet body and taking them both to that mindless ecstasy that had shattered all his previous conceptions of what it could be like between a man and a woman.

Zeke let his breath hiss out between his teeth. He'd never taken a woman with that much raw, crude urgency. The fact that she'd wanted him as much as he wanted her made the act of taking her just barely acceptable to his sense of integrity, but he was still shaken by the force of passion that had driven him to it.

He had some dim sense of his own reasons and motives. It had been a self-protective mechanism. He knew that. He'd wanted her until he burned with it, but that hadn't been the only reason for the quick, explosive sex. He'd wanted it quick, hot, and mindless--and without time for thoughts or emotions.

Keep it just sex, and you avoid involvement.

What bothered him was that he wasn't sure it had worked.

Cursing under his breath, Zeke stared out the window, forcing himself to consider the twist of circumstances they'd both been thrust into at a card game in an upstairs apartment. He'd had plenty of problems to worry about before he'd taken Chelsea on the back of her sofa in the living room.

He hoped to hell he hadn't made his problems more complicated than he could handle.

She made another sound. Sheets whispered, and the mattress creaked. Zeke glanced back over his shoulder to see her raised on one elbow, watching him. She brushed a strand of dark hair out of her face and gave him a slow smile, then slid out from the covers and walked toward him, naked.

He watched her, feeling a catch of desire that stirred his blood just with the sight of her.

"What were you looking at?" she murmured, her voice husky.

It took him a moment to realize she was talking about the view outside her window. "Not much. An empty street."

Her hand touched his back, sending slight, erotic messages all along his nerve endings. "Come back to bed."

He shook his head. "I want to keep an eye on the street. I don't want any ... surprises."

"Surprises? What do you ...?" Her eyes widened in question, then he saw comprehension come into her face, and with it, a cautious dread she didn't want to feel. "Surely you don't expect ... that man ... to come ... here?" Her voice caught on the last word, and Zeke felt her elemental fear--a threat against her home, her sanctuary.

He answered her question with a level, probing look, not trying to give her false reassurance. She drew in a quick breath, and Zeke turned back to the window. Behind him, Chelsea tipped her forehead down until it touched his shoulder.

He stiffened against the urge to touch her, to turn toward her. "Get some sleep, angel. I'll have to go back to my motel later on for messages. I don't want you to be asleep when I leave you here."

"I'll come with you."

"No."

She picked her head up.

Zeke felt her frown, questioning. He let out a short breath. "Right now they think you're Billy's girlfriend. They're just using you to give him a message. But--" He stopped, then finished the sentence. "If anyone gets the wrong idea about us ... they'll try to use you to pay me back for my run-in with Ponytail."

There was a shocked stillness, and around him the light from the window seemed to harden with

some glittering emotion.

"If anyone gets ... the .. *wrong idea?*"

He realized, too late, what he'd said--the way he'd hurt her. Regret knotted like a fist in his belly. He jerked his head back toward the window, jaw clenched.

She didn't pursue it. He felt her acquiescence as a silent, muscle-by-muscle process, an acceptance of truth she had to acknowledge and to absorb.

On the street outside, a car turned the corner, passed beneath the window, then drove off along the block. He felt her cheek brush his shoulder in a caress like the flutter of a moth, and Zeke felt the caress in every masculine nerve ending of his body. She moved away from him, and he glanced toward her, unable to help himself.

Her chin rose a fraction of an inch, and she made a tiny, quickly aborted gesture with her hand before she tucked her fingers around her elbows, her arms crossed over her breasts. To Zeke's eyes the small gesture bespoke pride, dignity, and, too clearly, the hurt of rejection. Zeke felt it echoed in his own gut, magnified by the sharp self-recrimination that lanced through him.

Zeke's mouth thinned into a hard, bleak line. Cursing steadily under his breath, he forced himself not to look at her. It didn't matter. He could see her in his mind as if the image had been burned into him. Dark hair and ivory skin, the sweet, vulnerable curve of narrow waist and high, soft breasts, the grace of movement and generosity of spirit that seemed translated into every gesture. He felt something in his gut clench tight as a cable winch.

Touch her now, and you'll be in over your head so far, it'll make Billy look like he's standing on dry ground.

He shut his eyes and pressed the edge of his fist against the window. The thought that he was already in over his head chased him, unshakable and unacceptable. He blotted it out ruthlessly.

There wasn't any future for them. He wasn't made for soul swapping. Chelsea Connors wasn't made for casual sex. End of story.

So why the hell don't you rewrite the ending?

He snapped his eyes open and uttered a mental epithet he'd been using often lately. He swore again, viciously and deliberately.

It was a hell of a lot safer than taking a chance on his thoughts.

The sun was just rising when Zeke parked in front of his hotel and walked in. The now familiar desk clerk was still on duty.

The woman straightened and gave him a shrewd once-over before sending him a worldly-wise smile and nodding at him. "Morning, honey," she said. She'd piled her gray curls on top of her head in the kind of Victorian topknot made famous by Diamond Jim Brady's favorite box companion in Saratoga's heyday.

"Morning," Zeke returned.

"No messages," she informed him.

"Right."

He pulled a pen and notebook out of his pocket and scribbled Chelsea's number on a torn-out page, then slid the paper toward the clerk and leaned his palms on the desk. "If anyone calls," he said, speaking with careful emphasis, "I'd like you to give the caller this number."

"Whatever you want." She glanced at the paper, then grinned at him. "But I don't mind sayin' you look like you could use the sleep."

"Just put the calls through."

Taking the note, she leaned across the desk to peer at the side of his face. "What happened to you this time, honey? You find your brother again?"

"No."

She shrugged massively, and Zeke started to turn away. "I didn't know playing jazz was so hard on the face," she commented to his back.

The remark stopped him cold. That explained the voluble desk clerk's special interest, he decided with grim resignation. Was there anybody in this town who didn't know Chelsea Connors?

He sighed and turned back to the clerk. "I don't play jazz. And as far as I know, it isn't dangerous. So you can tell Ms. Connors's fan club they can stop worrying about her."

"They can, huh?" The tone was dry. "She has a lot of fans, you know."

Something in the comment touched off a sharp, cutting pang of not-quite-logical guilt. Zeke faced the woman squarely, hands on the counter again. "I'm not going to hurt her."

"Not going to hurt her?" Penciled eyebrows shot up, and the woman let out a disbelieving chuckle that caused minor turbulence in her topknot. "Honey, in case you haven't noticed, you're the one who's collecting all the bruises."

The Metro, that night, was crowded, dim, alive with murmured conversation and the clink of ice in expensive drinks. The air smelled of perfume and affluence, and the crowd was noisy enough to

contradict the idea of serious listening, but when Chelsea walked onstage, Zeke heard silence run through the room like wind through a forest of hemlocks. He stood in the back, his shoulder leaned against an upright support, his hands in his pockets. The crowd in front of him obscured his view, but he had a glimpse of dark hair, loose black pants, a red silk T-shirt. He knew what the piano would sound like even before she started to play it.

Zeke made himself look away from her, scanning the crowd in the club. His gaze skimmed over faces in the dim lighting, then snagged on one he'd seen before. He frowned, staring at the red-haired card dealer they'd met the night before. He was leaning against the wall just inside the door, hands in the pockets of his designer sweatsuit, gazing at Chelsea.

A little too intently.

Zeke straightened, his shoulders tense, and started moving through the crowd toward the dealer. Halfway across the room he caught sight of something that alerted all his senses and made a rush of anger course through his body.

A suave, charcoal-gray Italian-cut suit, hair slicked back into a ponytail, hooded eyes fixed on Chelsea from a table in the middle of the room. Zeke froze where he was. It was the only way to keep himself from walking toward the man who had threatened Chelsea, yanking him out of his chair by his elegant collar, and slamming a fist into his face. He took a deep breath. One part of his mind was shocked by the violence of his own reaction, but in some deeper part of his mind he'd already accepted that his reactions where Chelsea was concerned had gone beyond anything he'd ever expected.

The hush in the room deepened when Chelsea started to play. Zeke let out a long breath and started to move toward the man in the gray suit.

The man lifted his gaze to Zeke without surprise when he stepped up to the table. "Ah," the smooth voice said, the words filtered through a curl of smoke from his cigarette. "My hot tempered friend."

Zeke said nothing. No objective judgment would label him as hot-tempered--except, possibly, in comparison to the man in front of him. The narrowed eyes exuded the chill of utter indifference to any claims of compassion or emotion. The cold gaze flicked toward Chelsea again, and Zeke had to set his jaw to keep himself from reacting. "I think we have some business to take care of," Zeke said evenly. "I'm Billy's brother."

The man drew on his cigarette, his eye on the stage, then, taking his time, glanced again toward Zeke. "Billy's brother," he said without inflection. He raised an eyebrow, and his gaze moved pointedly toward Chelsea.

"Ms. Connors has nothing to do with this," Zeke said curtly. "This business is between you and me."

"Is it?" There was a note of amusement in the voice. "Well, be that as it may, I never discuss business in public, I'm afraid."

Zeke leaned toward him and planted his palms on the table. "Look, *friend*--"

An ash flicked onto his hand as the man met his gaze and evaluated it. "Outside," he said softly.

"Right here's fine."

"No. I'm afraid it's not." The man stood up and turned his back to Zeke, then headed toward the bar without a backward glance, seemingly indifferent to whether Zeke accompanied him or not. Zeke suppressed his own chill of reluctance and followed.

The back exit behind the bar led to an alley lined with metal dumpsters and storage lockers, redolent with the smell of beer and wet pavement. The door to the club swung shut, dimming the sounds of music and the clink of bar glasses.

"All right," Zeke said grimly, when they were alone in the damp alleyway. "We're outside. Can we get down to business?"

The cigarette tip glowed as Zeke's companion inhaled. "Ten thousand," he said.

Ten thousand? Disbelief raised Zeke's voice. He shook his head, eyes narrowed. "No way my brother's into anyone for that much."

"Perhaps not ... originally. But the interest has been raised. It went up considerably after our ... altercation ... over Ms. Connors."

Zeke felt a chill that tightened every muscle in his body. He took a menacing step toward the gray-suited man. "Listen to me, pal. You leave her out of this, or you'll--"

From out of nowhere a shadowed figure shot into Zeke's line of vision. He spun toward it, but from his other side a hand grabbed his arm and twisted it behind him. The two men who'd been waiting wrestled him back and slammed him against the Dumpster with enough force to knock the breath from his lungs. With a hissed curse Zeke made himself stop struggling and eyed the man in front of him warily.

Say what you have to say, pal. And then get the hell out of my sight before I forget this is just business.

"Twelve thousand," the smooth voice said, as if there were no more tension in the atmosphere than in a savings and loan. "By tomorrow night."

Zeke stared at him, jaw clenched.

The man started to turn away. Then, in a move that mimicked the one he'd used the night before, he spun back and rammed his elbow into the side of Zeke's face. Stars exploded in front of his eyes. The immediate blow to his stomach doubled him over before he'd recovered from the shock of surprise. Grimly, he brought his knee up to deflect the next attack, but he was outnumbered and outmaneuvered, and he knew it.

In some corner of his mind he was aware that the music from the club had stopped, but when the door swung open, Chelsea's half-hysterical "No!" went through him like ice water.

He heaved himself against the two men who held him and kicked out against the gray-suited knees of the man in front of him. Something connected. The man fell back. "Get out of here, Chelsea!" he snapped. She'd turned and shouted for Eddie before he could finish.

The iron fists on his arms loosened, and all three of Zeke's attackers faded into the darkness around the back of the alley as Eddie burst through the door. Zeke let out a breath and sank back against the Dumpster, eyes closed.

"Zeke!" Chelsea's voice held panic. She ran toward him across the wet pavement, and then she was against him, her body warm and pliant, her hair touching his chin, her hand on the side of his face. Reflexively, his arms wrapped around her, and he cradled her head against his chest.

"It's okay," he muttered. "Not much harm done."

And maybe worth it, angel, for the feeling of you in my arms. His hands swept up her spine, then tightened around her.

He opened his eyes reluctantly, and met the frowning, reassessing gaze of Eddie, the club bouncer, who was clearly taking in the picture of Zeke and Chelsea together and coming to new conclusions.

One corner of Zeke's mouth lifted grimly.

If he'd hoped to avoid letting it become public knowledge that Chelsea was involved with him, he could abandon the hope after tonight.

He added one more measure of responsibility to his list. He'd let her get involved in this. It was up to him to protect her from the consequences of that involvement.

He wasn't sure who was going to protect her from him.

NINE

Zeke parked the Jeep at the end of the block, opened the first soda in the six-pack, and settled in to wait. One saving outcome of the night's fracas was that he'd settled with Eddie on the need for increased security. They'd agreed the bouncer would watch Chelsea at the club and provide her with an escort home while Zeke kept an eye on her apartment.

It was a deliberate division of labor. Zeke didn't trust himself to keep an eye on Chelsea. Not when he got hard every time he looked at her.

He clenched his jaw and tried to tell himself that sooner or later images of the way he'd made love to her would lose the power to make his blood race every time he thought of them. He leaned his head back against the seat and squeezed his eyes shut momentarily. He was old enough to know how to handle sexual involvement, he told himself. Old enough to know what the hell he was dealing with.

The problem was it hadn't been just sex, no matter how fast or how raw. He hadn't managed to keep the emotion out of it.

He'd just made himself want her again. And again. Slowly, deeply, enough times so that they'd both be limp and exhausted and replete with the knowledge of all the ways they could pleasure each other. He wanted to be inside her--mind, body, soul. Long enough and deeply enough and mindlessly enough so that there wouldn't be any way to tell them apart.

And what happens when your angel figures out you're not going to hand over your soul at her beautiful and talented fingertips? he sniped at himself.

What happens if I figure out I already have?

He drained the can of soda purely for the reason that he needed something in his hand to crush.

An hour later he recognized her silver sedan rounding the block at the end of her street. Her dark hair caught a gleam of streetlight as she turned her head. Frowning, Zeke stared at the car. Where the hell was Eddie?

There was a parking space near her front walkway, but as she drew near it, a van coming the other way on the street cut her off and pulled up to the curb. Zeke tensed, sitting up straighter in the

Jeep.

The backup lights flicked on, and the silver sedan reversed up the street to the corner.

A middle-aged woman got out of the van, locked it, and headed across the street to one of the apartment buildings there.

With a muttered curse Zeke slammed out of the Jeep and started toward Chelsea.

If you walk her to the door, you won't stop with a good-night kiss and holding her hand.

Who said anything about stopping?

He jammed his hands into his pockets, concentrating on the job he had to do, blocking out the consequences.

She was out of his line of sight for a moment, getting out on the driver's side, reaching into the car again for something on the seat. Zeke craned his neck to see her when she walked around the front of the car.

The slam of a second car door shot through him like a distant, warning gunshot. He was halfway up the block when a running figure leapt out of the double-parked car that must have followed her. Chelsea cried out and spun away from the man bearing down on her. She lost her footing when her attacker reached out and caught her arm. Bags scattered across the sidewalk with a flurry of papers. Chelsea went down to the pavement, struggling against the more powerful hands that twisted one arm behind her and covered her mouth.

Zeke's boots pounded on the wet pavement, his breathing harsh in his own ears. The man's head was bent toward Chelsea's, his slicked-back hair coming loose from its ponytail. He lurched to his feet as he heard Zeke approach, spinning Chelsea around viciously in front of him. Zeke heard her gasp in pain as she stumbled over her attacker's feet, but she gritted her teeth and kicked his shin hard enough to give Zeke an opening.

He slammed his fist into the man's face. The attacker grunted in shock. Zeke dug into his arm and yanked it away from Chelsea, working with the strength of blind anger. She pulled free as Zeke's fist connected with the smooth jaw again. The attacker clutched at Zeke's jacket as he fell, righted himself, then ducked away and raised his arms in defense. He took another step back, abruptly uninterested in fighting an opponent who matched him in odds and overpowered him with a fury born of sheer, unqualified rage. He turned and dashed toward the car double-parked beside Chelsea's.

Zeke let him go, jaw clenched, waiting until he'd started the car and pulled away. Then he spun around toward Chelsea, reached her with two long strides, and crouched to pull her into his arms.

She was cradling her wrist in one hand, fighting for breath, trembling so violently, he doubted she could have stood if she'd wanted to.

"Oh Lord, angel," Zeke murmured, his voice rough with residual anger and the instinct of battle.

"Are you all right?"

She let out a strangled sob, and Zeke's arms tightened. "Did he hurt you?" He smoothed the dark tangled cloud of hair and tucked her head under his chin as if he could shield her from the violence she'd just endured. She shook her head against his chest, but her trembling didn't stop, and Zeke shifted, bending one knee on the pavement to pull her into his lap.

"Oh God," he murmured in a rough, husky voice. "What the hell were you doing driving home by yourself? Damn it, you were supposed to be with Eddie."

"He ... got a phone call. A family emergency, they said. I made him go " Her voice broke, and Zeke wrapped his arm more tightly around her shoulders.

Zeke swore succinctly. "Why the hell did I ever let you get involved in this, Chelsea? You weren't meant for this. God, you weren't meant for ... this." His voice lowered to a gruff murmur, gentling on the last word to a scant breath of emotion.

"I ... don't know what he wanted," Chelsea got out. "He just said something about my ... boyfriend"

"Shh. Don't think about it," he murmured "I'll take care of it. Don't think about it again."

"But ... you were right." The words came out brokenly. "He wanted to get back at you."

"Shh," Zeke soothed again "I know I was. I'm not going to forget that. But I want you to. Forget it. Forget all of this."

Her fingers were still tightly wrapped around her other wrist, her hands trapped between them Zeke covered her hand with his and drew it out from her chest, turning over her wrist with slight pressure, murmuring to her "What did he do to you, Chelsea?"

She shook her head again. "Nothing. Not really. It's nothing."

"Damn it, if he hurt you, I'll ..."

But the words trailed off as Luke stared down at her wrist, then let out a slow, shocked breath. His thumb brushed over the fine network of old scars that lined her hand from the inside of her wrist to the joint of her thumb and across her palm.

Slowly, still shocked, he turned over her other hand. It was marked the same way, the old scars healed and faint, but still visible, even in the dim, diffused light from her apartment building.

A wave of numbing disbelief washed over him, chased by a dozen questions he suddenly didn't need to ask. The image of Chelsea in his Jeep, her hands against the glass of the windshield, flashed in front of him as if it had been projected, and with it came understanding that shook him in every cell of his body.

"A broken window," he said with intense certainty "You put your hands through a window, didn't

you?"

When he looked up at her, the green eyes were wide and unguarded. "Yes."

He wrapped his hand around hers and bent his head down, squeezing his eyes shut for a moment before he spoke again. "Were you trying to save your parents, Chelsea? Was it in the fire?"

She didn't answer. She didn't need to. Zeke knew what the answer was. He gathered her closer, tucking her hands against his chest.

When she spoke again, her voice was low, but the words were clearly audible. "After the glass broke, the fire flared up. Because of the draft from the window. I didn't know ... about fires ... and airflow. When the rescue team got there, it was too late. They couldn't get through."

The sharp, visceral pain of Chelsea's memory stabbed through Zeke and closed his throat on the words he wanted to speak. For a moment there was only the late-night mist, strangely illuminated by the yellow porch light that spilled across the pavement, and Zeke's deep, scratchy breath as he held Chelsea and felt the pieces of what little she'd told him click into place.

"That's when you started to play the piano?" he said finally.

She nodded. "Ray talked me into it. I wouldn't cooperate with the doctors or the therapists. I was too ... " She shrugged, a small, wordless gesture of her shoulders under his arm. "It was a way to exercise my hands. It turned into more than that."

Zeke clenched his jaw against the raw protest that rose in his throat. She'd been eight years old. *Eight*. Not a charmed, spoiled prima donna, not what he'd spent days and nights trying to convince himself she was.

A little girl with no parents who blamed herself for surviving when they hadn't, who had learned to play the piano to give herself a reason to grow up.

Zeke tipped his head back for a moment, raising his face to the misty, dark night, picturing that gesture she made whenever she tried to reach out, that small, unconscious movement of her hand that he'd rejected so often, she'd tried to stop herself from doing it. For a sharp, excruciating moment pain lanced through him so bright and cold, he thought he'd been physically injured.

His breath came back to him, ragged but functioning. In silent, wordless apology he lifted Chelsea's hand to his mouth and kissed the network of scars on the heel of her palm.

She made a movement toward him, and he stopped her, holding her away from himself so she couldn't touch him. "I don't deserve that, Chelsea. I don't deserve your kind of trust."

She went still and quiet in his arms, unmoving as the tremors in her body shook themselves out; then she reached up to the side of Zeke's face and laid her palm against it.

"No," she said clearly. "That's for me to decide, not you."

Her hand was warm and soft and as tender as the mist that filmed the edges of the light's illumination, but Zeke felt some deep, unquestionable feminine strength beneath the softness as he covered the back of her hand with his own and caught her gaze in his own intense, troubled expression.

"Chelsea, you don't know what you're--"

She stopped the words with her fingers, shaking her head, and he caught a sudden, surprising glint of moisture in her eyes. "No. You're the one who doesn't know."

He'd never seen her cry. Not when she'd woken from her nightmare, not when she'd been threatened the night before this, not when she'd told him about her parents' death. "I'm the one who doesn't know what?" he said, his voice a ragged thread.

She didn't answer, but her hand moved against his face, her fingers tracing the outline of the small muscle that ached in his jaw. "Walk me home?" she asked, serious. Her eyes were still a little too bright, but her mouth curved in a slow, brave smile.

The realization came gradually, with a slow crumbling of his resistance. He had no choice. He could no more refuse her invitation than stop breathing. He'd lost his will to resist her, by pieces, bit by bit, with the inevitability of erosion on sloping land.

She moved against him, slightly, restlessly, with no obvious intent to seduce, but Zeke felt a sound of raw need rise into his throat, almost audible. The sweet mix of sensuality and soul that she embodied drew him in ways he couldn't fathom or control. The touch of her hand against his face, the sweet weight of her breasts against his chest, drove all thought from his mind, and any choice from his options.

He stood up with her, lifting her to her feet as he rose, and turned them both toward her doorway.

The light from the porch spilled onto the polished floor of Chelsea's living room in a long rectangle partly filled with their joined shadows as Zeke opened the front door and walked her through it. Chelsea listened to the door close behind them, a soft thud muffled by her own breathing and the quickened beat of her heart. They were cloaked in darkness as the rectangle of light disappeared.

Zeke's arm around her shoulders was warm, strong, steady. She felt him turn his head toward her, examining her profile, evaluating her thoughts. Without speaking, he bent and picked her up, then carried her across the dark living room to the Oriental rug in front of the fireplace.

The once-functional hearth held an ornate cast-iron heating element. Zeke set her down on the rug as if she were something fragile, then leaned toward the hearth and fiddled with the archaic knobs at one side of the blower.

Heat flooded over her, welcome and penetrating, though she hadn't been aware of the chill that made the heat so welcome. In the faint glow given off from the heater, she caught his gaze, dark with purposefulness that made a sudden shiver chase down her spine.

He crouched in front of her, his eyes locked with hers, and slid his fingers into her hair, then leaned toward her, and covered her mouth with his.

His kiss was a promise that deepened by degrees, as if they were entering a contract solemn enough to seal with ritual. Reactions sifted through her, cool and warm, beckoning and compelling in rapid, dizzying waves of contrast. He touched her with only his mouth and one palm at the back of her neck. She touched him with only one hand, laid against his chest, but all along her body a wave of desire liquefied her defenses and heated her skin.

Last night had been an explosion of forces as inevitable as lightning. This time she felt a slow, rich building of passion that poured down over both of them like a soaking rain. Under her hand she felt the strong, rapid beating of his heart and the shudder that coursed through him as he fought to control that passion, but there was no trace of the urgency he'd let loose the first time they'd come together.

His free hand covered hers, holding it against his chest, then his cool fingers slipped down to circle her wrist. He broke off the kiss by slow, reluctant degrees, leaned his forehead against hers, then, holding her wrist as if it were gossamer-fine crystal, he lifted it to his mouth and kissed it.

"You need ice for this, Chelsea," he murmured. "I'll get it."

She'd forgotten, for the moment, the pain in her wrist. She would willingly have forgotten it for the next hour, but Zeke let go of her, rose and crossed the living room to the kitchen. She heard the freezer door open, then the rattle of ice.

Unreality wrapped around her, distant as a fantasy, filled with the pure, real emotions of a dream.

He came back to her, wrapping ice-filled terry cloth around her wrist, then crossed to the stereo system to fiddle with the dials. A moment later music filled the dark room.

She smiled at him as he walked back to her, then, letting out an abashed chuckle, she placed her unwrapped hand on his chest. "You're good at this," she said softly. "The heater ... the ice ... the music ... knowing what I'd ask for before I say it."

He covered her hand with his, pressing it against his skin, but the faint smile on his mouth faded before it could start, and his expression turned serious and pensive. He shook his head. "No. I don't think when I'm with you. I just want. Everything. Every way I can touch you. Every way you can touch me. It's gone past wanting. Last night was that. This is ... something I don't have a name for."

His voice was as rough and dark as the raw, throbbing low register of a saxophone. His face was shadowed, his expression obscured by darkness.

She wanted to see him. She freed her hand and turned away to light the candle on the end table beside the couch. A dim golden glow chased the shadows to the corners of the room. She turned to walk toward him.

He stood waiting for her, his eyes golden brown and intense with leashed passion.

He took her hand and moved it against his chest. Beneath the smooth fabric of his shirt she felt the contours of warm flesh, hard muscle, the structure of bone. Her palm tingled.

She spread her fingers against his shirt, taking in as much of him as she could reach, letting her eyes close to heighten the sensation of touch, needing the touch of his hands, his kiss, his body pressed against hers.

She must have made some sound, some sign, though she wasn't conscious of it. Zeke touched her lips with two fingers, then traced the curve of her cheek. His thumb brushed over her lower lip in the lightest of caresses, sensitizing her to his intent, his purpose, her own needs.

For a long, yearning moment she was caught in a still life that seemed to stop time, to deny the inevitable, when she wanted only to rush into it, to pull it toward her. Then he leaned toward her, slipped his hand around her neck, and brought his mouth to hers.

She could feel the steady thrum of his heartbeat under her palm, strong and persistent, driven by passion, while their mouths explored and responded, caressed and communicated in a pattern at once ancient and as new as the moment.

When he twisted his mouth to fit it against hers, more urgently, and claimed the warm inner recesses of her mouth with his invading tongue, Chelsea welcomed the deepening intimacy with hunger that matched his. She freed her hand from his grasp to slide her arm around his neck and pull him closer.

Zeke's arm around her shoulders was strong as the melody of a classic song. He lowered her to the rug, breaking off the kiss to settle her shoulders against the soft, worn wool of the Oriental carpet.

His face, inches above hers in the dim candlelight of the living room, was molded by passion: Sensitive and vulnerable, without the brusque certainty she'd seen so often in his features.

She felt her mouth curve in a smile as open and inviting as the cool, sensual trumpet notes that filled the room along with candlelight and electric heat. Her fingers twined in his hair, behind the crest of his ear, along the valley below his jaw. She raised her head to press her lips against the pulse in his throat, opening her mouth to take in the taste of his skin, the warmth of him.

She felt the shaking in his body with a welcoming, joyous sense of her power to make him tremble, but Zeke caught her face in his hands, holding her still, making her look at him.

"Tell me what you want, Chelsea. Tell me how to please you. Otherwise, I'll go too fast for you. What you do to me is ... crazy. Indescribable. I want you with me. For all of it. Everything."

The rough, passion-driven catch in his voice made her whole body quicken, like a recording tape raised to a higher pitch.

She curled her fingers around his wrists, smiling, breathless. "How do you know I won't be too fast for you?" she murmured.

The ice pack had slipped from her injured wrist. He caught her hand and circled it, then brought it to his mouth. His lips nuzzled the inside of her wrist, hot against her cooled skin. "You should keep ice on this," he murmured. "It will keep it from hurting."

"It's all right," she murmured, lost in sensation, barely aware of anything but Zeke, his touch, his mouth, the sound of his voice. "Nothing hurts."

Zeke's fingers trailed through her hair, separating the strands with slow, sensuous strokes. "It might later, though. What happens if you can't play the piano tomorrow?"

"Oh, the world would come to an end, I guess. At the very least."

She made him smile, but his hand still held her wrist as if he would protect her from the air itself. "When I saw you, Chelsea ... when I saw you being hurt ..."

His hand in her hair stilled, suddenly, and she felt the cords in his forearm tense with leashed reaction. She circled his neck and pulled him down to her. "If that was what brought you to me, I'd let it happen ag--"

"No," His hands contoured the sides of her face, her neck, her shoulders. "No. I can't let you say that. I can't ... I can't " The words trailed off as his gaze darkened to an intensity that made her breath catch. His hair was limned gold by the flickering light as he came closer, then he covered her mouth, fiercely, in a kiss that allowed for nothing tentative or uncertain. His tongue delved into her mouth, penetrating the warm inner recesses, claiming the same intimacy he'd taken when he kissed her in the rain outside his Jeep, kissing her now to acceptance of that intimacy, to rising desire, to a return of his claim.

His hands moved under her back, supporting her shoulders, splayed against the silky cotton of her cardigan, making the silk of her T-shirt slide against the skin of her back. The movement of his hands flexed the muscles of his chest in small, sensual patterns against her breasts. She arched her back, pressing closer to him. He gathered up the material of her cardigan and her T-shirt at the back of her waist to expose a band of skin. His hands, one warm, one cool from her ice-wrapped wrist, touched her skin, and Chelsea shivered once, straining against him, wrapping her other arm around his back, heedless of her injured wrist.

Zeke's bent knee partly covered her thighs. He moved over her, edging his hips closer, pressing with his thigh until she raised one knee to let his leg slide between hers. She moved against him, a slow, sinuous movement of her hips to seek the intimacy they both yearned for. The pressure of his thigh against the soft rayon of her slacks was sweet and heady, sensitizing, making her body sing in sensual harmony to the slow jazz trumpet solo that drifted through the candlelight and shadow of her living room.

She made a small, involuntary sound in the back of her throat. It was absorbed in the seal of their mouths as they kissed, their breathing now rushed, rich with half-whispered thoughts.

He raised his weight from her enough to skim her silk T-shirt up over her arms. She arched her back to give him access to the clasp of her bra. It came loose in his fingers, leaving her breasts

unconfined, uncovered to his ardent gaze as he lifted the wisp of lace and silk over her arms to drop it beside her shirt on the floor.

"Ah ... Chelsea ... you have the most beautiful skin, the most beautiful ivory ... skin " He clasped his hands under her back, arching it again, lifting her breasts toward his lowering mouth, moving toward her with slow deliberation that stretched her senses and tightened her breasts until their erect pink crests strained toward him. She raised herself higher, supporting her weight on her elbows to curve herself in a graceful, yearning bow that spoke more eloquently than language.

A wordless sound rumbled in Zeke's throat, then he uttered her name on a ragged breath. "You feel like silk ... like satin " he murmured. His warm hand slid over her rib cage, just under her breast, tantalizing her with a bare touch. His cool hand brushed the side of her other breast, sending a shiver of delight radiating through her. Then, as she arched even higher toward him, his mouth closed over the waiting peak of her breast, and his hot, wet tongue stroked a circle that made her whimper with pleasure.

He filled his mouth with her, shaping her with his tongue and lips, drawing sounds from her throat that were a broken litany of his name and the sensual pleasure he gave and received.

She pressed herself against him, welcoming his mouth, his hands, the muscled strength of his thigh, the evidence of his arousal. She felt lost in him the way she was so often lost in music, unaware of the room around them, the heater humming beside them. She reached for him, wrapping her palms around his strong upper arms as he moved his mouth to her other breast and took her nipple gently between his teeth, tugging with careful, sensual rhythm that made her hips move to match it and her breath come in gasps.

Her voice broke on the words of pleasure she would have spoken. He played her as she played her piano, with instinct so sure, it transcended skill and intention. But she had instincts, too, and she needed to touch as well as be touched, to give pleasure in equal measure that she received it.

Her hands sought his strong shoulders, his neck, the inside of his collar. One by one she unfastened the top buttons of his shirt, sliding her hands between their bodies, pushing the shirt aside to feel the texture of his uncovered skin against her palms. When her fingertips slipped into the waistband of his jeans, exploring as far as she could reach, stretching to reach farther, he drew in a sharp breath, and she felt a sensual shudder travel through him. He raised his head, his eyes squeezing shut for a moment before he opened them to meet her gaze with a look of such intense passion that Chelsea felt some part of herself extend from her body to lock with its mate in Zeke. They were joined, breath to breath, for an instant that stunned her with its unexpected certainty. Her hands felt a trembling in Zeke's body that echoed the trembling in her own.

His throat worked as he tried to say something, to find words she knew couldn't hold the meaning he sought.

She splayed her fingers on his waist and urged him up toward her. "Kiss me," she whispered. "Just kiss me, Zeke "

His kiss was fierce, possessive, all-consuming. His tongue twined with hers in a seeking dance

that seemed flawlessly matched, perfectly tuned to the mutual desire that wrapped them in music stronger than that emanating from the livingroom speakers.

Their bodies were aligned, warmth to warmth, skin to skin, his thigh against the most intimate part of her, her hip pressed against the ridge of hard male flesh beneath the zipper of his jeans.

His hips moved in the instinctive ancient language of body and soul, and she answered in kind. They left off the attempt at conscious skill and followed their instincts, pleasuring each other with touch and heat and mouths, and the force in each of them wanting the other.

Chelsea stroked his back as he had stroked hers, measuring the curve of his spine with her thumbs. She pushed her fingers beneath the back waistband of his jeans and curved them into the hard muscle of his buttocks. The muscles tightened under her fingertips, and his hips thrust against her convulsively. He broke off their kiss, and she felt his jaw clench as a sound of raw need came from his throat.

"Chelsea ... baby ... don't do that," he growled next to her ear.

She made her fingers relax. "Don't you want ... ?"

"Oh, yes, I do. I want you so much, I'll lose it if you do that."

"I want you to lose it. With me. Inside me."

"Chelsea ... my sweet, sweet angel ... oh, yes, I will do that." He rolled to his back, pulling her with him, sweeping his hands down to her hips and thighs urging her legs apart so that she straddled him. "Unless the world stops spinning. Unless there's some change in natural law."

His strong tanned hands cradled her hips, pushing the elastic waistband of her silk pants down as far as it would go. He guided her against him and with one slow thrust of his hips let her feel the shape of him through his confining denim jeans and her fragile silk garments. Heat from the cast-iron grill fanned over her breasts and her bare torso, but her response to his hands and his body was shivery and breathless.

On top of him, she was free to touch him as she'd wanted to the day she'd seen him without his shirt, standing in front of her window and holding himself back from any move they both might want. Now he put his own hands on top of hers, gently, lightly, as if she were teaching him a keyboard, and their joined hands rode over the muscles and bones of his chest, his stomach, the waistband of his jeans. She lifted herself from him to touch, to learn the shape of him through his clothes, but when she tried to unfasten the snap of his fly, he clasped her hands and moved them away from him, to her own half-uncovered hips. She knelt up and let him shimmy the loose pants down to her knees.

He let go of her as she kicked off pants and undergarment in one graceful movement; then his hands lifted her and turned her to stretch her out on the warm rug. He spoke in broken phrases, but the words were full of the emotions he'd forbidden himself to say before this, spilling out in a half-conscious litany. "Sweet ... " he murmured. "Sweet Chelsea, let me touch you ... let me give you

pleasure. Let me make it good for you ... and tender ... "

His hands trembled as he filled them with the weight of her breasts. He leaned down to her, trailing a string of hot kisses and murmured words all along the surface of her flushed and heated skin, taking in her shivers of pleasure as if they were water to a thirsty man. When he combed his fingers through the soft, thick triangle of dark curls at the apex of her thighs, tracing that soft, silken, intimate center of her body, she cried out in pleasure and clung to him.

Her cry of response rippled through him, rousing his desire as if her pleasure were his own. He shook with it, fighting for control, trying to master the passion that washed over him in a primordial tide, flooding through barriers of self-restraint and will he'd thought were the elements of his soul.

He'd been wrong, he thought through the dizzying spin of sensuality they wove together. Her strong, deft fingers went again to the snap of his jeans, and this time he let her unfasten it, then divested himself of his clothes to let her sheathe him with her hands.

His breathing grew strident, matched with hers, and he didn't know whether the shared rhythms of their bodies were dictated by him or her or by some outside force that held both of them in thrall.

When he entered her, slowly, by exquisite, barely conscious degrees, he raised himself above her to watch her face, to kiss her mouth, to murmur words grown meaningless as their bodies spoke a language known deeper in the cells.

"Yes. Zeke ... yes," she whispered as he penetrated her fully.

He began to move inside her, setting the cadence of an ancient rhythm known by their bodies, a dance of communion Zeke felt as shared pleasure twice as sweet as anything he'd ever known before. Her abandoned passion multiplied his own the way a saxophone multiplied the sound of breath. In every small, rhythmic cry that followed each thrust, he felt them enter that music, trapped in it, lost in it, striving toward some harmonic resolution he couldn't imagine. Then she moved, lifting more fully to meet him, to join with him, and the music shattered into sensation. Chelsea's hands gripped his shoulders, and she cried out convulsively as her climax sent him beyond music, beyond imagining, beyond thought.

TEN

Sated, warm, and content under the covers of the double bed where they'd spent most of the night, Chelsea was slow to wake. The room was still dark, lit only by gray windows of predawn light, but even with her senses hazy and half-asleep, she realized Zeke wasn't beside her. The empty place on the mattress was what had awakened her.

"Zeke?" She raised herself on one elbow. The all-night jazz station was still playing. Easy, slow blues on a piano. Then she heard water running from a faucet in the kitchen.

A breath of reassurance loosened her chest, but the feeling faded almost as soon as it washed over her. Quiet as his steps were, she could tell he wasn't barefoot.

He appeared in the doorway, dressed in jeans, boots, and jacket, his hair damp and combed back from his face.

She drew in a deep breath and held it.

"Chelsea."

He said nothing but her name. She went still, looking across the dark room at him.

"Listen." He ran a hand through his hair. "I want you to get out of here. Out of Saratoga."

A quick, cold, unwanted prick of understanding needled its way into her mind. "What ... what do you mean?"

"I've got to take care of this business. I don't want you getting mixed up with it."

The only sounds were the background music of the radio and Chelsea's suddenly apprehensive heartbeats. She felt a stab of dread--long enough to let her realize that what she feared went beyond the seeming logic of his words. She shook her head in quick denial. "No. I'm staying with you."

"No, you're not. You're getting out of here. You're going to stay away from all this until it's over and done with."

She shivered, as if she felt something physical stinging the surface of her skin. "No. We've had this argument before. I can't believe you're bringing it up again. I can't believe you're saying the same

things you did when I saw you in the Metro and walked over to--"

"This time I win the argument. No negotiations. That's the way it is."

Something in her throat resisted speech.

On the radio the piano was joined by a harmonica and an acoustic guitar.

All night they'd spoken to each other in language that didn't require words, that didn't express the idea of separation. A vulnerable, disbelieving part of her didn't want to accept the meaning of his words now. Under the surface of her composure, raw panic was trickling in as if a faucet had been left open.

She stood up, taking the coverlet with her, and crossed the room to the stereo controls. She touched the knob, and the music stopped abruptly. She stared at Zeke, her throat tight. "Why?"

His control broke like the sudden, violent release of a floodgate. "Because I don't want you hurt, damn it! I don't want to see you mugged in an alley with all your fingers broken. I don't want to be responsible for that!"

"You're *not*. You're not responsible for it--if it happens. It's my decision to stay or leave!" Her voice rose as she faced him, lashing out at him because there was a tight knot of fear in the pit of her stomach driving her to anger. "You don't have a right to make my decisions for me."

The muscle in his jaw clenched. "I'm making them anyway, angel. You're getting out of here this morning. I have to drive upstate to get the money. There aren't any branch banks here, and I don't want to wait for a bank transfer."

"Don't be ridiculous! I have money in a bank in town."

A beat of incredulous silence followed her words; then Zeke gave a quick snort of disbelief. "Do you think I'd take money from a woman I just--" He bit off the sentence before he finished it, letting out a long breath, dropping his gaze to glance away from her.

In the center of her chest a tight, hurtful band was constricting her lungs. She waited until he looked at her again, then said, "Just *what*?"

All the crude, indifferent, inadequate words that could be used to describe what they'd shared hung in the air between them, unspoken and unwelcome but suggested by what was happening between them now.

"Ah ... Chelsea." He took a step toward her. "I never wanted to hurt you. I never wanted to do this. I just wanted--" He reached for her and dragged her against his chest, wrapping her in his arms, rocking her against him until her resistance crumbled and a sob whimpered in her throat. "Ah, Chelsea. Don't."

She clung to him, absorbing his heat, his strength, the hardened muscle and sun-toughened skin. She pressed herself against him, her hands in the hollow of his spine, her face against his chest.

When he tilted her head up to bring his mouth to hers, she felt the hot, wet prodding of his tongue and opened to it, taking him into her mouth fiercely and with a kind of defiance whose target she couldn't have pinpointed: Zeke, herself, the fate that tied them together.

He lowered her to the mattress, and she pushed the coverlet out of their way. His hands traced the contours of her body even as she reached for the snap of his jeans. The sensual link between them flared into desire, immediate, powerful, and all-encompassing.

As she took him into her body, Chelsea knew the act for what it was: A denial of barriers, of separateness.

She dug her fingers into his shoulders, holding him against her, filling a need for him she didn't try to fathom. The passion they created between them broke like a seed from its shell, grew, flowered, then drenched them both with shared release. Chelsea welcomed it with a spontaneous moaning of Zeke's name.

They lay still, locked together, while the small sounds of the old house crept back into their awareness, unchanged, underscoring the dull, ineluctable fact that there was no reconciliation of their argument.

Chelsea took along breath, then let it out. In the center of her chest there was an ache that hadn't gone away, even with sensual completion.

It hurt. She told herself she'd known long before this that Zeke North wasn't going to fall in love with her. He wouldn't let himself. But she'd thought he might let himself ... be close to her. Give them a chance. The myriad unspecified possibilities she hadn't let herself name spun out away from her reach like so many escaping fireflies. "Zeke ... "

It was a plea, unanswered.

Suddenly, an unexpected sound made Chelsea's pulse jump. Someone was knocking at her front door. Her eyes widened in instinctive alarm as she met Zeke's gaze.

He didn't move for along time; then, looking away from her, he drew back. His hand clasped the back of her neck; then he rolled to the edge of the mattress and sat up, his back to her.

"I called Big Eddie," he said flatly into the questioning silence. "I want you to go up to the cottage and stay there until this is resolved. Eddie will take you up and stick around as long as necessary."

Disbelief warred with some deep, hurtful sense of betrayal in Chelsea's mind, crystallized by the unexpected realization that he'd done this before she'd even awakened. Before they'd talked about it. Before they'd made love. "You called Eddie?" she murmured, incredulous. She tried to imagine the conversation, the protective conspiracy, the premeditated arranging of her life so that Zeke could walk out of it. Alone.

The knock sounded again, but Chelsea made no move toward the door, nor did Zeke. She slid up on the bed, pulling the covers with her, and stared with steady defiance at the back of his head until

he turned to face her again. "You didn't call Eddie to make sure I got out of here," she said finally. "You called him to make sure *you* got out of here. You knew I'd want to help. You were afraid you might take my help."

"That's not--"

"Isn't it?" She faced him down, demanding a reckoning of truth to match what they'd shared only moments before. Zeke let the denial die, his mouth tight.

"You can't take anything from me, can you? Not my money, or my help, or my ... coffee, for God's sake. You won't even say what you need because you're terrified I might give it to you and you'll end up--I don't know--owing your soul for it."

The muscle in the side of his jaw clenched tight, and she thought for a moment she saw a blaze of intensity in his eyes that cut through the defenses and excuses and unadmitted pain. But when he spoke, he didn't let his voice rise beyond a raw, low murmur. "You said it once yourself. I have the soul of a loner. I'm sorry, angel It's all I have. I can't give it up."

Staring at him, she pulled the coverlet up around her shoulders, wrapping herself in it as if for protection from hurt.

A flash of pain came and went in his face, and the muscle in his jaw flexed again, but he turned away from her, pushed himself up from the bed, and pulled on the jeans he'd dropped on the floor, then bent down to pick up his shirt and walked out of the bedroom toward the fireplace.

When he came back, he had her clothes in his hand. "I let Eddie think I spent the night on the couch," he told her. "I didn't know how much you'd want anyone to know ... " He held out the bundled clothes.

Chelsea stared at the rumpled black and red silk. For a second his thumb moved gently on the material in a gesture that was almost a caress, then, as if he realized it, he closed his fist so tight, the knuckles turned white.

She got out of bed and stepped toward Zeke without a word, took the crumpled clothes, then kept walking across the living room. She dropped the clothes on the sofa. Silk and lace spilled across the upholstered cushions, her black bikini panties sliding over the edge to the floor, in plain view of anyone who might walk into her living room. She snapped on the light as she walked to the door, trailing the white coverlet wrapped around her like a toga.

Eddie had his hand raised to knock again when she pulled open the door. He cleared his throat, lowered his hand, and stepped inside.

Both of them ignored Eddie, their gazes locked. Zeke walked across the living room, his eyes on her face, took the door from her grip, and, without another word, walked through it, pulling it shut behind him.

Chelsea stared at the closed door, swallowing hard.

Eddie said nothing.

There wasn't anything to say, she thought bitterly. Words couldn't express the kind of hurt that went all the way down to the bone.

Two hours out of Saratoga Zeke stopped at a fast-food restaurant where the coffee was hot and the service was immediate. He didn't care about anything more than that. The grim black anger that had driven him since he walked out of Chelsea's apartment blocked out any competing emotions.

He didn't allow himself to think beyond his immediate purpose. Get the money he needed, find the men who wanted it, and pay Billy's debt.

Thinking about Chelsea twisted his gut into too many knots to unravel. He couldn't afford that risk.

He used the pay phone to call his Saratoga motel for messages. A voice he'd never heard answered the call, put him on hold a moment, then came back on. "Just one message. 'There's a game tonight.' Does that make any sense?"

Yeah, it made sense.

It meant he'd be finished with Billy's troubles in less than twelve hours. He'd be twelve thousand dollars lighter, but Billy would be off the hook, and Zeke could turn his back on Saratoga's gambling underground and sophisticated clubs and too-intimate jazz scene.

A clean break. Sharp, antiseptic. He could start figuring out how to forget Chelsea Connors and her sweet, yielding body and gifted hands and sighs of satisfaction.

He gritted his teeth against the vehement protest that thought evoked somewhere in the region of his soul. This wasn't a choice. This was reality.

"Hello?" the phone voice inquired.

"Yeah," Zeke said. "Thanks."

He hung up the receiver carefully, shocked at the realization that what he wanted to do was rip it off the wall. He'd long since learned to school such emotional impulses into the tough, usable core of determination that drove him. He knew what could happen to unchecked emotions. And he was no fool.

It wasn't until he was back in the Jeep and on the road again that his cynical inner voice finished the comment. *And only fools fall in love.*

Her wrist still worked. It was slightly swollen, a little painful, but it obeyed her will. The tendons and muscles and nerves carried her message to the keyboard and translated it into the music she needed to hear.

She played the blues--slow, gritty, rich with pain or resignation or anger or the complex, intertwined emotions of all three. She played old tunes, written by other musicians who'd felt pain they'd translated into music. Chelsea sought the comfort of that kinship instinctively, and with a need she couldn't deny.

She didn't notice the sun slanting across the floor from the kitchen doorway until Eddie's shadow blocked it for a moment, and she looked up at him.

He'd made her a plate of toast and a cup of coffee. Touched by the gesture, she didn't have the heart to tell him she wasn't hungry. "Thanks. "

"That's my gourmet specialty," he told her. Her mouth quirked in an ironic smile that kept the lump down in her throat. "I can beat you, then. I can scramble eggs. Sometimes it seems like I live on eggs and toast at three in the ... " Her voice trailed off. It had been closer to five in the morning when she'd made eggs for Zeke North. The sun had been coming up, as it was now.

Eddie was leaning against the doorway, watching her.

She took the plate from him and put it on top of the piano. "Not many women have someone on call for bodyguard duty at five in the morning with no prior notice."

He nodded. "Not many can play the piano like you do, either."

"Oh, yes," she said on a long, unhappy breath. "I can play the piano."

His troubled silence held assessment and long-standing concern. "You know," he said finally, awkwardly, "I've got nothing against North, but if he really got you into the kind of trouble he's talking about--" He broke off, looking down as if afraid he'd said too much, but at her continued silence, he met her gaze again. "Maybe you're better off without him."

Her mouth turned up in another sketchy smile. "Sounds like a line from a blues tune."

"Look ... you could ... " He crossed his arms over his massive chest and shook his head, then blurted, "You could have dozens of guys that'd give their right arm to buy you a drink. "

She shut the keyboard cover, gazing at it, seeing instead Zeke North when he'd first come out to the cottage the night of the storm, and he'd slumped against the railing and let something show, for just a moment, that had opened her heart.

She squeezed her eyes shut. "I don't want dozens of right arms," she said,

"Yeah." Eddie's voice was just as resigned as hers. "I guess not."

To her dismay, she felt moisture gathering behind her eyelids and spilling over. She rubbed the

heel of her hand across her cheek, pressing back the tears.

Eddie's involuntary sound of alarm startled her into looking up at him. "Hey," he said sharply. "What happened to your wrist?"

She glanced at her hand, her vision still blurred. "It's . . . nothing. Nothing serious."

Eddie took a couple of steps closer. "Have you had anyone look at it?"

She shook her head, wrapping her fingers around her injured wrist. It was still swollen, though she'd stopped noticing the pain. The injury was minor, only in the flesh, a mere matter of nerves and muscles. It would heal on its own. She closed her hand into an unconscious fist. "My wrist will be fine, Eddie," she said.

He let out a quick breath. "I don't--"

"I know," she said, stopping him. "I'll ... get it looked at today. Thanks for being concerned, but I'll take care of it. Really."

"I could drive you to the clinic. Or your own doctor."

She didn't want to tell him no. She was too sensitive to the pain of rejected gifts to be callous with even the most prosaic offering. "I'll ... keep that in mind," she told him.

He frowned again. "What about the cottage?" he asked her. When she said nothing, he slanted her a wary, disapproving look and pulled himself up straighter, taking on a mantle of self-conscious male protectiveness. "I think it's a good idea for you to go up to the cottage. You don't want the kind of trouble that leads to--" He gestured toward her hand. "To that."

"I know, Eddie," she said softly. "I don't particularly want any kind of trouble." She reached for the coffee cup, wrapped her fingers around it, and cradled it in the palms of her hands, staring down into it, holding it tightly. "But there are some things here I have to do. Someone I have to help. Or ... try, anyway."

"But ... " He hesitated, clearly unhappy with the direction of her thoughts. "I don't think that's a good idea."

She glanced down at her cup again, with a faint, wry movement of her shoulders. Blues tunes didn't come out of good ideas. Music that came from the soul didn't start with logic. She met Eddie's frowning look with her own level gaze. "I'm not going to the cottage, Eddie. I'm staying here."

"But ... "

"Female prerogative, Eddie." She put the cup down. "I'm exercising it."

ELEVEN

The hallway that led upstairs to the apartment where the game was being played was lit with the same dim bulb that had been burning two nights ago. Zeke let the door swing shut behind him and touched his hand briefly to the money belt he wore around his waist, under his shirt.

He glanced up the stairs, feeling something tighten in his gut. Two nights ago he'd come here with Chelsea. She'd walked into the dim hallway and up the stairs as if no crime in Saratoga could touch her.

He felt tension knot his shoulders for a moment as the picture of her assailant twisting her arm behind her burned for a moment in his mind. He made himself take a breath and let it out, reaching for control.

You're not here for violence, he told himself. And neither are they. It's business, pure and simple.

Just as hurting her was business?

He froze, one foot on the stairs, fighting the bleak answer he didn't want to acknowledge. *Yeah. Billy's creditors to hurt her wrist, and Zeke North to twist her soul.*

He forced himself to ignore the sharp pain that shot through him in some part of him that he couldn't locate in his body. What he wanted with Chelsea--the impossible, compulsive longing that he'd fought for fifteen hours--had no place in his life, or hers. He knew too well what happened to those who let go of their souls. In his mind, if not in his gut. He couldn't trust his instincts any longer where Chelsea was concerned.

He walked in on a game already in progress. He recognized several of the men who looked up when he walked in, including the red-haired card dealer who'd been in the Metro before Chelsea was attacked. The dealer gazed at him a moment with an expression Zeke could only interpret as innocuous surprise, then shrugged and gestured with the deck.

"Hey," the dealer offered. "Join the game."

Zeke shook his head, his jaw clenched. "I don't think so."

The man glanced around the table, as if the answer to his puzzlement could be found on the faces of the men who'd gathered over the cards, then he shrugged at Zeke. "You lookin' for somebody?"

Zeke nodded.

"Yeah ... well ... " The man looked around again, running a hand through his bushy red hair, then glanced back at Zeke, his gaze innocent and guileless. "She's not here."

She? Zeke felt, for a moment, as if his heart stopped beating, then a surge of adrenaline jump started his nervous system. "Where is she?" he asked.

There must have been a note in his voice that triggered something in the red-haired dealer. The man froze for a moment, then smiled nervously and gave another shrug. "She's fine. I heard she was playin' tonight at the Metro. Special show. No cover."

Zeke felt the tension in every muscle of his body. What had made him think she would follow any logical instructions and keep herself out of trouble, just because he'd wanted her to? What the hell had made him think Big Eddie could control her any better than he could himself?

"Suppose," he said, his voice carefully neutral, "you tell me exactly what you've heard."

The card player passed his deck to the man on his right and excused himself from the table. He gestured Zeke into the back room, then led the way, hands in the pockets of his jeans, shoulders hunched. "You got no reason to be lookin' for trouble," he said conversationally as he turned toward Zeke, out of earshot of the card game, carefully out of reach of Zeke's arm. "It's just the nature of the business, you know? Sometimes people need a little ... persuasion. But as long as it all gets taken care of ... "

Zeke said nothing.

"Your brother--he's just a green kid." The man shook his head, smiling, chatting, Zeke thought incredulously, with as much amiable good nature as if threats to his brother and to Chelsea were no more than what he'd said--everyday business.

"Got in with the wrong crowd," the man said, "and then he thought he had to cover for his friends. Long as it's been taken care of, nobody's gonna bother anybody about it."

Zeke stared at the man, sorting through the information and slotting it into place. "Who covered it?" he asked.

The dealer looked up, frowning, clearly taken aback by the question. "Your girlfriend," he said. "The piano player."

Zeke stared at him. In the back of his mind he felt something give way, like a small, seemingly minute shift of destiny.

He left the man where he was, turned on his heel, and walked back through the kitchen and out the door. No one spoke so much as a word until the door had shut behind him.

The sign outside the club said, CHELSEA CONNORS--TONIGHT--LIVE. Zeke pulled the Jeep over to the curb and stared at it. He hadn't wanted to believe. He'd needed to see for himself that the red-haired card shark had been telling the truth.

So now you know the price of your soul, North.

Like hell, he growled at himself without missing a beat. *She paid the money for Billy, not me.*

And that's the way you want it, right?

He didn't answer himself. He didn't have any satisfactory answers.

He shut his eyes and forced himself to think about Billy and the still unsatisfactory explanation he had for Billy's folly. What wrong crowd had he gotten himself in with, and why had it cost him so much money? And what was he going to do to make sure it never happened again?

Another car turned into the club's parking lot, cruising the aisles for a space. The club was full, evidence that the word had gotten around quickly about Chelsea's unscheduled performance. Saratoga was a small place.

It occurred to him that Billy might have heard about this performance in the same way he had. His kid brother had known when he was in trouble; he was likely to know just as quickly when he was out of it. Maybe that had been her intention.

Either that, or to show Zeke North she wasn't affected by the way he'd walked out.

He didn't ask himself why he should have felt a surge of anger at that last thought. He set his jaw and turned his head away from the parking lot, wondering if Billy would show, if they could settle this tonight, if settling it would do anything for his mood.

If he went in now, he could catch her last set. It might be worth catching. It might settle something.

Or it might make you think of the last set you caught.

She'd been warm and wet and incredibly sensual. The last time they'd made love she'd been sitting in his lap, her hands tangled in his hair, her knees straddling him on either side of the mattress, and the song on the radio had been one of hers. They'd matched their movements to the piano. Slow and deep and building to a hot, passionate summit, where the music had been somewhere other than on the radio.

Zeke stifled the groan that rose to his throat, then reached for the door handle, got out of the Jeep, and slammed the door. The cool night air made a marginal impact on his body temperature, but as soon as he was out of the Jeep the music from the club's open foyer caught him, drifting down the street in barely audible snatches. She was playing with a band. Drums, horn, bass.

You don't need to hear it, he told himself.

She'd been right about Eddie that morning. He'd called Eddie because he wasn't sure he had what it took to walk out on her. He wasn't sure now. The only thing he was sure of was that she deserved better than what he had to give, better than a man who couldn't take what she had to give.

But he hadn't counted on the way her music could wrap itself around his soul, as if she'd already laid claim to something he hadn't intended to let go of.

She was playing the lead when he walked in. The music was sweet and subtle and passionate, an improvisation so distinctly hers that it took him a moment to recognize the tune. When he did, the recognition broke over him like slow heat--a message that reregulated his heartbeat. "Body and Soul," in a rendition she'd made her own, filled the room with a message that burned through him like flame.

She couldn't have known he was there. Her eyes were closed, her face tilted up to the light. The dark cloud of hair shimmered as she bent her head down to the piano, lost in her own interpretation of the music.

Zeke shut his eyes again on an ache of unbearable emotion. Chelsea didn't hide her soul from anyone who wanted to listen to it, he realized. The truth was she'd never hidden her emotions. She acted on feelings. And she let them show to anyone who wanted to see, to listen, to take in her music. What she gave was given freely, generously, with that graceful, open gesture of her hand outstretched to someone who needed it.

"Zeke."

Zeke frowned in the direction of the sharp, peremptory summons.

Billy was facing him, hands jammed into his pockets, his boyish face wary and defensive, his posture tensed as if he was unsure of his welcome.

An empty table stood near them. Zeke took a step toward it and pulled out one of the chairs, suggesting by the gesture an elementary sign of cooperation. For a moment he thought his brother would refuse to sit, but Billy yanked a hand out of his pocket and pulled a chair out.

"I heard you paid what lowed," he said gruffly.

""What you heard--"

"Let's stick to the facts, okay? It's a small town."

Taken aback by Billy's belligerence, Zeke nodded, frowning. "Okay by me," he said.

"I plan to pay you back," Billy announced. "As soon as possible."

"That's not what I'm--"

"Plus the tuition money. I quit school. I'll pay you back for that."

Billy's defiant independence struck Zeke silent for a moment. He hadn't seen the extent of his kid brother's determination before this, and the sight was disturbing in ways he hadn't assimilated. *He wants to be just like you*, Chelsea had told him. *Another lone ranger*.

Zeke rubbed his fingertips across his forehead, searching for the right words, the right meanings, a way to understand and to connect. "Billy," he said, looking up at him, "what you ought to know is that I didn't pay your debt. Chelsea paid it."

"Chelsea?"

She was still playing. Billy's questioning glance moved toward the stage, then back to Zeke. "Oh, God," Billy breathed.

He dropped his head into his hands, and his defiant resistance crumbled like a cardboard cup under a fist. "Oh, God," he repeated, the words muffled in his hands.

"Billy ... "

His brother looked up, then dropped his head again and hunched his shoulders as if to hide his face. "I really blew it, didn't I?" he muttered into the table. "I really screwed up."

"What happened, Billy?"

Billy took a strident breath. "I had a little money saved," he got out, his voice strained, "I was going to pay you back--for the semester--and this friend of mine said he could pay me back twenty-five percent interest if I loaned him the money."

Zeke made some sound of reaction, and Billy glanced at him, then buried his face again. "Then he got into trouble, and I said ... I told those men ... I'd cover what he owed. I didn't realize how much it was. I panicked. I didn't know what they'd do to me after I said I'd pay them. But my friend said I could win it back--in just a couple of games. He said he'd help me." He looked up again, at Chelsea onstage, then Zeke, and his face showed a flash of anguish. "I tried getting it back, but I lost even more."

Zeke's breath hissed out between his teeth.

"They gave me a week to come up with it. They said they'd give me credit for that long."

"Why?" Zeke asked him.

"They thought ... they thought I had a rich girlfriend."

Neither of them moved for a second, then Zeke slid his clasped hands off the table. "You don't," he said bluntly.

Billy nodded. "I know that. I'll pay you back, I promise. I'll do whatever it takes. I'll work for North Brothers ... whatever I have to do." He shot a guilt-ridden glance toward Chelsea. "I never meant to get her involved in this."

Onstage, the tune had ended. The drummer had started a riff that would lead into another number, but Chelsea leaned toward him, and he stopped playing. Chelsea glanced toward Zeke, and their eyes locked for a moment. He felt the shock of it all the way through his body.

Billy's gaze flicked from Chelsea to Zeke. "Believe me," he said, "I never meant to--"

Zeke stopped the self-recriminations with a short, succinct sentence. "You didn't."

Billy's mouth dropped in surprise. Through the mike, Chelsea murmured something about a break.

"You didn't get her involved," Zeke said. "If anyone got her involved, I did. She paid the money because of me."

"Because of ... ?"

Billy was saying something, but Zeke was watching Chelsea stepping down from the stage, moving gracefully between the crowded tables, walking toward him.

He stood up when she reached their table. "You paid the money," he said softly, "for me."

She nodded.

He took a deep breath, and his hand unconsciously went to his waist, his palm flattened on the money holder. "Do you want to be paid back?" he asked her.

She shook her head.

Zeke felt his jaw clench. *You can't take my money, or my coffee, or my help. You can't even say what you want.* He swallowed hard, and his hand dropped to his side. "I think you just bought yourself a soul, angel," he said.

There was a sheen of bright moisture in her eyes, but her mouth curved in a smile that defied it. "It didn't come cheap," she murmured.

Zeke nodded. "I know."

He glanced at Billy, watching them both in silence, then around the room at the curious spectators trying to pretend their attention was elsewhere, at Big Eddie, frowning at them from the doorway. He held out his hand to Chelsea.

She reached out and put her palm against his, and he wrapped her hand in his fingers with gentle, exquisitely caring pressure. "I'll try to make it worth your while," he said.

Her smile widened. "When?"

"I have some things to take care of here."

She nodded. Zeke's eyes held her for an exchange that wasn't spoken in words. Then he

murmured, "Wait up for me."

Zeke stood on the doorstep, his hand lifted to knock, for a long moment, listening to the sleeping silence from inside the apartment. He dropped his hand, then, after another deliberation, fished the key out from the window box.

Her apartment was dim, orderly ... familiar. Zeke shut the door behind him, letting the lock click in.

She appeared from the kitchen and paused in the archway a moment, her gaze taking him in.

"Hi," he said.

"Hi, yourself."

Zeke watched her cross the room toward him. She stopped at the hall table to turn on a lamp. Warm light spilled over her hair, her fair skin, the folded sleep sofa behind her, the books she let her friends borrow without permission, the extra instruments she kept for any musician who might stop here in need of a bed, a meal, a helping hand.

"I thought you might be asleep. I didn't think I'd be so long talking to Billy. But ... he needed to talk."

"I'm glad you took the time. Maybe you needed it too."

She reached out and touched his arm. Zeke felt the electric shock in a sensation that galvanized all his nerve endings, but he kept himself from touching her. They were still new to each other, despite the times they'd made love last night. The thought shook him. It had implications of intimacy that went beyond making love. He'd had no experience with that.

"Maybe," he said softly. The rest of the thought formed in his head. He censored it automatically, by habit, then, as he had outside on her doorstep, he tried a different way. "Maybe. But not as much as I needed to be with you."

She caught a breath. A faint flush of color came into her face. They stood in the dimly lit hall, silent, both aware of something changed between them, reluctant to stretch the fragile new bond too soon or too far.

"I'm not quite sure how to do this," he said quietly. "This ... taking things."

"You seem to be doing okay," she said, unsmiling.

"I do?"

Her mouth curved. "Would you like a cup of coffee?"

He shook his head, then stopped himself and smiled. "Yes. You can give me some coffee."

He followed her into the kitchen and took the mug she filled from the coffee machine, but his eyes stayed on Chelsea, drinking in her appearance, her grace, the smell of her hair--all things he wanted more than coffee.

"Is Billy going back to work for you?" she asked him.

"No, I don't think so. He doesn't want to work in the forestry business. I told him he'd have a job there if he ever wanted it, but--" He broke off, staring into his coffee mug, then put the mug down on the counter beside him. "I think I'll talk to Pete--my manager--about getting his pilot's license. He's been screaming at me for two years to hire a new pilot. It will serve him right if I offer the job to him."

She grinned. "He'll take it?"

"Don't see how he can refuse. And that way Billy ... can keep working in the band, or whatever works out--without me running his life."

Her face softened, the green eyes clear and steady on his. "It must be hard for you to let go of him. You brought him up, took care of him, put him through school."

He said nothing. There was a tightness in his throat that he wasn't sure would have let him say anything. He nodded.

Chelsea reached toward him again with that open, graceful gesture he associated with her. "He's learned a lesson from this, Zeke. He'll be all right. All he really needs from you is to know you love him."

He caught her hand in both of his, holding it for a second, then turned it over, palm up, and raised it to his mouth. He kissed her palm, then lowered her hand, still clasping it in his own unsteady grasp. "That's the thing about love," he said in a raw, husky voice. "It's not something you earn, or deserve. It's not an obligation. It's a ... gift. I have a hard time seeing that, I guess."

She had a thought, suddenly, that she should teach him the way it was with music--sharing the joy of it, the gift of it, the way you could be lost in it. She knew the way, suddenly. She laid her free hand against his chest, where she could feel his heartbeat inside his shirt, then, needing to touch him, she undid the buttons and pressed her lips against his skin.

"Ah ... Chelsea." He framed her face with his palms, tipped her mouth up to his, and covered it in a long, searching kiss.

She knew, without his saying it, that he loved her. That was easy for him. What was harder for him was to take her love the way he'd said, as a gift.

When he lifted his head, she studied him. His hair was backlit and haloed by the living room light, his eyes were dark and warm, searching her face the way his kiss had searched her response to it.

She ran her fingers through his hair. "I'm going to give you gifts, Zeke North, and make you take them."

He smiled. "What?"

"I don't know. A song, maybe."

He dipped his head to hers and rubbed her temple with his jaw. "I'll take it."

"A road map to Saratoga from upstate."

She felt his smile against her hair. "Mm. I could use a map. Draw a colored line on it to show the fastest way."

"You have to promise to follow it." She stood on her tiptoes and turned her face to his, pressing her lips against his once more.

"Yes," he said, then. "Make one for my life. I'll follow that too."

She pulled back from him, watching his face, her expression serious, her hand sliding down to the side of her neck. "A road map for your life?"

"I've been thinking of hiring another manager for the business upstate. And opening another branch office down here."

"Here? In Saratoga?"

He covered her hand with his warm, strong palm. "I don't know about ... giving and taking, Chelsea. I just know this much. I love you. I want to spend my life with you."

She stared at him, saying nothing, her emotions too tumultuous to be spoken.

"Will you give me that, Chelsea Connors?" he asked her. "Will you marry me?"

A slow, burgeoning sense of joy filled her chest, her throat, her smile. "Oh, yes," she said. "Oh, yes. I'll give you that."

Zeke's eyes closed as a breath left his chest, and he slid his hands into her hair, down the nape of her neck, along her shoulders, pulled her closer to him.

"Ah ... " he said softly. "My sweet angel. I'll take it."

EPILOGUE

The Metro was awash in champagne and white roses. Most of Chelsea's musician friends, who rarely drank anything stronger than coffee, had lifted a glass or two to the bride.

His bride, Zeke thought, with a rush of satisfaction.

Chelsea's soft laughter drifted toward him, recognizable to him even amidst the celebratory chatter of the reception. His eyes followed her as she moved across the room toward him, her dark hair a cloud of silk against her white satin dress. For just a moment the champagne, the music, the guests disappeared for Zeke. She made her own music for him, sweet and singular and perfect.

"Zeke." She smiled at him. "What are you doing over here in the corner?"

"Watching you."

"You should be mingling."

He kissed her briefly. "I've been mingling. None of your friends seem to have last names. They're just 'Jim. Saxophone,' or 'Joanna. Vocals.' "

She slipped her arm through his, leaning her head on his shoulder as she watched the musicians playing on the stage. "Billy sounds good, doesn't he?"

"Yes." Billy, sax hanging around his neck, had hardly left the stage all evening. Everyone wanted him to keep playing. It meant a lot to Zeke that his kid brother was surrounded by an abundance of friends willing to give him a helping hand, now that he'd learned how to ask for it.

Zeke hadn't given much advice in that quarter. It was a lesson he was still learning himself. And he had a good teacher.

The best.

He turned his head to glance down at her again. She wore the gold locket he'd given her. She hadn't let him give her a diamond, since she didn't wear rings.

Zeke's mouth curved in a wry smile. What she'd "let" him give her was the privilege of making the down payment on the lattice-trimmed Victorian house they'd bought together. Zeke's savings had

gone into the business he was starting in Saratoga.

In return, she'd given him gifts he was learning to take: Tickets to a Mozart performance at the Arts Center, a hummingbird feeder for their kitchen window, a pair of red boxer shorts she'd gravely told him, were suitable for a kept man.

She lifted her head from his shoulder. "How are you, Pete?" She smiled at the tanned, gray haired would-be pilot who'd materialized from the crowd.

"I'm fine, Mrs. North." He grinned. "Never thought I'd see the day when this guy turned up any place in a tux. Have to admit, though, it looks good with your dress. 'Course, anything would look good with that dress."

She laughed. "I picked it out to go with Zeke's tux."

"Well, you did a hell of a job picking out." He grinned again at Zeke. "And so did you, fella. Congratulations."

Zeke watched his old friend retreat, then let out a low chuckle.

"What are you smiling about?"

"I didn't tell Pete just how dressed up I really am. What I'm wearing under the tux, for instance."

Her eyebrows rose, then, surreptitiously, she slipped her hand under the cutaway coat and slid a finger into the waist of his pants, glancing down. "Red boxer shorts?"

He grinned at her. "When we go home, Chels, I have plans. I'm going to act like a kept man."

"Oh, good. I'll act like a kept woman."

His smile faded into seriousness as he looked at her. "Well, then, what will I have to give you?"

"Let's see. I've already got your soul."

"And what will you ask for next?"

"In those shorts?" Her eyes glinted mischievously. "Do you have to ask?"

He smiled back at her, letting her warmth wrap around him like music. "It's yours, Chelsea. Forever."

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