

PROTECTING
Paige

MAGGIE

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

CARPENTER

Protecting Paige

Maggie Carpenter

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Carpenter

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Published by Dark Secrets Press

www.MaggieCarpenter.com

Cover Design by Korey Mae Johnson

Images by 123RF/kiuikson, 123RF/Fernando Gregory Milan,
123RF/creative4m, and 123RF/Valentin Valkov

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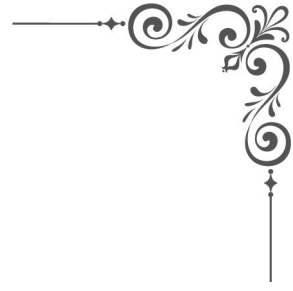
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Chapter One

PAIGE BROOKS STARED at her boss in disbelief. He couldn't be serious. Michael Shapiro, founder of Shapiro Public Relations, had just given her some startling and unwelcome news.

“Under the circumstances, I hate to ask, but I have no choice,” he said soberly. “I can't do anything about this. I can't unbreak Rachel's ankle, she can't possibly hobble around the sand on a Caribbean island, and I can't leave Erica to cover everything by herself. I'm afraid you have to go. You'll be leaving tomorrow at noon.”

A deep ache rumbled through her, and for a moment she thought she might throw up. She tried to respond, to absolutely refuse, but her mouth was dry and she was unable to utter a sound. How could she be around Cole Barrington and his awful girlfriend, Jasmine Juniper, and survive? Viewing their beaming faces on the pages of magazines was bad enough, but to be around them on a romantic, private tropical island where she had spent a magical week of blissful nights melting in Cole's arms would be too much to bear.

“Look, Paige, I know it's not ideal,” Michael continued, interrupting the salacious memory, “but my hands are tied. *Our* hands are tied.”

Paige adored her boss. Michael was like a father figure to her. He'd hired her straight out of college several years before and they'd developed a close bond. She almost felt sorry for him as he shifted uncomfortably in his chair. He knew the news was the last thing she wanted to hear.

“No, it's not ideal,” she managed, “and I know what you're going to say. It's been a year and I should be over it by now, and I am,” she lied, “but honestly, the thought of being around him and Jasmine at an event for several days... it's making me feel sick. It'll be humiliating.”

“Only if you let it be,” Michael said firmly. “Hold your head up. Act as if nothing happened. You have to accept that he's been with Jasmine on and off for a long time.”

“Don’t remind me.”

“I’m surprised you haven’t run into them before now.”

“I’ve studiously avoided situations where I might.”

“This may be a big business, but it’s a small town. Running into them, or even bumping into Cole with one of his other, uh, female friends had to happen sometime. I need you, Paige. You have to suck it up and get through this.”

“Don’t worry, Michael, I won’t let you down, but I have a favor to ask.”

“Whatever you need.”

“I know I’ll have to fly to the island with them, but can I stay behind a day or two and take a commercial flight back?”

“Sure, no problem. Do you have something special in mind?”

“Scuba diving. Maybe I’ll get lucky and find a sunken Spanish galleon. There’s booty all around the islands. Did you know that?”

“Everyone knows that, and I hope you get lucky,” he said warmly. “Yes, of course, take three or even four days if you want, I know how much you love the water, but you have to bring me back a few coins when you find your pot of gold.”

“I’ll scoop up a pocketful for you.”

“I’m glad you’re smiling again. I’ll make sure you get all the files from Rachel, and you can call her at home if you have any questions, but nothing much has changed since you were there last year.”

“Okay, I’ll get right on it, and you’re right. I need to face my demons, and it’s been ages since I spent time with him.”

Spent time with him. What did that even mean? *Spent time with him.* It sounded so innocuous. She could feel the old anger resurface. How could she not? In addition to the lingering hurt, she still felt like a fool. The idyllic romance had fallen apart when she and Cole had returned. Michael had immediately guessed why she’d been miserable for days. It

had been a no-brainer. Cole and his womanizing ways were legendary.

“Try not to worry,” Michael said, hoping to reassure her. “It probably won’t be as bad as you think.”

“I’m sure it won’t be,” she muttered, then rising to her feet she walked swiftly from the room, but as she returned to her office she could feel her teeth clenching.

She couldn’t believe it. She was about to be trapped playing nicey-nice with Cole and Jasmine. How would she get through it?

Cole would be a major personality during the event, but Cole was a major personality, period. He was a producer with his own company based at one of the major studios. His last three films had been box office bonanzas, and while he was famous for being an innovative filmmaker, with his square jaw, coal black hair, and bright blue eyes, not to mention his tall, muscular frame, Cole Barrington could easily be a star in front of the camera.

Closing the door behind her, she moved around her desk and sank into the leather chair. How could this have happened? Couldn’t Rachel have waited until after the event to break her ankle? It was a stupid thought, but she couldn’t help herself, and closing her eyes, recalling the awful moment when she’d learned Cole was nothing but a jerk, felt like days ago, not twelve months.

She’d been at the studio where his offices were located, and had impulsively stopped by with his favorite coffee and a doughnut. His secretary wasn’t at her desk so she had tapped lightly on his door and stepped in. To her complete shock she had found herself staring at Jasmine Juniper. The young, buxom starlet had been unbuttoning her blouse and kicking off her shoes. Heart in her mouth, Paige had backed away, but leaving the door open just a crack she’d peered in to see what would happen next. A moment later she’d heard the sound of the shower in Cole’s private bathroom, then his voice calling for the beautiful blond actress to join him.

“The water’s hot, Jasmine. Whenever you’re ready.”

She'd watched Jasmine pad barefoot across the thick carpet, peeling off her shirt as she did, then disappear through the door that led into Cole's private suite. The stories Paige had heard about Cole Barrington had raced through her head. *He's a total Casanova. Look but don't touch, not unless you want your fingers burned.* Tears flooding her eyes as her heart broke, she had hurried away to hide in the stairwell.

The week she and Cole had spent together had been nothing short of magical. They'd truly connected, or so she'd thought. Clearly she'd been wrong, very wrong. They'd been home just a couple of days and he was already back in Jasmine's arms. On their flight home she'd convinced herself that Jasmine—and all the others—would be history. She'd been shocked and hurt and utterly distraught.

A short time after that heartbreaking moment she'd learned Jasmine Juniper had been cast in the starring role in Barrington Productions' next feature film. That had been the nail in Cole's coffin. In her coffin. In their coffin. He'd called a couple of times, and she might have called him back had she not seen endless photographs of him with Jasmine at various publicity parties. Paige had forced herself to come to grips with the fact that she'd just been one of the many girls he'd bedded. Nothing special. Just a week of hot sex on a hot island. Nothing more, nothing less.

"Michael's right," she mumbled as she stared out of her office window. "It's a miracle I haven't run into him before now. I'll stay cool, collected, and professional, and make sure he doesn't have the satisfaction of knowing he shredded my heart into a thousand pieces. He'll never know. Not ever, the bastard!"

A knock on her door announced the arrival of the files from her colleague's office, and as she began to peruse them she found herself getting annoyed. Rachel's organizational skills left a lot to be desired, and after an hour or so Paige decided to take the work home. She was out of sorts. She needed to make herself copious cups of tea, scan and upload certain documents, and start packing.

Placing the manila folders back into their carry box, she threw her briefcase in with them, donned her coat, and started down the hallway, but as she approached the reception area she paused; the unmistakable aroma of an expensive European aftershave wafted around her nostrils. It couldn't be! Cole Barrington never came to them; Michael always visited him at the studio. Maybe it was someone else. She paused. Should she turn around and scurry back, or take a chance and turn the corner?

"Screw it," she muttered, determined to push past her fears. "If it's him, fine. I'm not going to let him get to me. I refuse!"

Swallowing hard, then taking a deep breath, she entered the reception room.

Sure enough, there he was, all six feet, two inches of him, with his black hair, blue eyes, and chiseled features. Her heart stopped beating. Completely. He was dressed in tan slacks and a cream shirt, and she found herself thinking if he opened just one more button, the chest hair that she once loved to nuzzle against would be in plain sight.

The phone on the receptionist's desk rang loudly, and Paige abruptly realized she was staring. She needed to say something, she needed to break the awkward silence, but decided to fight the almost overwhelming need. Why should the onus be on her? Why didn't he speak first?

"Well, my goodness. Paige! How are you? That looks heavy. Do you need a hand?"

He was walking forward. Her heart had started again, but now it was thumping like mad, and she hated how gorgeous he looked.

"No, I'm fine, thanks," she said quickly, clutching the box for dear life. "What are you doing here?"

"I was in the neighborhood and thought I'd stop in and say hello to Michael," he replied, stopping directly in front of her. "Are you sure you don't want me to take that?"

"Quite sure!"

“I understand Rachel’s out of action and you’ll be taking her place.”

“Wow, news travels fast,” she managed, despite the fact that the box was beginning to feel ridiculously heavy and a hot flush was moving across her face. “I have to go. I have a ton of stuff to do.”

“I’m sure. I guess I’ll be seeing you tomorrow.”

Striding past him to the elevators, she cursed herself. Memories were flooding her brain. The deliciousness of his powerful arms, how he would tilt her head up and drop his lips onto hers, the heavenly way his breath tickled her ear when he’d murmur his decadent fantasies, fantasies she still carried around with her, fantasies no one else had ever spoken of, fantasies she wanted... desperately wanted... ached for... craved... dreamed about.

The ding of the elevator snapped her from the bittersweet thoughts. Fighting the bevy of emotions, she moved through the doors, but when they closed she leaned against the wall and dropped her head. Cole was as enticing as ever, as roguishly masculine as ever, and she still wanted him as much as ever.

“You’re being an idiot,” she angrily muttered. “He was with Jasmine two days after you got back. Two fucking days!”

The old argument leapt to the fore. She’d had no claim on him. There’d been no promises, no speeches of undying love. The short speech hadn’t helped a year before, and it wasn’t helping her now. Just two days after their amazing week together, he’d been able to jump back into Jasmine’s arms. It was something she couldn’t forgive, and worse, it was something she couldn’t forget.

Stepping from the elevator into the underground parking garage, the sound of her heels clicking on the concrete seemed strangely loud as they echoed through the air. At least Jasmine hadn’t been at his side at the reception. That was something for which she was grateful, and unlocking her car she placed the box in the back seat, settled behind the wheel, and took several long few deep breaths.

“This is ridiculous. I will not let him get to me,” she mumbled. “I need to get home, I need cups of tea and toast and honey. I need to work. That’s what I need.”

Placing her key in the ignition, she was just about to start the car when her cell phone rang. Glancing down, she didn’t recognize the number, but assumed it was someone related to the event. The phone calls would be coming in fast and furious as everyone switched gears from working with Rachel to working with her.

“Paige Brooks speaking.”

“Hello, Paige. I’m glad to see you’re answering your phone these days.”

Cole?

A fresh wave of heat crossed her face and her stomach did a wild flip. Closing her eyes and telling herself to stay calm, she managed to find her voice.

“I thought you were there to see Michael? Has he kept you waiting all this time?”

“He’s on one of his interminable conference calls. I just wanted say how pleased I am you’re going to be on the island. I’m looking forward to working with you again and catching up.”

“Save it. Your charm has lost its gloss.”

She instantly regretted the outburst. Her repressed anger had surged to the surface and the words had left her lips before they could be stopped.

“If we’re going to be working together again, don’t you think it would be best to be civil?”

Paige continued to silently berate herself. She hadn’t meant to lose it, not even a little bit, and now she was deeply embarrassed.

“Paige? Are you there?”

“Yes, sorry, of course. Please accept my apology. I can assure you I will not be rude to you again.”

“If you are,” he said, lowering his voice, “I might just put you over my knee.”

Had he just said that? The butterflies she’d not felt since their last night together suddenly burst to life. Spanking her had been one of his whispered threats, one that had made her toes curl.

“I’m not sure that’s being civil,” she quipped, amazed the retort had miraculously flashed through her head, “and I don’t think Jasmine would appreciate you flirting with an ex, even though we weren’t ever... uh...”

“What makes you think I was flirting,” he asked, interrupting her and saving her from no-man’s-land, “and why do you think Jasmine and I are an item?”

“Everyone knows that!”

“Who’s everyone?”

“Oh, please, Cole, just stop with the bullshit.”

She’d done it again. She’d lost her cool, but suddenly she didn’t care.

“Michael’s ending his call. I’ll see you on the island, but we will be civil... and Paige... we have to talk.”

“You know, you really should have been an actor.”

“What?”

“I’ll see you on the island because I have to, but you can’t con me, Cole Barrington. I’m not one of your silly starlets, but don’t worry, I’ll be the modicum of civility.”

Ending the call, she realized she was holding her phone with a white-knuckled grip.

“I hate this,” she groaned. “I hate this so much. What’s wrong with me? Why does he still affect me like this? I have to get myself together. I have to.”

Fastening her seat belt, she was just about to start up her car when her phone rang a second time. Darting her eyes down, she was relieved to see it was Rachel. The distraction was just what she needed.

“Rachel, you just caught me. I’m actually sitting in my car getting ready to leave the office. How are you? I’m so sorry about your accident.”

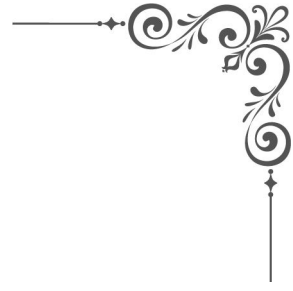
“Ugh, it’s such a pain, and I mean that literally as well as figuratively. Do you want to call me back after your Bluetooth clicks in?”

“No, I’m perfectly happy to chat now. Grateful in fact.”

After a lengthy conversation, Paige felt much better. Her head was back in business mode, she had her priorities, and from what Rachel had told her things were in good shape. Starting up her car, she began to drive out of the building, but as she glided slowly through the street level of the parking structure she spotted Cole’s midnight blue Porsche.

In twenty-four hours she’d be boarding a flight and spending the next several days around him and his Marilyn Monroe wannabe girlfriend. Jasmine was a blend of blond hair, bouncy boobs, and black stiletto heels, and regardless of her pent-up feelings, Paige knew she had to be professional. Everyone who was anyone would be there, and she would be in the center of the activity. She grimaced. She had to maintain a polished dignity. Engaging Cole in a nasty spat and hanging up on him was not exactly an auspicious way to start off.

Willing herself to be brave, she turned the steering wheel, pulled up next to the sports car, and switched off the engine. She’d wait for him and have a quick, courteous dialogue. She had no choice. Whether she liked it or not, she had to get things back on the right track.



Chapter Two



Paige jumped. She'd been preoccupied with thoughts of the plane trip to the island, and being trapped in the cabin of the private plane with Jasmine and Cole, but a loud tap on her window had sharply snapped her from her daydream. Darting her eyes around, she saw Cole staring down at her. Out of the blue she flashed back to his muscled body pressed against hers, his consuming kisses, and the mewling sounds that had emanated from someplace deep inside her as they'd made love. Fighting the memory, she pushed the button to lower her window, but her ignition was off so nothing happened. He smiled. It was a sardonic, yet patient smile. A smile that made her feel foolish.

She watched him step back and lean against his Porsche, folding his arms and tilting his head to the side. Why the hell did he have to look so damned sexy? Gritting her teeth and hating the scarlet blush that was burning across her cheeks, she started her car, then wondered why she hadn't just climbed out to talk to him. The heat in her face wasn't abating, and it unexpectedly reminded her of the first time he'd kissed her. His lips had been simultaneously soft and crushing, her stomach had tumbled, and she had been sure had he not been holding her in his strong embrace her legs would have given way beneath her. Silently chastising herself for allowing such thoughts to dance through her head, she took a deep breath and forced herself to look back at him.

"Can I have a word?"

"Sure," he said with his easy confident charm, "but it has to be a quick one."

"Never mind," she said hastily. "If you have it go... it's nothing."

"Speak."

His natural authority made her blush even more, and fighting through her nerves she managed to fix him with a

steady gaze.

“Look, Cole, it wasn’t my choice to work this event.”

“You’re stating the obvious.”

She groaned inwardly. She’d sounded so negative.

“It’s just...” she said tentatively, searching for the right words.

“Yes?”

She pulled her eyes away, wishing she didn’t feel so rattled.

“Paige, it’s clear you have something to say and I’m interested in whatever that is, but I have to get back to the studio. Spit it out. The world won’t come to an end, I promise you.”

She turned her eyes back at him. No, the world wouldn’t come to an end, though it had felt like it had the day she’d seen Miss Blond Bombshell prancing around his office and disrobing on her way to his shower. Why was it still making her crazy? It had been a year ago! She knew why! Of course she knew why. As much as she hated to admit it, she was still nuts about him and it was killing her.

“The thing is,” she continued, battling her feelings, “as much as neither of us wants this, we’ll be thrown together on the island and it’s not going to work very well if we’re at each other’s throats so I’d like to call an official truce.”

There. She’d managed it. She felt proud of herself, but then he smiled that killer smile and she wanted to climb from the car, circle her arms around his neck, press her body against his, and...

“Let’s take that a step at a time. First, personally I’m delighted that you’ll be there; second, I’m delighted to call a truce, though I didn’t know we needed one; and third, just so we’re clear,” he continued, leaning forward, lowering his voice, and fixing her with his shockingly bright blue eyes, “there’s no throat I’d rather be at than yours.”

She wanted desperately to look anywhere but back at him, but her gaze was literally locked by his, and swallowing hard she somehow managed to find her voice.

“Why did you say that?”

“Couldn’t help myself, and besides, it’s true and it needed to be said.”

“Yeah... can’t help yourself describes you to a T,” she quipped, “and if this is going to work, you need to keep crap like that to yourself.”

“Crap?” he said with a frown. “Paige, that was a compliment. Maybe a hair over the top, I’ll give you that, but it was still a compliment.”

“Compliments are meaningless if they’re thrown around like confetti.”

“What are you talking about? I can assure you I have not said that to anyone in... let’s see... at least five minutes,” he declared, his scowl abruptly disappearing as he laughed out loud. “I’m kidding, I swear, I’m kidding.”

“That wasn’t funny.”

“Oh, come on, it was a bit, but honestly, if I was a vampire I’d be sinking my teeth into you right now.”

“No, you wouldn’t, it’s daylight. You’d be dead.”

“You’re right,” he chuckled, raising his eyebrows, “and do you want to know what else is true?”

“Probably not,” she muttered, “but I doubt that’s going to stop you.”

“You need a spanking.”

The infuriating hot blush sprang back to life, her butterflies flew into their fluttering dance, and she stared at him, completely aghast.

“Whaaat?”

“You have an attitude! I don’t know why, but you do, and if you carry it with you to the island, I promise I will spank it

out of you.”

“How dare you!”

She’d sounded righteously indignant, but she couldn’t imagine anything she wanted more. It would be a fantasy fulfilled. A fantasy she’d dreamed of more times than she could count since he’d first whispered the threat in her ear all those months before, but in the fantasy, not only did he spank her, when he was done he pulled her into his arms, covered her with kisses, and told her that he’d been missing her like crazy and Jasmine Juniper meant nothing to him.

“Hey, chill out. I don’t know what your problem is, but get over it. Now I really do have to leave. I’ll see you on the plane.”

“You and Miss Juniper,” she mumbled under her breath, shifting her gaze back to her steering wheel.

“No, she won’t be there.”

Though horrified that he’d heard her, she spun her gaze back to him.

“I don’t understand.”

“She’s busy. She’s accepting an award in Norway, or Sweden, or... someplace over there. Why do you care?”

“I don’t. I, uh, just assumed...”

“What is this thing you have about Jasmine?”

“I don’t have a thing about Jasmine,” she said defensively, “and I thought you had to leave.”

“I do, but this conversation is, shall we say, intriguing.”

“It is? I don’t know why.”

“Perhaps because I haven’t spoken to you since this time last year.”

“Yeah, well, shit happens.”

“There it is.”

“What?”

“Your attitude.”

“I do not have a fucking attitude!”

“Riiiiight,” he drawled, “no fucking attitude.”

“Okay, so maybe I’m a bit testy, but I’ve got a lot on my plate.”

“We’ve all got a lot on our plate.”

“Sure we do,” she groaned, rolling her eyes, “you more than anyone. So much to sample and so little time.”

The sarcasm had been dripping from her voice, and she’d seen his lips purse together. She knew what that meant. He was irritated, then suddenly he was walking around her car, and before she could protest he was climbing into the passenger seat. She stared at him as though vexed, but secretly she prayed he’d clutch her hair, kiss her passionately, and scold her for being so impossible. He didn’t, of course, he just looked at her with a puzzled frown.

“All right, Paige, enough of this. I was going to wait until we were on the island, but now is as good a time as any.”

“For?”

“What is it I did to piss you off?”

“When? Just now? What do you think, Cole?”

“No! Not just now,” Cole said, his frustration causing him to raise his voice.

“Don’t yell at me. You have no right to yell at me.”

“I’m sorry, but you are so damn exasperating.”

“Me? I’m exasperating? Oh, no, no, no! Don’t you dare call *me* exasperating,” Paige bristled. “If anyone deserves that title, it’s you.”

“I’ll spell it out, shall I?”

“What do you mean?”

“Dammit! Paige, will you please stop being such a brat.”

“I’m not!”

“Never mind. This is hopeless,” he grimaced, and as quickly as he’d slipped into her car he was out of it and marching back to his.

“Hey, I thought we’d called a truce,” she called, sticking her head out the window.

“Yeah, so did I,” he called back, “but I forgot I was dealing with a child. When we get to the island I’ll spank you good and hard, then maybe I’ll have a chance at having an adult conversation.”

Shocked, she watched as he slipped quickly behind the wheel of his Porsche, and a moment later, tires squealing, his car roared from the garage. Completely bewildered, wondering what the hell had just happened, she sat completely still.



Driving through Century City, Cole swung up to Sunset Blvd. and followed the winding road toward the 405 freeway. The traffic was surprisingly light, and risking a ticket he drove his expensive machine the way it was designed to be driven, moving at lightning speed, revving it through the gears, and expertly maneuvering around the few cars that appeared before him. He was frustrated, aggravated, and late for his meeting. The aggressive drive was exactly what he needed. Paige was maddening. She had been, and still was, an enigma.

One year before, though she’d been strictly professional through the charity event, at times bordering on aloof, she had responded to his first kiss with a fervor that was startling. When he’d whispered his dark desires into her ear, she’d clung to him, begging to hear more, and he’d been excited at the prospect of carrying out his salaciously decadent threats when they returned to Los Angeles. His hidden closet held all sorts of wicked implements, and he’d fully intended to introduce her to them one by one over many weeks, learning about her body and unlocking the secrets stored in her heart.

During the incredible week they’d spent together she’d wowed him. She’d been like a fish in the warm water, diving in and out of the waves, and she’d been able to hold her breath

and stay submerged for a frighteningly long time. He'd teased her, telling her she was reincarnated from a mermaid, and she'd laughed out loud, heartily agreeing with him. She was smart, so smart he would have offered her a job in his production company if they hadn't been involved, but what he'd found the most appealing about Paige was her sincerity. She'd been genuine, or so he'd thought. For reasons he couldn't fathom, when they'd returned to Los Angeles she had blown him off.

At first he'd thought she was just slammed at work and trying to catch up after being away, but when he'd realized she'd been avoiding him, he assumed he'd offended her, or perhaps might even have a boyfriend. Not one to push he'd let sleeping dogs lie, but now he was beginning to think that Jasmine Juniper was somehow connected to Paige's unexplainable retreat all those months before, but why?

The traffic was slowing, and as he approached the onramp to the freeway he touched the screen on his console. There was only one person who might be able to help, and though Cole didn't like putting people on the spot, he wanted answers.

"Michael Shapiro's office."

"It's Cole Barrington, is Michael there?"

"One moment, Mr. Barrington."

"Hi, Cole? What's up?"

"I'm going to apologize in advance," Cole said as he hit the freeway and zipped across to the fast lane. "I'm about to ask you an awkward question."

"Not a problem. I live for awkward questions. They're my bread and butter. Go ahead."

"Paige Brooks."

"What about her?"

"I know you two are close."

"Uh-oh. This really is going to be awkward. What do you want to know?"

“Last year, Paige and I, we spent a week together. Did you know that?”

“Can I plead the fifth?”

“So that’s a yes. The thing is, when we got back to L.A. she blew me off. I didn’t push. If she didn’t want to see me again, fine, but I talked to her just a few minutes ago and I swear that girl is furious with me and I have no idea why. Do you?”

“Ouch.”

“Is that a yes?”

“Um, that’s a possibly.”

“Do you have any idea how annoying this is? She won’t tell me, and you’re being just as mysterious. What the hell?”

“She’s a woman. Annoying comes with the territory.”

“Let me ask you something else. Does her attitude have anything to do with Jasmine Juniper?”

“I’m pleading the fifth again.”

“Goddammit, Michael! Why would Paige care about Jasmine? Do they know each other?”

“Not to my knowledge, though...”

“Please, give me something, anything.”

“Do you really like Paige, I mean, sincerely, not just—?”

“Yes, absolutely,” Cole said, interrupting him. “I was totally into her, truth be told I still am, and if she’s not dating anyone I’d like to give it another shot. We had a great time, but when we got back here I was suddenly a leper. As I said, I just saw her and we had a bizarre conversation. She is seriously ticked off but I have no idea why.”

“You need to ask her.”

“Michael! Aren’t you listening? I just did! She’s impossible!”

“Yeah, I know, and again, she’s a woman!”

“You’re not helping,” Cole said impatiently.

“Sorry. Listen, Cole, I’m not going to betray anything she told me in confidence, but I will tell you this much.”

“Like I said, anything, please.”

“She works for me, and what does my company do?”

“Public relations.”

“Right, so we’re constantly reading the trades, the gossip columns, the magazines, keeping up with all the gossip. It’s an important part of our job.”

“Yeah, so... ooh, she sees photographs of me with Jasmine all the time.”

“I would say so, and you and Jasmine are known as a pair.”

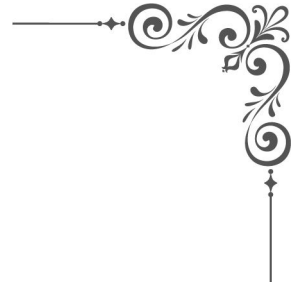
“But we’re not. I’m with others too, you know that, hell, everyone knows that.”

“I’m sure you are,” Michael said with a sigh, “and that wouldn’t have helped your cause much either. You do know you’ve got a helluva reputation.”

“Now it’s my turn to plead the fifth,” Cole replied. “Thanks, Michael. I’ve got the gist, though I’m sure there has to be more to Paige’s weird attitude than just seeing me in a bunch of gossip column photos, but at least I have a starting point now.”

“Bye, Cole, and good luck. You’re going to need it.”

Ending the call, Cole accelerated, crossing several lanes of traffic so he wouldn’t drive past his off-ramp, and as he exited and headed toward Ventura Blvd., he decided no matter what it took, Paige was going to answer his questions. If that meant putting her over his knee, baring her backside, and spanking her, so be it.



Chapter Three



In spite of her encounter with Cole and the chaos of getting everything ready for the last-minute trip, Paige had slept surprisingly well. Zipping around her modest home drinking coffee, talking on the phone, and packing last-minute items, she decided it must have been because she was so relieved Jasmine Juniper would not be on the plane or at the island. While it was true she couldn't stand seeing Cole and Jasmine together, she also found the actress incredibly annoying.

The private plane that would be flying Paige, Cole, and other VIPs to the remote private island was leaving from LAX, and while she would be driving herself there, the celebrities were being picked up by limousines. The island was called Sandman Cove and was owned by Howard Hickson, a wealthy British philanthropist. He used his tropical paradise for many of his charity events, and being enamored with Hollywood he made sure they were attended by many showbiz celebrities. Paige liked Howard, though she, along with most everyone else outside of his famous guests, was required to call him Mr. Hickson.

Checking her watch for the umpteenth time, a satisfied smile curled the corners of her mouth. She was ahead of schedule, but the L.A. traffic was always a question mark and she liked to give herself extra time. She had just loaded her suitcase into the trunk of her car when she heard the distant sound of her cell phone. It was in her bag, which was sitting on the kitchen counter, and running back inside she pulled it out; the screen told her it was Cole. Her heart skipped. Why was he calling? She'd be seeing him in less than an hour.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Paige, listen, I've got a problem."

She rolled her eyes. Of course he did, and she'd known it the second she'd seen his name on her phone, but problems were Paige's forte. Solving problems was what she did.

“You sound a bit anxious,” she said in her ‘stay calm, don’t panic’ voice. “Just take a breath and tell me what’s going on.”

“Apparently you haven’t seen the news.”

“No, I haven’t, why?” she asked, running into her living room and turning on her TV.

“There’s a huge accident on Pacific Coast Highway. I’ve been sitting in the same spot for almost thirty minutes. I’m not going to make it.”

Cole lived in Malibu. The fastest route to LAX was along Pacific Coast Highway and through Santa Monica, but if the famous road had an issue the only alternative was to drive over one of the canyons to the 101 freeway. It added at least an hour to the trip.

“Shit,” she muttered, staring at her television screen. The snake of cars was backed up for miles.

“What do you want me to do, Paige? Should I take a commercial flight later today?”

“Hold on, let me think for a second. Okay, tell the driver to turn back and take you to Pepperdine University. They have a helipad. I’ll either arrange a helicopter to pick you up and get you to LAX, or I’ll send you on to Camarillo if I can arrange a plane from there. It’ll be one or the other. If it’s Camarillo I’ll meet you at the terminal.”

“Fantastic. Thanks, Paige. You’re the best. Wow. I mean, you are, really.”

“No problem. Back to you shortly.”

The decision would be Michael’s, but even as she waited for her boss to pick up the phone she knew what he’d say. It would be less expensive and more efficient to have Cole leave from the small, private airfield in Camarillo. That meant she’d be on the plane alone with him, and how she felt about that she wasn’t sure, though the thought was making her stomach churn.

“Definitely Camarillo,” Michael said immediately. “I’ll get it sorted out from here. You hit the road, and don’t worry

about Erica. She can take care of things at LAX.”

“I know she can. I have every confidence in her.”

“She’ll be thrilled,” Michael chuckled. “Her first time alone handling our big-name clients.”

“I remember that feeling,” Paige said, a smile crossing her lips. “It’s scary but exciting.”

“Call me when you reach the airfield and I’ll give you the information for the flight to Sandman Cove.”

“Okay, will do.”

She’d been pacing as she’d talked to him, and ending the call she dropped down on the couch and watched the dramatic scene on Pacific Coast Highway. News helicopters were circling, ambulances, fire trucks and highway patrol cars were everywhere, and the tangled wreckage of several cars suggested a deadly collision. It was a mess.

“Thank God you weren’t in that,” she murmured, wondering how close Cole’s limo had been to the accident. “Life is so unpredictable.”

A shiver rattled through her, and taking a breath she called him.

“Camarillo,” she said as he answered. “Obviously I’ll be taking the freeway so you’ll probably beat me there, but Michael’s arranging everything from the office. If you have any hiccups just call him.”

“Great, so, I guess this means we’ll be flying together, as in just the two of us.”

“I guess it does.”

“Funny how things work out sometimes.”

“Yeah,” she said quietly, feeling a ridiculous blush cross her face yet again. “I was just thinking something like that.”

“See you soon.”

“Yep, see you soon.”

The phone still in her hand, she rose from the couch and walked back into her bedroom to do a last-minute check, but she knew it was more about taking a moment to gather her thoughts before getting behind the wheel of her car. She felt strange. Things had happened so fast. The last-minute news that she was going to the island, then running into Cole in the reception area, the scene with him in the parking garage, and now she would be flying with him. If he turned on the charm, would she be able to resist? She had to, and her pride would make sure of it.

“Fool me once, shame on you, fool me twice, shame on me,” she mumbled as her eyes scanned her room, then telling herself she needed to stop procrastinating and leave, she moved swiftly back to the kitchen, threw her phone in her bag, and hurried out to the car.

It was late morning, and outside of the usual bottleneck where she had to transition from the 10 freeway to the 405, the traffic was mercifully light. Accelerating and maneuvering across to the fast lane she cruised at seventy miles per hour until she was descending into the San Fernando Valley. There she would pick up the Ventura Freeway that would take her into Camarillo. The drive was sailing by at a remarkably fast clip, but as she exited the highway and made her way to the airfield her heart was thumping. Pulling into the parking area she spied a sleek black limousine, but the airport was frequented by the wealthy so it wasn't an unusual sight, though the limo could be Cole's, and it was possible Cole had asked his driver to wait because there was a problem.

Pulling up a short distance away and climbing from her car, she walked briskly inside and spotted Cole immediately. He looked as handsome as ever, but she felt a sudden pang of jealousy. He was chatting with a beautiful, elegantly dressed young woman.

“Hi, Cole,” she said, feigning her brightest smile as she approached. “Any issues?”

“None, we're all set, and I've arranged our flight to Sandman Cove from Miami. Remember Jack? The guy who took us on that day trip last year?”

“Yes, sure, of course,” Paige replied, the memory of the magical day sending a warm shiver through her body.

“He’ll be taking us.”

“It sounds so exciting,” the young woman said enthusiastically. “I’ve never been to a private island.”

Paige bristled. Could the girl have been any more transparent?

“It’s like a regular island but with less traffic,” Cole joked. “Amanda, this is Paige. Paige is otherwise known as Superwoman.”

“He’s exaggerating, I’m just good at my job,” Paige said modestly, “and while I’d like to stop and chat, if the plane’s ready we need to get on board.”

“It is,” said a man marching toward them. “I assume you’re Miss Brooks? I’m Captain McClure. Do you have any luggage?”

“I do. I have a suitcase in my car. I’ll be right back.”

As she turned away and walked into the parking lot, glancing over her shoulder she saw Amanda hand Cole a business card. She wondered if he kept them all in a black leather folder in his desk drawer, or perhaps locked away in his safe, or did he toss them in a bowl on his coffee table and pull one out when he had a free night and wanted company? Cursing herself for caring she hurried to her car, and opening the trunk she pulled out her suitcase and set it on the ground. Stepping around to the passenger door to grab her carryon bag, she caught sight of Cole escorting Amanda to the limo. He was only there a moment before the driver appeared, and after the attractive young woman had climbed into the back seat, Cole happened to look up and catch Paige’s gaze. She managed a smile before returning her attention back to her bag, but as she pulled out her phone and called Michael she saw Cole had started walking toward her.

“Is everything okay?” Michael asked as he answered her call.

“Hi, yes, fine. I’m at Camarillo. Cole just told me you spoke to him.”

“Yes. He has a friend who will be flying you over to Sandman Cove, but prepare yourself. It’s a small private seaplane, not like the one you were on before. It’s just a four-seater.”

“Yikes, that is small.”

“It should be fun. Cole said when it lands you think you’re going underwater.”

“Good thing I know I could swim out if I had to.”

“This is true,” Michael chuckled. “Call me when you get to Miami.”

“For what, a final farewell before we take off in a tin can?”

“You are a funny girl,” he chuckled, then becoming serious, he added, “How are you? Are you coping?”

“Yes, yes, no problem,” she said quickly, unable to say anything else with Cole just a few feet away. “I’ll talk to you soon.”

Ending the call, she looked up at Cole, now wearing aviator-style sunglasses. It was annoying. She couldn’t read him, and he had her at a disadvantage.

“You ready?” he asked, picking up her suitcase as she locked her car.

“Yep, but I can get that.”

“Of course you can, but I’m a gentleman, so you won’t.”

A retort was on the tip of her tongue, but swallowing it back she muttered a thank you and fell into step beside him.

“Have you ever been on a small seaplane?”

“Not a small one,” she replied, “but I’m guessing you have.”

“Sure, plenty of times. I was shooting on Kodiak Island a few years ago, and people have them parked behind their

homes like cars. I had a few hair-raising flights, but if you get in trouble you can glide down and land on the water.”

“Why does this not reassure me?”

“It should, and hey, I had lessons. If Jack has a heart attack I can take over.”

“Again, why does this not reassure me?”

Cole threw back his head and laughed out loud.

“I promise I’ll only jump into the fray if it’s a dire emergency, but that won’t happen. Jack’s as fit as a fiddle and a fantastic pilot.”

“How many times do I have to say it; this does not reassure me,” she quipped, staring at her reflection in his glasses.

They were approaching the Gulfstream jet, and climbing inside they were met with a luxurious and comfortable cabin. They settled into their seats and the pilot walked up and chatted with them for a few minutes before disappearing into the cockpit, then the flight attendant stepped forward and introduced herself.

“I’m Susie. What can I get you after we’re airborne, Miss Brooks?”

“I’ll take a shot of vodka right now.”

“Make that two,” Cole added, and as the attendant walked away, he removed his glasses and looked across the narrow aisle.

“Paige, you know—”

“I do, I know plenty of things!” she said sharply, then bit her tongue. Why had she just snapped at him? “Sorry,” she said quickly. “I guess I’m a bit on edge. I need that drink.”

“Among other things,” he murmured.

She was going to ask what he meant, then changed her mind. A weird silence descended, but only for a moment; much to Paige’s relief Susie returned with their drinks.

“Here you are, two shots,” the flight attendant declared, placing their glasses on their armrests.

“Thanks,” Paige said gratefully as she picked hers up. Cole immediately did the same, but lifted his in the air and leaned across the narrow aisle.

“To a successful event.”

“Sure, I’ll drink to that.”

Downing the liquor, she let out a heavy sigh, handed the glass back to the waiting attendant, then turned her attention to fastening her seat belt.

“It’s only natural you’re a bit rattled,” Cole said kindly. “Last-minute things are always a bit unnerving.”

“Some more than others,” she said under her breath, then knowing he probably would have heard her, she added, “I mean, the last thing I expected was to be racing around trying to get ready for a Howard Hickson event, so yeah, the last twenty-four hours have been crazy.”

“When we’re airborne I’d like to move to the couch. I really do need to talk to you, and I’d rather not have to raise my voice across this aisle.”

“Talk about what?” she asked, his request making her stomach tumble.

“You’re a smart girl,” he replied, raising his eyebrows, his blue eyes boring into hers. “I’m sure you know.”

“Fine, whatever.”

“There’s that attitude!”

“Don’t start,” she said with a frown as the plane began to move. “Things are going okay right now.”

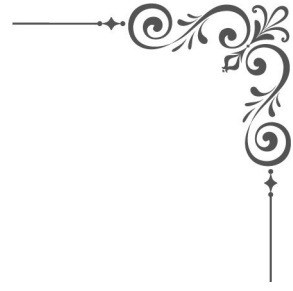
“Hey, drop the edge and we’re good.”

She held his look for a moment, then shaking her head she turned her eyes and gazed out the tiny window. There’d be no getting out of it. She’d soon be telling him what she’d witnessed in his office a year before. If he made some lame excuse, then what? Another argument? As the question hung

in her head she noticed a woman wearing yellow overalls pushing a cleaning cart. She stopped in front of the terminal and began wiping bird droppings off the window. The gleaming jet was reflected in the glass, and abruptly, with the impact of a sudden earthquake, Paige had an epiphany.

She was deeply blessed. While that poor woman was washing windows, she was seated on a private jet about to be whisked away to a tropical island. She had a fabulous career, worked for a man she adored, and had wonderful friends. She led a life many would envy. Everyone suffered through a broken heart at some stage of their life. She had no business feeling sorry for herself.

The realization washed over her, and as the plane continued to roll down the tarmac, she felt better than she had in a long time. Was she still hurt and angry? Yes, but it wasn't all-consuming, and looking back at the handsome man she still loved, it dawned on her that perhaps she should listen to him and not be guarded and defensive. Maybe, just maybe, he would say something worth hearing.



Chapter Four



The plane lifted into the air, quickly gaining altitude, and as Cole stared down at the City of Angels dropping away beneath him, he knew the right time to speak to Paige would reveal itself. It was a four hour and thirty minute flight to Miami, there was no rush, and it was obvious she was wired. He'd give her a while to chill out.

“Would you like your appetizers here, over on the couch, or would you like to sit at the dining table?” Susie asked as she appeared from the galley.

“Paige? What do you think?”

Paige too had been staring out her window, and as she turned and looked back at him, he thought she seemed more at ease. Was the vodka kicking in? Flashing back to their week together he recalled she didn't have to drink very much for alcohol to have an effect.

“The dining table,” she said firmly. “Civility will reign on this trip.”

Though he could have construed her comment as a sardonic retort there was no sarcasm in her voice; she was sincere.

“Then if I may, after you, madam,” Cole offered, rising to his feet and making a dramatic gesture with his arm.

It was only a few steps to the highly polished, burlled walnut table, and as they sat down, Susie quickly set up the table, then disappeared into the galley for only a moment before returning with a platter of tasty-looking morsels.

“Miss Brooks, can I get you something else to drink?”

“A glass of champagne, please.”

“Champagne!” Cole repeated. “Interesting.”

“And for you, Mr. Barrington?”

“Paige, are we celebrating?”

“I am,” she said with a wide smile.

“Then I’ll join you. Make that two, Susie.”

The attendant moved away, and tilting his head to the side, intrigued by Paige’s sudden change in mood, Cole fixed her with a steady gaze.

“Okay, so tell me. What’s the occasion?”

“Look at us,” she declared, waving her arm in the air. “We’re flying on a private jet on our way to a private island to have a fabulous time and raise oodles of money for charity. Excuse me... several charities. I’m celebrating my extremely good fortune, and you should too. You’re one of the hottest producers in the business. I mean, wow, what’s not to celebrate and be thankful for?”

“You’re absolutely right,” Cole exclaimed. “Funny thing, I was saying something just like that to Amanda.”

“Amanda?”

“The girl at the airfield? She was moaning about something completely insignificant, and I pointed out how extremely fortunate she is.”

“Really? She wasn’t a stranger?”

“I know her brother, Keith Somerset.”

“Wait, you mean the Somerset family? The people who own Somerset Cinemas?”

“Yep. They’re worth a ridiculous amount of money, and Amanda was bitching about her car. Spoiled young women, they make me nuts, and she’s one of the worst. Talk about a princess.”

He looked irritated and Paige was surprised. He’d seemed so friendly toward the young woman. Flirtatious even.

“What?” he asked, seeing her puzzled frown.

“Nothing.”

“It’s not nothing, tell me.”

Paige wasn't sure what to say, but was rescued when Susie reappeared with their champagne flutes, along with a basket of bread rolls and butter.

"We'll buzz you when we're ready for something else," Cole said politely.

"Of course, Mr. Barrington."

"Ask your question," Cole insisted as Susie returned to the galley. "Why are you surprised to hear that?"

"You were being so nice to her. I thought..."

"You thought what? That I was interested in her?"

"Well, yeah, and she—"

"She...?"

"It's nothing."

"Paige, please finish."

"I just noticed she gave you her card... or a piece of paper. I assumed..."

"What should I have done? Been rude and said no thank you?"

"Sorry, it's none of my business," Paige murmured, feeling her face flush.

"I'm courteous to everyone I meet. It's who I am. I have no patience with rude people, and I certainly don't intend to be one of them."

"No, of course not. That's one of the things I used to admire about you."

"Not anymore?"

"Yes, yes, of course," she said hastily.

He paused. This was *the right time*. He just hadn't expected it to happen so soon.

"You look like you have something else to say," she remarked, sensing he'd been about to speak then hesitated.

"I'm thinking about it."

“Go ahead. I’m in the mood for a chat,” she said, suddenly wanting the elephant between them to be acknowledged.

“Okay,” he began, lowering his voice and leaning over the table. “I have a question, and all I want is the truth. I won’t get upset.”

His voice had taken on a firm tone, not unkind, but firm, and as she looked into his determined blue eyes, though she felt her pulse tick up, her epiphany had put her in a much better frame of mind.

“Go ahead. What is it you’re wondering about?”

“I’m sure you already know,” he began. “Why did you blow me off after we returned from the island last year? I thought we’d had a great time. Was there... is there... someone else? At the time it was the only thing I could think of that made any kind of sense.”

“No, there was no one else and, uh, there still isn’t,” she said slowly.

“Then...?”

“It became apparent you had other interests.”

“Other interests? What does that mean?”

“Other fish in the sea. What do you think it means?”

“Don’t get testy.”

“Sorry,” she said quickly, wondering why she had.

“Let me get this straight. We had a fabulous time, we came back, I called you, but you didn’t want to talk to me because you thought I was more interested in seeing other women. Is that what you’re saying?”

“Yes, and, uh, one woman in particular.”

“Why would you think that?”

She stared at him. He *had* been seeing someone else. She’d seen it firsthand, and his ongoing relationship with Jasmine was evident from the constant parade of photographs in the showbiz magazines.

“Paige, what was it that made you assume such a thing?”

Reaching for her glass of champagne, she took a large swallow. She had to tell him what she'd seen, but the thought of relaying the story was making her nervous, and the memory was beginning to upset her. Her calm and happy mood was beginning to evaporate.

“You need to tell me,” Cole said softly. “Whatever it is, it's really bothering you, and obviously it's been bothering you since... well... since back then.”

“I, uh... I'm not sure I can.”

There was suddenly a hot lump in the back of her throat, and unable to look at him, she dropped her eyes.

“What the hell is going on? What did I do, what did I say? My God, Paige, what is it?”

“If I tell you, you'll make up some excuse, and then—”

“An excuse? What do you mean, and then? And then what?”

“I don't know,” she said hoarsely. “I don't know. That's why I don't want to tell you. I don't know.”

“This is crazy,” Cole muttered. “You're becoming very upset, and you're talking in riddles. What am I supposed to have done?”

“There's no ‘supposed to have’ about it,” she snapped, darting her eyes up. “I saw you, I saw you with my own eyes. Not you exactly, but—”

“Saw what?”

“Jasmine Juniper.”

“Jasmine? Where, what was she doing? What was I doing?”

“It was only two days! Two fucking days after we got back,” she hissed. “I swung by your office to say hi. Your secretary was gone, I pushed open the door and I saw her.”

“Saw who? Jasmine?”

“Yes, fucking Jasmine peeling off her clothes and walking into your bathroom. I heard you calling her. You said, and I quote, *the water’s hot, Jasmine. Whenever you’re ready.* I’ll never forget those words as long as I live.”

The unexpected speech had tumbled out of her, and though she’d tried to contain herself, the raw emotion she’d suppressed for so long had boiled over. She sat on her hands, convinced they’d be trembling if she attempted to reach for her glass to take a much-needed drink, and though his eyes were still locked on hers she knew his mind was elsewhere. She could see him trying to remember the moment. His frown had deepened. He was rummaging through his memory banks, then she saw it. The flicker of realization. Leaning back in his chair, he lifted his glass and took a long swallow. Why wasn’t he saying anything? Why wasn’t he giving her an explanation?

“So?” she demanded, unable to stand the deathly silence. “Nothing to say?”

“Oh, Paige, I have a lot to say, but nothing you want to hear.”

“What? Now I’m the one that’s confused.”

“Tell me,” he said calmly, staring at her with an impenetrable gaze, “during our week on the island, did I say anything to you like, Paige, will you be my one and only? Did I say, please don’t see other men when we get back? Did I suggest that I’d like us to be exclusive? Did we have any conversations like that? Any conversations at all?”

A slow burn began to crawl up her neck and over her face, and unable to look at him, she pulled her eyes away and sent them out the window to the infinite blue sky.

“I’m waiting. Did we?”

“No.”

The simple word was all she could manage, and it had been barely audible.

“And how long had I known you? Two weeks?”

She wanted to say something else, anything, but her throat was tight and she couldn't seem to get a grip. She'd imagined the conversation a hundred times, but never had it played itself out like this. This was a nightmare.

"Two weeks, but only one week that we were together," he continued, "so after one week I'm supposed to return to L.A., cut off my ties with other women, and keep myself available to you, and only you. Is that what you expected?"

"I don't know," she managed, mumbling her answer, "it just seemed..."

"Think about this for a moment. You have a very dear friend, someone you've known and been close to for years. Not exclusively, mind you, never exclusively. You go away for a charity event, meet a guy you really like, have a great time, and when you return home, that very dear friend is excited to see you. Would you say no? Would you call the person you just met for permission?"

"That's a weird thing to ask me."

Her brain was started to function again, and reaching for her glass, to her surprise, she found there was no tremble in her hand.

"No, it's not weird, it's a perfectly reasonable question and I want an answer. Would you have checked with me before going out with him?"

"Probably not, no, but I might not have gone either."

"What would you have told him? Sorry, I just spent a wonderful week with someone and even though you're my dear friend and have been for years, I don't want to see you anymore. Is that what you would have done?"

"This isn't fair," she said angrily. "You're twisting everything."

"I'm not twisting anything. I'm trying to point out that you and I had no claim on each other. Our friendship, or whatever label you want to put on it, was just starting. I wanted to see you again... very much! I wanted to get to know you, I wanted to see what might develop between us, but you never gave me

a chance. Jasmine and I, yes, we're close, but we're not monogamous, we've never been monogamous. In fact, just for the record, she was in my office that day because she was in the middle of a shoot and she didn't have time to go home to shower and change before going to a lunch meeting. If you hadn't jumped to conclusions, if you'd just let things develop, if you—dammit!”

“You said you wouldn't get upset!”

“You're right, and I'm sorry,” Cole said gravely, running his fingers through his hair, “but I sure as hell wasn't expecting to hear that.”

“I don't know what to say. I feel really stupid right now.”

“That's because there's nothing you can say, there's nothing I can say. It is what it is.”

“So... now what?”

“Honestly, I have no idea, and I think I need a proper drink,” he muttered, lifting his armrest to buzz for Susie, then raising his head, he added, “That's why you've had such an attitude? Because of that?”

“It wasn't exactly a wonderful thing to walk in on,” Paige said defensively. “I mean, good grief.”

“What can I get you, Mr. Barrington?”

Susie's quick appearance made Paige feel even worse. Had she overheard their entire conversation? The cabin was small. The galley was just a hair's-breadth away. It was embarrassing.

“Whiskey, straight, a double,” Cole said briskly.

As Susie left them, Paige didn't know what to do with herself. She wanted to leave, but she wanted to stay; she was hungry, but her stomach was in a knot; she wanted to cry, but not in front of him; she felt guilty, but she didn't know why; and impulsively grabbing a roll from the basket, she raised it to her lips to take a bite, but for reasons she absolutely couldn't fathom, she threw it at him.

“What the hell?” he barked as it hit him on the cheek.
“What are you doing?”

“I know I’m not perfect,” she exclaimed, jumping to her feet, “but you’re not either, and you have no right to judge me. You’re not looking at this from my point of view at all. You’re right, I had no claim on you, but seeing that still hurt like hell, and you’re a fucking asshole for not understanding that. You’re a selfish, arrogant asshole, Cole Barrington. Screw you and the fucking plane or car or whatever it is you rode in on.”

Storming away from him, almost knocking Susie over as she returned with Cole’s drink, Paige plonked herself into a seat at the very front of the cabin.

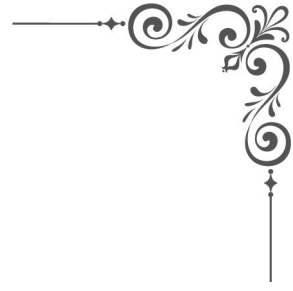
“Can I get you anything?”

Susie’s timid but kind voice made her look up. The girl looked worried, and Paige knew if she were in Susie’s shoes she’d be worried too.

“Vodka, lots of it, on ice, leave the bottle, and if I fall asleep don’t wake me up.”

“Right away.”

Fighting her fury, Paige closed her eyes and leaned her seat back. In all the times she’d imagined telling Cole what she’d seen that day, she’d never imagined it would end in a fight. A horrible fight. She’d foolishly thought they’d end up in each other’s arms, but now things were a mess, and how she’d get through the next few days she had no idea.



Chapter Five



Paige knew she was in the never-never-land between waking and sleeping, and though she was vaguely aware of the drone of the jet's engines, in her dreamlike state she was lying in a hammock in the warm sun and Cole was speaking to her softly, telling her he'd been a complete idiot.

"I'm sorry I reacted so badly. I was upset because we wasted a year. I wish you'd talked to me."

His palm was smoothing itself over her face and she sighed happily. It was sensuous and comforting, and as she turned her head and stared back at him she realized she was naked.

"I need you. I've needed you for a year," she whispered. "I've been aching for what you offered. I've been craving it. I crave you."

"What I offered?"

"Yes, you know, those things you whispered to me about. Remember all those salacious threats you made?"

"Oh, you mean taking charge of you, how I'll spank you and tie you up and tease you into oblivion," he whispered, his breath tickling her ear. "Those things."

"Ooh, Cole. I've been dreaming about it for so long. I'm so mad at you for not pursuing me more. Why did you give up after only two phone calls?"

"I don't chase, and two was one too many, but I've not stopped thinking about you, Paige."

The hammock began to rock, gently at first, then she wasn't in the hammock anymore, she was lying on the hot ground and the sun was beating down on her. She could feel it turning her skin red, and she couldn't see Cole anymore. Raising her hand, she tried to shield her eyes as she searched for him.

“Cole? Where are you? Water, please, please, I’m dying. Bring me water.”

The sun was blinding, and unable to stand it she squeezed her eyes shut, then everything went black. A hand was shaking her shoulder. She could hear Cole’s voice again, but it was far away, so very far away. She called to him, but she couldn’t hear herself, and she realized no sound was coming from her lips.

“Paige? Paige? I’m right here.”

With a great effort she slowly blinked open her eyes. For a moment she didn’t know where she was and a flash of panic seized her, but as she spun her head around and saw Cole’s face she abruptly remembered she was flying to the charity event at Sandman Cove.

“We’ll be landing soon,” he said with a warm smile. “I thought you might want something to eat and some time to freshen up.”

“Ooh, my gosh, I feel so weird. Water, I need water.”

“I’ll get you some.”

“I have it,” Susie declared, appearing beside him. “Would you like some coffee or tea, Miss Brooks? Anything to eat?”

“Tea, that would be great,” she muttered, trying to clear the fog in her head.

“And some bread and marmalade if you have it,” Cole added, “assuming you still like that, Paige.”

“Ooh, yes, please,” she replied as she struggled to sit upright, then taking the glass of water she swallowed it with large gulps. She felt a hundred years old and her head was pulsing.

“I feel as if I’ve slept for a week,” she muttered, “and my stupid head...”

“Would you like some aspirin?” Cole asked softly. “Apparently you downed a rather generous amount of vodka.”

“Yeah, I did. Wait... why are you being so nice to me?”

“Time to renew the truce. I have no desire to fight with you.”

“Yes, please. I don’t want to fight with you either, and I don’t have energy even if I did.”

“Your hot tea and warm bread is ready,” Susie declared. “I just need to set up your table.”

“How long before we land?”

“About forty-five minutes. Plenty of time to have something to eat if you want it.”

“I know it’s late afternoon,” Cole said, “but I’d love some scrambled eggs with tomatoes, and cup of coffee.”

“Coming right up, Mr. Barrington. What about you, Miss Brooks?”

“Sure. The same for me.”

As Susie disappeared to cook up their light meal, Paige devoured the bread and marmalade and washed it down with her tea, then turned around and looked across at Cole, who had settled back into his seat.

“Why were you crouched beside me?”

“You were talking in your sleep. I thought you needed something.”

“I was? What did I say?”

“I’ll tell you later.”

“Should I be worried?”

“Absolutely,” he winked. “You gave away State secrets.”

He was wearing a wry grin and had a mysterious glint in his eye, and though she tried to recall the dream, all she could remember was being naked in a hammock.

“Ah, great,” he murmured, spying Susie leaving the galley.

“I’m hungry too; cups of tea will help my poor head.”

By the time they finished their meal the plane was beginning its descent, and as Susie cleared away their plates,

Cole and Paige gazed out their respective windows at the scene below. It was a crystal clear late afternoon; the sun was shining and the water was azure blue.

“Looks like we’ll have a great flight to the island,” Cole remarked. “I’m sure you’ll enjoy the seaplane.”

“To be honest, a small prop would not be my first choice, but I’ll do my best to be brave!”

A few minutes later the jet touched down and rolled across to the small terminal building that serviced the private planes. Disembarking and walking inside, they immediately spotted Jack’s craggy face.

“Hey there, good to see you again!” Cole declared, moving quickly forward and shaking his hand. “Do you remember Paige?”

“How could I forget such a beautiful lady? Nice to see you again, Paige.”

“Thanks, Jack.”

“You folks ready? Got much luggage?”

“Just a couple of suitcases,” Cole replied, “and here they come.”

A porter had collected their bags from the jet, and Jack led them out to a minivan, loading the bags as Cole and Paige climbed in. Moments later they were on their way, and as Jack began chatting with Cole, Paige gazed out the window at the gorgeous day. In spite of their fight she sensed that somehow she and Cole had found an even keel. Was there any hope, even a glimmer, the trip might rekindle their flame? It had once burned with a white-hot heat. She ached to have his arms around her again, to have his mouth on hers, to feel his hands roam over her body. Was there such a thing as a second chance, or was she dreaming a dream that could never become reality?

“Have you ever been on a seaplane?” Jack asked, breaking into her wishful thinking.

“Not a small one.”

“It’s a bit noisy, but the takeoff and landings are fun,” he declared, turning into a parking lot. “We have to park here and take your bags to the end of that jetty.”

Looking out the window she saw several planes parked alongside a row of small piers, and as Cole climbed from the car she followed apprehensively.

“Don’t look so worried,” Jack grinned as he collected their luggage. “I fly around the islands all the time. Have for years.”

He started striding up the pier, and purposely lingering, Paige touched Cole’s arm.

“Cole, it’s so tiny. Are you sure about this?”

“Absolutely.”

“Maybe we should take a boat.”

“Okay, you ready?” Jack called, standing by the open door of his aircraft.

“I am,” Cole replied. “What about you, Paige?”

She paused and looked up at him. His eyes were merry, and there seemed to be no residual anger from their battle. It was almost as if it hadn’t happened.

“Paige? The plane? Are you ready?”

“Um…”

“You can always find a commercial flight into Nassau then grab a boat,” he suggested, “but I’m going with Jack.”

Cole was oozing confidence, and she decided if he wasn’t concerned she shouldn’t be either. Cole Barrington might be a risk-taker, but he wasn’t reckless.

“Sure. Okay. What the heck.”

Approaching the plane, Cole gestured for her to enter ahead of him, and though she attempted to appear cavalier, as she climbed inside the tiny compartment she felt a fresh wave of fear.

“Don’t you get blown around by the winds?”

“Sure, but it’s calm today,” Jack said, shooting her a reassuring smile as he climbed into the pilot’s seat. “Don’t you fret. This is a great little craft. Her name’s Betsy, and she’s seen me through a lotta years.”

“Oh, great, so it’s old.”

“Don’t insult her,” Cole scolded with a grin. “You’ll hurt her feelings.”

“Betsy’s not old, she’s experienced,” Jack chuckled. “You two buckle up and let me know when you’re settled?”

“We’re all set,” Cole called back, locking his belt in place.

“Speak for yourself,” Paige whispered. “Sorry, but I’ve never felt less settled in my life.”

“Like I said, don’t worry about the noise. She’s kinda loud,” Jack yelled as he started up the engine, and as he began talking on his radio, Paige grabbed Cole’s arm.

“Oh, my God, what the hell am I doing? Is it too late to change my mind? I’m, uh, freaking out.”

“Hey, you’re a fish, remember,” Cole said, taking her hand and giving it a squeeze. “Nothing’s going to happen, but if it does we’ll glide down and land on the water. You’ll be fine. You’re a fish. Jack and I will be the ones who’ll need help.”

“Actually, that does make me feel better. Thanks.”

Cole was absolutely right. She was an outstanding swimmer, and if she could have found a way to turn her talent into a lucrative career she would have jumped at it. The plane began to move, and as Jack taxied away from the wharf, water sprayed up the sides.

“This is so weird,” she mumbled, but a moment later she felt her fear begin to change into excitement, and when they lifted into the air, though her heart was still racing, she broke into a smile.

“You’re right,” she shouted, “this is kind of fun.”

“I told you,” Cole laughed. “You have nothing to worry about. Enjoy it!”

She stared into his bright blue eyes. His attitude toward her had completely changed. His mood was upbeat and relaxed. It was almost as if they hadn't had their big fight. It felt good, and she wasn't about to question it, at least, not yet, and it was too noisy for any real conversation. Dropping her eyes to the turquoise water she could see manta rays and other sea life beneath the surface. It was an amazing sight, but suddenly the plane began to bank.

"Cole, I thought it was a straight shot."

"I did too," he said with a frown. "Maybe there's other air traffic; oh, wait, look."

Following Cole's pointed finger, she stared past Jack through the front windows; a gigantic cloud was in their path.

"Holy shit, what the hell is that?"

"Something we don't want to fly through. Stay here."

She heard the worry in his voice, and as he unbuckled his seat belt and moved forward she followed suit.

"I said, stay here."

"Screw that, I want to hear this too."

"You need—"

"Never mind what I need, go on," she said impatiently.

It was only a few feet closer, but as they kneeled behind Jack and stared through the windows, Paige thought the cloud looked much larger and definitely more ominous.

"I take it we're going around that beast," Cole said, having to shout above the din of the engine.

"You bet. That monster is a plane cruncher."

"You didn't know about it when we left?"

"Nope, but I wouldn't expect to."

"I don't understand."

"My God, it's massive," Paige exclaimed, interrupting them as a surge of fear sent a shiver through her body. "It seems like it's getting closer. Why can't we get past it?"

“What did you mean, Jack?” Cole pressed. “Why wouldn’t you have been warned?”

“You know this is the Bermuda Triangle, right?”

“Yeah. What are you saying?”

“That devil of a cloud is the reason behind the weird stuff that’s happened out here; at least, that’s my theory. It appears out of nowhere, pilots call it in, then it’s gone, or there’s a cloud, but it’s just a regular nothing, and believe me, there’s nothing regular about it.”

“You’re kidding. Why haven’t I ever heard about this?”

“It’s kept quiet. It’d scare the tourists away.”

“You’re not serious,” Paige muttered. “Please tell me this is a really bad joke.”

“No joke, and if we were on the water it’d look like a fog bank.”

“Wait a second,” Paige said anxiously, her fear beginning to turn into panic. “Are you saying it’s not a cloud, it’s not fog? Then what is it?”

“I dunno. I haven’t seen one in a few years and I’m not happy to be seeing it now. It carries some kinda current that messes up all the instruments. Right now I’m flying by eye and I have no radio. Everything went all cockeyed the minute that damn thing appeared.”

Cole couldn’t help but notice Jack’s voice was growing higher in pitch. The man was scared.

“But you’ve flown around here for years. You know where we are, right?”

“Yep, but I can feel the plane fighting that thing. Damn...”

“What do you mean, fighting it?” Paige pressed. “How can you fight a cloud?”

“This sounds crazy, but it’s like a giant magnet and it’s trying to pull us in. I’m going to take us lower. Maybe that’ll help.”

The plane began to descend, but the mysterious cloud seemed to be growing, or moving closer, Paige didn't know which, and it was taking on a strange purple hue.

"Look at the color," she muttered, grabbing Cole's arm. "Look. I'm scared, I'm really scared."

"It's probably the sun shining through it somehow, like a prism," he said, hoping he sounded more confident than he felt.

"No, I don't think so. I think it's something else."

"It's okay," he said, wrapping his arms around her, but he didn't feel okay about anything. The cloud was bizarre, and Jack, a man who Cole had always thought was utterly fearless, was clearly alarmed.

"I'm getting the better of it," Jack suddenly exclaimed. "I can feel us breaking away."

"Thank God," Paige breathed, still clutching Cole, unable to pull her eyes from the bizarre phenomenon in front of her. "I'm really fucking terrified right now."

"Yep, Betsy's back. Seems like that thing has less power down here, but my instruments are still messed up, and I'm betting the radio... oooh..."

"Jack? What is it?" Cole asked urgently. "What's wrong?"

"I spoke too soon. Get back in your seats. Buckle up. I'm going to see if diving for the water will rip us out of its hold."

Scrambling back to their seats, it was only a second later that Paige stifled a scream. Jack had managed to tip the nose down and was trying to send the plane into a dive.

"Cole?" she said frantically, grabbing him and darting his eyes up to his.

"Yeah?"

"If anything happens... I'm sorry about everything. I should've called you back. I'm such an idiot."

"I'm sorry too," he mumbled, his eyes blazing into hers. "I should've tried harder, and I'm sorry about what you saw with

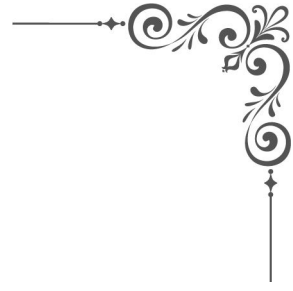
Jasmine. I'm sorry it hurt you."

"I'm crazy about you, Cole."

"Back at ya, baby, and I have been since the day we met."

"Hold on!"

As Jack's warning rang through the air, Cole wrapped her into his arms. He felt her quaking with fear, and when she buried her head in his chest he heard a stifled sob. The water was fast approaching, and squeezing his eyes, bracing for the impact, he prayed for God to spare them.



Chapter Six



As the plane hit, Paige clutched Cole for dear life, and as it skimmed and bounced across the water she was convinced it would break apart. Her mind raced. She'd be able to rescue Cole, but Jack? She didn't know about Jack. He was bigger and certainly heavier... then suddenly the violent jostling stopped. They were still, and though the engine was still running it was making a puttering sound, not the noisy vibrating rumbling she'd heard throughout their flight.

"We made it, I can't believe it, we made it," she muttered, gingerly raising her head.

"Thank God," Cole sighed, smoothing the hair from her face. "Are you all right?"

"Freaked out, but yeah. What about you?"

"Fine. Can I leave you for a second to check on Jack?"

"Yeah, sure, please, definitely," she stammered. "See if he's in one piece."

Extricating himself from her limbs, Cole moved forward and found his friend looking decidedly shaky and taking long deep breaths.

"You okay?"

"There's no tag on my toe, so that's a good thing."

"That's always a good thing," Cole smiled. "Seemed like a close call there for a minute."

"Wasn't the easiest flight I've ever had. Honestly, I've never dealt with that before. Let me catch my breath and then I'll beach Betsy. The water's calm and it's the easiest thing to do."

"It was a helluva landing. Thank you."

"I don't know about that, but I'm sure glad we made it. Go ahead and get back in your seat. This will only take a few

minutes.”

“Is he okay?” Paige asked as Cole returned.

“Seems to be. He’s going to take us into the beach.”

“I wish I could stop shaking.”

“You will.”

“I wonder how long that cloud thing will be there.”

“I have no idea.”

“It’s like some great monster waiting to gobble up whatever crosses its path.”

“I think that’s exactly what it is,” Cole grimaced. “Paige?”

“Yes, Cole?”

“There’s something I have to do and it can’t wait.”

“Then you should...”

But his fingers were suddenly in her hair, and she felt her heart skip as he gently tugged back her head and locked her eyes.

“I’ve been wanting to do this since you walked into the reception room yesterday and I’m not putting it off another second.”

Her eyes closed as his lips dropped onto hers, and as he glided them across her mouth in a gentle but passionate kiss, her arms encircled his neck and she let out a muffled moan. Her heart thumped and the butterflies in her stomach fluttered in a delicious dance, and as she fervently returned his kiss she prayed his hands would slip from her hair and roam across her body.

“Paige,” he whispered as he pulled back. “God, I’ve missed you.”

“I’ve missed you too, so much. I meant what I said. I’m so sorry.”

“I’m an idiot for not tracking you down and finding out why you didn’t want to talk to me,” he grunted, “but it won’t happen again, I can promise you that.”

“I won’t let you. If I walk into your office and find Jasmine there, I’ll stomp right in and throw her out.”

“I’d like to see that,” he chuckled, then lowering his voice, he murmured, “What we had was so much more than just a week of fun in the sun. It meant something to me, and now I know it meant something to you as well, and Paige, just for the record, I am going to spank you.”

She swallowed hard as the erotic heat burned through her body, but a jolt broke the spell. The plane had come to an abrupt halt, and turning around they watched Jack slowly clamber from his seat.

“If you look behind you, there’s a large wicker hamper,” Jack said, still somewhat breathless. “It’s a gourmet picnic for a couple I was supposed to take to a private beach after I dropped you off. May as well bring it out. I’m not sure how long we’ll be here.”

“Because of that cloud thing? You mean there’s no way to leave if it’s still there?” Paige asked.

“Even if I go around the other side of the island, there’s no telling it won’t move or cause me more trouble. I’d rather wait and see if a wind comes up to shift it or it dissipates. Besides, the radio’s not working and I’m not flying without one.”

“Does it have a name? The cloud I mean?”

“Not that I’ve heard of, and like I said, I haven’t seen one for years. That’s the closest call I’ve ever had, and I sure as heck don’t wanna do it again. I did try sending out a distress signal the minute I saw it but I don’t know if I was heard, and even if it was, the way the instruments were acting up there’s no telling what kind of location information went out.”

“That is so bizarre. Cole,” Paige said, feeling a chill shudder through her body. “You should make a movie about this.”

“Not a bad idea, though the Bermuda Triangle’s been done to death. Maybe I can come up with some kind of twist.”

Jack continued climbing from the plane, and as he disappeared through the door, Paige looped her arm through

Cole's and rested her head on his shoulder.

"Maybe it's a Cupid cloud."

"A Cupid cloud?"

"It was sent by Cupid so we'd get scared and say what we really felt."

"I like it. Yeah, let's go with that, and let's grab that hamper and get out of this tin can. I need to stretch my legs."

"I'm sure," she twinkled, and in spite of their harrowing ordeal, she moved her hand to his crotch.

"What do you think you're doing, young lady?"

"Maybe it's because we almost dove into the sea or because it's been forever since we were together, but I can't help it. My gosh, that must be awfully uncomfortable," she purred, squeezing his stiffening member.

"If you're not careful, you'll be the one awfully uncomfortable."

A flock of flutters exploded to life, and she closed her eyes, relishing the erotic charge.

"Yes, Paige, it's going to happen," he whispered, seeing her reaction. "You'll be over my knee the first chance I get."

"You make me feel so weak."

"I'm glad, but I suspect you're also feeling that way because we just dodged a plane-eating cloud and plummeted several thousand feet."

"Maybe that as well, but mostly it's you."

"And I haven't even started yet," he murmured, then slipping from his seat he moved behind them to retrieve the large hamper. "At least we won't starve to death. This thing's heavy."

"Can you manage it?"

"I'll drag it near the door, then lift it. Why don't you get out first?"

Moving to the open door, she stared down at the clear water, grateful she was wearing a dress and she'd left her legs bare.

“Cole, before you come out could you check and see if there are any towels in here? I might want to find a private spot and skinny dip.”

“With an offer like that, I'll search until I find something!”

She couldn't help but giggle, and shooting him a look, she pulled off her strappy sandals, dropped into the knee-deep water, and wading the few feet to the beach, she spotted Jack sitting under the shade of a palm tree. He was their hero, and the plane was now was facing into the ocean with the back of the pontoons nestled in the sand. Turning around she stared back at the odd cloud formation. It had changed from a towering cloud into a dark fog bank.

“It looks so different,” she remarked as Cole joined her, carrying the generously sized hamper with a towel sitting on the top. “It doesn't even resemble a cloud.”

“Maybe it's starting to evaporate, or whatever it does before it disappears.”

They marched across the soft warm sand to join Jack, and placing the hamper next to him, Cole stretched his arms above his head as Paige sat down.

“Are you doing okay?” she asked. “Is there anything you need?”

“Thanks, no. I'll get some water from the hamper in a minute.”

“How can we ever thank you. You were amazing.”

“There were a few minutes there I thought for sure we'd get sucked in. Damn thing's turned into a fog bank now. If there are any boats around they'll be done for.”

“And no one has any idea what it is or why it forms?”

“Nope.”

“And we're stuck here until it's gone?”

“As long as it’s out there I’m not going back up.”

“It’s getting late,” Cole remarked. “If we’re going to be here overnight I think I’ll bring out our suitcases.”

“There are blankets under the seats,” Jack offered.

“Does it get cold?”

“No, not this time of year, but you’ll want the blankets. The sand gets all over you if you sleep on it, and you should cover yourself from the bugs.”

“I’d like to go exploring before the sun goes down,” Paige said, gazing up at Cole. “Can you be quick?”

“I’ll be quicker if you help me.”

“Oh, right, of course,” she said, getting to her feet.

“Um, one thing, put everything underneath some dense plants, including the hamper, maybe over there where it’s thickest,” Jack said, gesturing to the far side of the small beach near some rocks. “We get unexpected rains here. You don’t want everything to get soaked.”

“Ah, good thinking,” Cole replied. “Thanks for the tip.”

“Don’t worry about me,” Jack said with a wave of his hand. “Take advantage of the daylight that’s left. I’m going to take a doze. Feel free to pick up whatever you can use from the plane.”

“We don’t want to abandon you,” Paige said, feeling bad about leaving him there alone.

“Believe me, I have no problem being by myself, besides, I have Robinson Crusoe to keep me company.”

“Robinson Crusoe?”

“I come to this island all the time and that’s what I call that log over there,” he chuckled. “See it, over by the rocks?”

Cole and Paige stared at the large log lying on the sand. There was nothing unique about it, but apparently it meant something to Jack.

“You should get the blankets from the plane and climb over those rocks to the beach on the other side. Take advantage of this. It’s one of those opportunities that only come along once in a lifetime. Stay there overnight.”

“Thanks, Jack. We’ll think about it,” Cole said as he reached down and picked up the towel.

“Nope, don’t think about it. Carpe diem! Seize the day, or in this case, the night!”

“I think he wants to get rid of us,” Paige giggled, “but it does sound wonderful.”

“Then we’ll do it,” Cole agreed, smiling down at her.

Unloading their suitcases, they carried them across to the dense vegetation, and while Cole went to fetch the hamper he’d left next to Jack, Paige returned to the plane to collect the blankets and to see if there was anything else they might need. She discovered two flashlights, both on loops of cord. One was large and waterproof, the other compact but powerful. She decided to take both. The sun was low in the sky. It would be a comfort to have them when night fell. Climbing from the plane, she saw Cole was still by the foliage, and glancing across at Jack, she saw his body slightly slumped. He seemed to be asleep against the palm tree.

“I found some flashlights,” she announced as she approached.

“More than one?”

“Yep, and Jack looks dead-to-the-world.”

“So I see. After that ordeal, it’s just what he needs,” Cole said solemnly, then wrapping his fingers around Paige’s free hand, he leaned down and softly kissed her.

“Yummy,” she sighed, looking up at him. “Can I have more, please?”

“Absolutely.”

Before leaving their suitcases, Paige quickly changed into a fresh sundress and switched out her sandals for a pair of comfortable walking shoes, and as they began to climb over

the rocks she was glad they were stranded. If they'd made it to Sandman Cove they'd be busy readying themselves for a cocktail party, not spending the night together on an exotic island. The frightening flight had thrown them together and she was sure it was fate. Moments later, as they rounded the point, they found themselves staring at a beach like the one they'd just left, but smaller, and the vegetation was like a horseshoe around the sand.

“Cole, this is gorgeous. It's like a cozy island nest.”

“The perfect place to watch the sunset and spend the night,” he said softly.

“Would you think I was crazy if I said I'm glad this happened?”

To her surprise, Cole laughed out loud.

“What's so funny?”

“I was just thinking that exact same thing.”

“Really?”

“Of course. I'd much rather be here with you than mingling with a bunch of people drinking cocktails and trying to be interesting.”

“You don't have to try to be interesting. You're the most interesting person I've ever met.”

“Um, excuse the lack of humility, but I was talking about them.”

“Ooh, sorry,” she giggled. “Duh!”

“We need to find the right spot and lay out a blanket.”

“I think that is an excellent suggestion,” she said, lowering her voice and moving her body closer to his. “The two of us here together... how much more perfect could it be?”

Cole knew if he touched between her legs he'd find her slippery wet, and the thought sent fresh energy to his cock. Holding her hand, he led her into the center of the half-moon beach, then laying out the blanket, he took the flashlights from her hands and wrapped her into his arms. Sinking into his

chest, she felt his hardness against her belly, and closing her eyes, she remembered how glorious their week together had been. From his first touch, he had taken her breath away, and every minute had been a slice of heaven.

“This is a moment,” he murmured. “Jack was right. This is one of those once in a lifetime things.”

“I know,” she purred. “It’s like something out of a romance novel.”

“Or one of those old classic films with Lauren Bacall and Humphrey Bogart.”

“Spencer Tracy and Katharine Hepburn.”

“You love the golden oldies too?”

“Why are you surprised?” she asked, shifting in his hold and staring up at him.

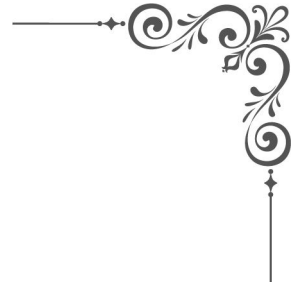
“You just seem so... trendy.”

“Me? Trendy? No, not me, I’m about as old-fashioned as a grandmother’s rocking chair.”

“I’m really happy to hear that, because I’m a caveman, and I want to take you by the hair and drag you into my cave right this minute.”

“Will an empty beach do?”

“Even better,” he said huskily, and pressing his mouth against hers, he devoured her lips as he pulled her down to the blanket.



Chapter Seven



As Cole slipped her dress over her head, Paige rolled into him and urgently grabbed at the buttons of his shirt, but grasping her wrists he pushed her onto her back and pinned them on either side of her head.

“We’ve got all night,” he softly murmured, “and I’m going to make the most of every minute. Don’t move.”

Rising to his feet, he leisurely stripped, then returning to lie at her side, he slid her panties down her legs and popped the front fastener of her bra. As it sprang free he slid it down her arms and tossed it aside, then kneeling over her, he gazed at her in wonder; the huge setting sun was cloaking her skin in a golden glow.

“You’re even more lovely than I remember,” he crooned, then straddling her body, he sent his grasp back to her wrists, lowered his lips, and began kissing her neck.

“That makes me crazy,” she bleated. “I love it. I love it so much.”

“I know,” he purred, traveling his lips across her shoulders toward her breasts. “I remember the things that make you crazy. I’ve relived them many times.”

She moaned in response, and as he drew in her nipples, sucking hungrily, she raised her chest to meet his mouth.

“Remember what I said?” he murmured, lifting his head and locking her eyes.

“Ooh, don’t stop.”

“Does that mean you don’t remember?”

“I can’t stand it,” she complained. “Remember what?”

“My promise to spank you. I promised when we were together before, and I promised you a few minutes ago. I think it’s time I kept that promise.”

“You’re going to do it now?” she gasped. “Right now?”

“Seems as good a time as any,” he said with a wicked grin, and releasing her wrists, he quickly flipped her onto her stomach and yanked up her hips.

“Oh, my gosh! What are you doing?”

“You do have an incredibly spankable ass.”

“I can’t believe this! Why do I feel so—”

“So what?” he asked, smoothing his hand over her backside. “So embarrassed?”

“Yes, and, ooh, I feel so weird.”

“That’s natural, but I’ll bet…” he said, his voice trailing off as he slipped his fingers between her legs, “uh-huh, you’re soaked, and in a few minutes you’re going to be even more soaked. Now keep still, and don’t shout out like that again.”

“I didn’t mean to, I was just shocked.”

“I know you’ve been craving this.”

“How could I be craving something I’ve never had?”

“Now you’re just being coy. I think I’ll add a few extra slaps for that.”

“Okay, I have,” she said quickly, “but it’s weird and I don’t know why.”

“There is no why. It’s just how God made you, and I’m the other side of that coin. Are you ready?”

“I guess.”

“Nope, I need more than that.”

“Good grief.”

“Are you ready?”

“Yes, I’m ready.”

Though her voice had been filled with trepidation, he’d also heard excitement, and raising his hand, he brought it down with several quick slaps, not hard, but carrying a sting that would not disappoint her.

“Ow!”

“I said no shouting.”

“Sorry.”

“Here, bury your head in this,” he suggested, reaching for her dress and handing to her.

“You mean I’ll need to?”

“You might. I won’t spank you too hard, but it’s still going to hurt.”

“Ooh.”

“Unless you’d rather I stop. Do you want me to stop, Paige?”

“Uh, no... no, I don’t.”

“Right then, roll up your dress and bury your head.”

Though he didn’t think her yelps or the sound of his smacking hand would carry around to the rocky point to Jack’s ears, having her muffle her squeals in her dress added some extra spice to the moment, and waiting until she was settled, he began to land his slaps in an easy rhythm as he traveled his flattened palm across her cheeks. When she began to squirm, he moved his slaps lower, and after adding a few good swats to her sit spot, eliciting a series of mewling cries, he paused and ran his hand over her warm pink skin.

“How are you feeling?”

“Please, will you touch me?” she begged, turning her head to look at him over her shoulder.

“That was not the answer to my question,” he said firmly, delivering a solid smack to the center of her bottom. “How are you feeling?”

“Ow, did you have to do that?”

“And again,” he declared, landing another hard slap.

“Oww.”

“How are you feeling?”

“My ass is stinging, how do you think I feel?”

“I can’t believe you just said that,” he muttered, shaking his head and grinning at her nerve. “Anything else?”

“Yes. I feel...”

“Go on, everything. Tell me everything.”

“Cole, I love it. I mean, I don’t but I do. I really do, I just don’t know why.”

“We don’t always need to know why we like something, now close your eyes and feel my hand rub away the burn. That was your introduction.”

As he began to caress her hot backside he heard a long sigh. She was sinking into the unfamiliar erotic charge the spanking had sent pulsing through her body, and moving his fingers into her drenched slit he let out a sigh of his own. He wanted to slide his cock inside her perfect pussy, he wanted to kiss every part of her, he wanted to feel her naked skin against his, he wanted to utterly devour her, then suddenly, to his shock, she abruptly shifted her body around, placed her lips around his swollen manhood and began to slither her mouth up and down his shaft. Closing his eyes, he flashed back to their week together and how she had loved sucking him, and as the scintillating sensations flooded his loins, it was almost as if the year hadn’t passed and they were still living that magical week, but his thoughts were abruptly interrupted. Her fingers were tickling his testicles, and she was swirling her tongue around his tip, shooting him forward into his climax.

“You need to stop. If you don’t... ooh, Paige, no,” he growled, grabbing her hair and making her pause.

“Don’t you like it?” she mewled, lifting her puzzled eyes to meet his.

“Oh, yes, I do, I love it too much, that’s the problem,” he murmured, and gently moving on her onto her back he leaned over her. “I want you so badly, but I don’t have any condoms.”

“Bummer.”

He paused, staring down at her.

“Do you always make sure your lovers use them?” he asked, studying her sparkling eyes.

“Every time. I’m on the pill, but yeah, I always insist, but I haven’t...”

She paused, then bit her lower lip.

“What were you going to say?” he pressed. “You haven’t...?”

“I haven’t been with anyone since you,” she whispered. “I couldn’t. I mean, I’d go out with someone, but at the end of the night I just couldn’t uh... do anything...”

“Paige...”

“So I haven’t used any because I haven’t needed to, but before then I did, always, just like we did.”

“I always use them too.”

He lowered his lips back to her breasts, gently tonguing, listening to her soft moans, then took his mouth to her ear.

“If you’re on birth control, and I’m always safe...”

“Oh, thank God, yes, please, yes,” she whimpered. “Take me, right now, I can’t stand it.”

He didn’t need a second invitation, and positioning himself he thrust forward, letting out a deep groan of pleasure. Not only was he inside the woman who had been haunting him for a year, his cock was naked. It had been so long since he’d had sex sans a condom he’d forgotten how amazingly delicious it was, and as he pummeled her with slow, powerful strokes, he knew he’d be hard-pressed to prolong their coupling.

“Cole, you feel incredible,” she muttered, parroting his thoughts. “I swear I think I’m going to come any minute.”

“I know, I feel it too.”

“Fuck me, fuck me hard. Please, I’m already so close. Please, Cole.”

Her urgent begging sent him forward, and rising up, he clutched her waist, pulled her into his pelvis, and propelling

himself forward, he pumped her with abandon. Only moments later he saw her fingers close into fists as her body grew taut, and she let out a series of joyous cries. It sent him tumbling into his orgasm, and as he exploded inside her, his loud grunts became the bass to her soprano. Their mutual climaxes seemed to last forever, and when they finally collapsed they stayed locked together, their limbs entwined, and drifted into a post-orgasmic doze. It had been an arduous day, culminating in a terrifying flight, and both utterly exhausted, their nap transformed into sleep.



Sometime later when Paige opened her eyes, she was surprised to find herself staring up at a thousand stars and an almost full moon. Still wrapped up in Cole's arms, she lay quiet for several minutes, relishing the magical moment, then feeling the need to stretch her limbs, she slowly began to move.

"Oh, man, I guess we fell asleep," he mumbled, then gazing up at the night sky, he added, "Wow. Look at that."

"Isn't it amazing?"

"Amazing," he repeated, yawning and hugging her tightly.

"We should have brought some wine with us."

"Hmm, or at least some water. That wasn't very smart. We could go back and get something. Do you want to?"

"I think I do, as long as the rocks are still easy to get across," she said softly, then breaking from his hold, she sat up and studied the water. "You know what I'd like to do first?"

"Unfortunately I do," Cole said with a frown. "You want to take a swim."

"Why does it bother you so much?"

"You can't see what's in the water in the dark. There could be anything out there. There isn't a lot that scares me, but that does."

"Cole, I've done a ton of swimming at night. I'll be fine. I did it last time we were together."

“I know, and I didn’t like it then either.”

“You should come with me. It’s really a nothing thing. What if we took the flashlight? Will that help?”

“Somewhat, but I still don’t want us stay out very long.”

“Okay. In and out. Come on, let’s go,” she said eagerly, rising to her feet.

Picking up the large, waterproof flashlight, Cole stood up, but as they walked toward the water’s edge the almost full moon offered enough light he didn’t bother switching it on. Small waves were lapping on the shore, and as he stared at the moon’s reflection on the gentle sea he thought it resembled a magnificent oil painting.

“It really is gorgeous,” he breathed, pausing to take in the sight.

“Does that mean you’re feeling better about going in?”

“Sorry, no, and I’m only doing it because I’ll be more worried if I don’t. Even with the flashlight I still don’t think it’s a good idea.”

“Thanks for humoring me. I promise, there’s absolutely nothing to worry about.”

“You’ll never convince me,” he said nervously as they waded forward. “This will never feel safe. How can you not be worried?”

“I’m never worried in the water,” she said happily. “It’s like my second home.”

They waded in up to their thighs, and handing her the flashlight, he stood nervously by as she turned it on and duck-dived beneath the surface. Though he could see the beam and it was reassuring, as she began to swim away his fear kicked up. Trying to convince himself Paige was right and there was nothing to worry about, he started to move forward, but the water was getting deeper and he didn’t like being there one bit. It didn’t help that the seconds were ticking by and she wasn’t surfacing.

“Dammit, come up!” he muttered under his breath. “I know you can hold your breath forever but this is making me nuts.”

He could see her continuing to swim away, and he was about to dive under himself and go after her when she finally popped her head above the water.

“Paige. You’re too far out.”

“Don’t worry. I’m coming back right now!”

Though she had placed the flashlight around her neck and immediately began swimming toward him, her voice had sounded intense and his worry grew.

“What is it?” he asked anxiously as she approached.

“You won’t believe it,” she said breathlessly. “Let’s get into shore.”

“Is it bad?”

“No, no, quick, we need to get back.”

Though she was in a hurry she was smiling broadly, transforming his concern to curiosity, and reaching the sand, she strode quickly across to the blanket.

“What is it?” he demanded as they dropped down.

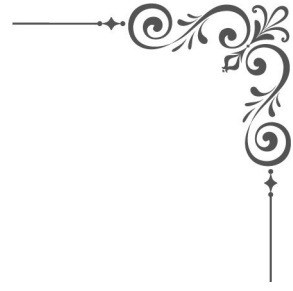
“You won’t believe it,” she replied, still panting and looking at him wide-eyed. “Look what I just found.”

Staring at her closed fist, he watched with eager curiosity as she uncurled her fingers.

“Nooooo!”

“Yes! That’s what took me so long. I saw it glinting and I had to swim over to see what it was. Aren’t you glad I did?”

But Cole was speechless. He was staring down at a very old, very large gold coin.



Chapter Eight



In disbelief, Cole took the coin from Paige's fingers, then lifting the flashlight from around her neck, he shone the bright beam over the piece as he turned it over in his hand.

"This is the real thing. It's astounding."

"When it caught my eye sticking out of the sand I knew it was something special, maybe a locket or something. When I picked it up my heart stopped."

"It was just lying there?"

"Yes! How crazy is that?"

"Did you dig around to see if there were more?"

"Just for a second. I was almost out of air and I was bursting to show it to you."

"I'm not sure what to do about this."

"Why? What do you mean?"

"We need to put this somewhere safe."

"You mean, hide it?" she remarked, picking up the towel and drying off. "Forgive me for asking, but I don't know him. You're not worried Jack will try to steal it, are you?"

"No, no, Jack would never do something like that, and he might be able to tell us more about it. He's a covert treasure hunter. He has been for years."

"So, why do you want to hide it?"

"I don't want to risk losing it or worry about it while we're hiking tomorrow."

"I wonder what it's worth."

"Did you hear about those treasure hunters finding forty-eight gold coins lying in the sand off the Florida Keys?"

"You're kidding?"

“Nope. It was a couple of years ago, and it turned out they were worth a quarter of a million dollars, then they found a gold statue worth almost nine hundred thousand.”

“Whaaat?”

“This might be a lone coin, or it might be evidence of something extraordinary buried in the sand near where you found it.”

“Holy crap.”

“Exactly!”

She had dressed as they’d been talking, and handing her the coin and flashlight, Cole took the towel, gave himself a quick wipe, then pulled on his slacks.

“You said this is the real thing,” she said as she watched him. “How do you know?”

“I was fascinated by that find I just told you about, and I was considering exploring the rights to produce a movie. At the time, I studied the photographs of the coins. I remember them vividly and they were similar to this, but I’m sure this one is larger. In fact, this may not even be a coin. It’s seems too big.”

“You said Jack’s a closet treasure hunter. Has he told you much about what might be around here?”

“He’s always been vague. On the odd occasion when we talked about it, he said there are several Spanish ships that went down in these waters and not all of them have been found.”

“That’s it?”

“That’s enough. Professional treasure hunters that come down here all the time.”

“I just had a thought. What if those old galleons went down because of Cupid’s Cloud?”

“That’s the official name now?”

“You said it worked for you.”

“It does, and I like it, though I don’t think Cupid would approve,” he said with a grin. “That chubby little cherub is all about red roses and a devoted heart.”

“But what if I’m right?” she continued earnestly. “Maybe that cloud causes havoc in the same general area, like tornadoes in certain parts of the Midwest. If that’s true, then it would make sense that there might be sunken galleons around here.”

“Kind of a stretch, but it’s certainly possible.”

“I wish we could jump on the internet. I could cross-reference historical records with modern day Bermuda Triangle mysteries and see if incidents happened around the same time of year, or area, like those fighter jets that went missing in 1945.”

“You know about that?”

“Sure. I’m in public relations, remember? I have all kinds of crazy trivia floating around my head. It’s amazing how you can relate a moment of past significance with something current.”

“We’ll have internet access when we get to Sandman Cove.”

“I know, and I’m going to start digging. Huh, digging for buried treasure on the internet. That’s the new millennium for you.”

“I suppose it is,” Cole murmured, staring out at the horizon. “I probably shouldn’t say this, but I’m almost hoping Cupid’s Cloud is still with us in the morning. It would be great if we could spend more time here. You could take another swim, dig for more gold the old-fashioned way, I could take time to relax with you and ponder the great mysteries of the universe.”

“Sort of like what we did a year ago, except no hotel or room service.”

“Exactly,” he said softly, turning his head and looking into her eyes. “Nothing to distract us. No phones, no anything, just us.”

“That does sound like all kinds of wonderful.”

“So, beautiful lady, I have a plan. We stash the coin and you’ll take an early morning dip to have a scout around to see if you can find anything else, then we’ll go back to Jack and we’ll tell him we’ve decided to take off by ourselves for a day or two, or at least until that eerie fog is gone, and we should explore the island, but not just because it might be fun. If there is any treasure around here, maybe we’ll find other places it might be hidden.”

“But if I found the coin in the water, doesn’t it stand to reason that’s where it would be?”

“Possibly, but think about this. The galleon runs into trouble—”

“Because of Cupid’s Cloud,” she interrupted.

“Sure,” he chuckled, “for argument’s sake, because of Cupid’s Cloud. The sailors get safely to this cove in a rowboat with their loot. Maybe the seas were rough and some of it fell overboard, or someone dropped some coins, but the bulk of it is carried safely to shore and hidden somewhere.”

“Oh, like the proverbial buried treasure! But how could we possibly find something that’s buried?”

“We can’t, but there might be other places something could be hidden.”

“Like?”

“When I was doing research about the Florida Keys treasure hunt, I read about caves being used as hiding places.”

“I just got a chill,” she said as a shiver rippled through her body.

“Maybe you’re just cold from your swim.”

“No. I got the goosies. Maybe I’m crazy, but I think you might be on to something.”

“Where should we put the coin?”

“Let’s walk up to the edge of the forest. I’m sure we’ll find a spot.”

“I’m so excited,” Paige exclaimed as they got to their feet and headed up the sand. “I know you told me earlier, but can you tell me again what you think it’s worth?”

“The gold coins those guys found off the Florida Keys were valued around five thousand each, but like I said, yours appears to be bigger.”

“Gosh. I hope I find more.”

“It’s unlikely, *highly* unlikely, but on the off-chance that we do there’s a lot to think about,” he said solemnly. “If, by some miracle, we do stumble across some valuable pieces, do we mount a full-scale operation with a professional outfit for a proper hunt, or do we keep it to ourselves and recover what we can? There’s also another question. What if this island is privately owned?”

“Ouch. I see what you mean.”

They’d reached the edge of the tropical forest, and turning on the flashlight, Cole moved the wide, powerful beam across the foliage.

“What about there,” Paige exclaimed, pointing to a group of bright red blossoms. “They’re easy to spot. We can bury it in the dirt.”

“That could work,” Cole agreed, and as they moved across to the large crimson flowers, he continued shining the light against the plants to make sure there weren’t similar groupings that could confuse them. “Yes, it’s perfect. All the other flowers seem to be yellow and orange.”

Bending down, she scraped away the dirt, put the coin in the small hole, then covered it up.

“Go to sleep, little doubloon. That’s what it’s called, right?” she asked, looking up at him. “A doubloon?”

“Yes, I believe it’s a doubloon.”

“Wow. What a wonderful surprise that is,” she said happily, standing up. “I sure didn’t expect any of this when I was packing last night. Mind you, I didn’t expect I’d be facing

some freaky cloud and nosediving into the ocean in a small plane either.”

“Speaking of surprises,” he said softly, turning off the flashlight and pulling her into his arms, “how’s your beautiful backside?”

“Ooh, did you have to ask?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact, I did.”

“Tender,” she replied, feeling oddly shy. “I could feel it when I was in the water.”

“Mmm, I’ll bet you could. I was thinking about that, but then the discovery of the coin distracted me,” he murmured, taking hold of her hair and gently tugging her head back.

She felt her stomach flip, and as his lips pressed against hers, the flip turned into fluttering butterflies. His soft, warm lips were drifting, but his grip in her hair was tight and sure, and she could feel the wonderful weakness moving through her body.

“I’m absolutely nuts about you,” he purred as he finally pulled back. “I can’t wait to wake up with you in arms.”

“I remember our mornings. It will be divine to have that again.”

“We should get back to the hamper. I have a feeling if we don’t go right this minute we might not get there at all.”

“I have that feeling too,” she sighed, “and now I’m definitely praying Cupid’s Cloud will still out there tomorrow, and not because of our treasure hunt, but because I want to be alone with you like you said.”

“It would be an amazing couple of days.”

“The only downside is that people will be worried about us.”

“I feel bad about that too, but there’s nothing we can do about it. Shall we head off to get provisions?”

“Yes, I think we should.”

Taking her hand, they started across the sand, but startling her, Cole suddenly stopped short and stared out to sea.

“Cole?”

“Ssh... do you hear that?”

It took a few seconds, but she could hear what sounded like the drone of a distant engine.

“Is that a plane? Is someone else in trouble up there? I don’t see any lights in the sky.”

“I think it’s a boat,” Cole said solemnly, “but it’s late for a rescue team.”

“Who else could it be? They’ve been out searching for us and they’ve spotted the plane, or Jack was able to send out our location after all.”

“No, no, I don’t think so. The authorities don’t search at night, and we haven’t heard any aircraft flying over us; besides, the cloud is there. You heard Jack. The locals know its dangers and wouldn’t fly near it.”

“Look,” Paige shouted, pointing out to sea. “It is a boat and it’s definitely coming toward us. We should turn on the flashlights and signal them.”

“I don’t know, I’m getting a weird vibe. Call me crazy, but two and two aren’t adding up to four.”

“Cole, we need to—”

“Something’s not right,” he said, cutting her off as he glanced at his watch. “It’s almost eleven-thirty. What’s a boat doing out in the middle of nowhere this late at night?”

“Looking for us! It’s the only explanation.”

Raising his eyes to the clear night sky, then staring out at the strange fog, barely visible under the moonlight, he shook his head.

“Except for that weird cloud that turned into a fog bank, the sky is totally clear, and it was totally clear earlier.”

“So?”

“Something just hit me. It’s strange enough that Jack wanted us to cover everything up when there’s absolutely no chance of rain, at least, not as far as I can tell, but even stranger, don’t you think it’s weird that he wanted us to move everything so far away from where he was? If I was going to take a nap under a palm tree, I sure as heck wouldn’t want to walk the length of a beach to get some water or something to eat.”

“Actually, that did occur to me,” Paige admitted. “I just didn’t want to make a fuss. What do you think it means?”

“I have no idea, but it doesn’t feel right. Look, there are two boats, not just one, and they’re headed directly toward the plane, or at least the beach where Jack is. I’m going to walk to the rocks and see if I can watch what happens when they come ashore, assuming they do. You stay here.”

“Oh, no! Where you go, I go.”

“Listen to me,” he said gravely. “If there is some kind of trouble I want you out of harm’s way.”

“You really think there’s trouble?”

“Probably not, I’m probably being overly suspicious. Maybe they pinpointed where Jack’s plane landed and because of the crazy cloud they came out here in boats, but we’ve been here for hours, and it’s so late. I just think it’s all a bit weird and I don’t want to take any chances. Move into the foliage and don’t turn on the flashlight. I’m going to sneak around the rocks and take a peek. If everything’s okay I’ll call you over. Got it?”

“I should go with you.”

“Dammit, Paige, you need to do what I say.”

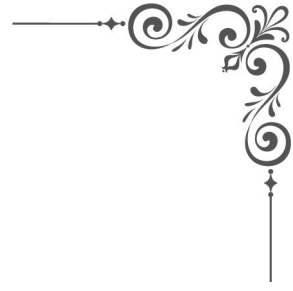
“Okay, fine, I’ll wait, but don’t go around the point without me. Look, they’re getting really close.”

“Stay here.”

He was suddenly sprinting away, and staring after him Paige had to fight to stay where she was. He was hugging the tropical forest as he ran and soon disappeared into the

shadows. Every part of her was compelling her to go after him, but the more she thought about it, the more she realized his concerns were justified. If the boats were in search of them, wouldn't there be people with flashlights calling their names with a megaphone or something?

“Be careful,” she whispered, dropping down on the sand and hugging her knees to her chest. “Please, Cole, please be really careful. Now I'm getting a bad feeling as well.”



Chapter Nine



As Cole approached the rocks he could hear raised voices, but the sound of the boat engines was drowning them out, then to his dismay he discovered the tide had come in and the rocks were underwater. There was no way around the point. He paused to listen, trying to determine how many people there might be. Men were yelling back and forth, they sounded angry, and he sensed orders were being given. Whoever they were, they definitely weren't in search of him and Paige. Jack would have told them where they were and they'd be calling his name. No, something was wrong, and though he worried for Jack's safety, there was simply no way to see what was happening.

Feeling helpless, and wishing he could observe what was happening, he started back, but as he turned a movement caught his eye. It only took him a minute to realize it was Paige! She was waving at him from the water's edge. He waved back, then to his horror he saw her wading in. What the hell was she doing? He couldn't risk calling out to her, and breaking into a run he dashed across the hard wet sand, but he was too late. He arrived just in time to see her diving under the water.

Had she ignored his request and followed him, then realized he couldn't get around the point so had decided to swim out to see what was going on? It was the only explanation. Angry and worried, he paced up and down, waiting and hoping to see her head pop above the surface, but hearing a boat motoring through the water, he was also scared that when she did come up she'd be spotted. She seemed to be taking forever, then it occurred to him he simply may not be able to see her.

“Cole.”

Her voice had been a soft call, and spinning around, to his great relief he saw her jogging toward him.

“What the hell? Where did you come from?”

“There was a boat buzzing all over the place so I swam further along and came in down there,” she replied pointing toward the far end of the beach.

“You do realize you’re naked.”

“Of course. I couldn’t swim in my dress.”

“What if they’d seen you?”

“Chances were pretty good they wouldn’t.”

Her eyes were sparkling up at him, and in the moon’s light they looked almost silver. Her long hair was falling around her face in wet ringlets, and her naked body was glistening as beads of seawater dribbled across her skin. She looked stunningly beautiful, and filled with gratitude that she was safe, he threw his arms around her wet body and hugged her tightly.

“My God, Paige, pretty good? Don’t ever scare me like that again, you hear?” he scolded. “Don’t ever take off without talking to me first.”

“Cole, listen to me,” she said urgently. “They’re towing away the plane.”

“They’re what?” he exclaimed, breaking their hug and staring down at her in alarm.

“They’ve tied lines to the plane and a launch is towing it off the beach.”

“What the hell is going on?” he muttered. “Who are they, and why did they come here, of all places?”

“I don’t know, but, Cole, we need to get off this beach! If that small boat comes around the point and we’re standing here we’ll be spotted right away, and something tells me that wouldn’t be good.”

“You’re right.”

They ran up to the blanket, and while Cole quickly gathered it up, Paige picked up the towel, wrapped it around

her body, grabbed her dress and shoes, then they hurried up to the edge of the forest.

“You have to tell me everything you saw, but let’s find a place to settle inside this forest first, assuming we can. If those guys have a searchlight—”

“They do,” she declared, interrupting him. “They were sweeping the beach.”

“Then we have no choice. Are you okay about trudging through the forest in the dark?”

“Sure, of course. Lead on.”

“Here, put this small flashlight around your neck. I’ll take the big one and the blankets and towel. Don’t turn it on though.”

“Well, duh! I’m not a complete dunderhead.”

“Sorry,” he said sheepishly, “of course you’re not, though jumping into the water like you did wasn’t the smartest thing in the world, and we’re going to have a talk about that later.”

In spite of their dire circumstances Paige felt her stomach tumble. He was being protective and authoritative and it was sexy as hell. The men in her past had always been tentative about suggesting she couldn’t take care of herself. They didn’t understand it wasn’t about that. She wanted a man she could lean on, a man who would defend her and watch out for her.

“You ready?” he asked, breaking into her thoughts. “We need to get moving.”

“Yes, definitely.”

“Stay behind me, but stay close.”

There it was again. He was being her knight in shining armor. She wanted to hug him and thank him, and she would do both the moment she had the opportunity.

As Cole started into the vegetation he began to wonder if it was the right thing to do. The plant life was dense and intimidating, but after a short distance it began to thin out and he started to breathe easier. They’d been walking about a

minute when a noisy boat engine echoed up from the beach sounding frighteningly close.

“Maybe Jack did tell them we were here?” Paige suggested.

“I doubt it. They would have appeared much sooner. I wonder if they found our suitcases. That would be a dead giveaway that someone else was on the island. I’ll bet that’s why Jack had us hide them. He must have known this might happen. It’s all so bizarre.”

“I don’t understand,” Paige mumbled. “None of this is making any sense.”

“We should keep moving. It looks as if there’s a bit of a slope ahead. Let’s go up there and see if there’s a spot we can look down on the beach.”

“Good idea,” she replied, but taking a deep breath, she peered up at the path ahead.

“Are you all right?”

“I’m starting to run out of steam, but I’ll be fine. I’ll make it.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, honestly, I’m fine.”

They began to march up the incline, but they’d only traveled a short distance when Paige spotted a sparse area on a steeper slope off to the right.

“What about over there? That looks ideal.”

“It does, but it also looks like a tough climb.”

“I’m wearing good shoes. What about you? All you’ve got on are those loafers.”

“I climb like you swim,” he grinned. “Don’t worry about me. Take short steps and don’t be afraid to get on your hands and knees if you feel you need to.”

“I’ll get on my hands and knees for you any time!”

“Good to know,” he chuckled. “You ready?”

“Yep. What is it the British say? Lead on, McDuff?”

“Something like that.”

Moving cautiously up the steep bank, they soon found themselves on a plateau with an uninterrupted view of the beach below. The speed boat was zipping back and forth in front of the beach.

“No searchlight but they’re definitely checking things out,” Paige remarked, her voice breathless from their climb.

“The searchlight must have been on the launch, but they’ll probably have high-powered binoculars and there’s plenty of moonlight.”

“This is so scary. How the hell did we end up here?”

“An accident on Pacific Coast Highway,” Cole grimaced as he flapped open a blanket and let it fall over the ground. “That started the ball rolling. Let’s sit down. I need you to tell me what you saw.”

“Oh, that feels good,” she sighed as she settled down. “Okay, so, as you know there are two boats, one large, like an expensive cruiser, the other that runaround we just saw. I counted five men, but there could have been more on shore. It was hard to see past the plane and I didn’t want to get too close.”

“I’m glad you didn’t. Go on.”

“They had tied lines onto the plane and were pulling it off the beach.”

“I can’t believe that.”

“I couldn’t either.”

“What about Jack? Did you see him?”

“I fairly sure I glimpsed him on the big launch, but it was hard to see clearly. All the lights were shining on the plane. They’d gotten it off the sand when the speedboat started buzzing around and that’s when I thought I should bolt.”

“I’m glad you were able to see what happened, it’s great, but please, Paige, don’t go off and do something so dangerous

again. You need to talk to me, tell me what you're thinking, then we can decide what to do together."

"I did wait at the shoreline until you turned and saw me."

"Not the same thing. You marched right in without a word."

"I knew you'd say no," she said softly, leaning into him and putting her arms around his neck. "When I started to lose sight of you, I walked forward a bit and I saw the blanket was much closer to the water than it had been and I realized the tide had come in. I knew you wouldn't be able to get around the point. One of us had to see what was going on."

"We're a team now," he said firmly, "and I'm team captain. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"Yes, Cole, I do, and I'm sorry I worried you."

"You promise not to do anything like that again?"

"I promise."

"You know what I'm going to do to make sure of it, right?"

"Seriously?" she whispered as her heart skipped. "You're going to, uh, spank me again?"

"Absolutely. Not now, of course, but in the morning. Are you okay with that?"

"What am I supposed to say?"

"The truth."

Closing her eyes, Paige leaned into his chest. She knew what this was. It was dominance and submission. When he'd whispered his dark promises to her the week they'd been together, she'd wanted to experience everything he'd talked about. She knew at the time he'd been enticing her, building her anticipation, but now he was jumping in with both feet.

"It's what you told me about last year," she murmured. "Punishment for being a bad girl, and a reward for being good."

“Exactly, and in this situation listening to me really matters.”

She could feel the heat crossing her face, and the warm delicious flood between her legs. Taking a breath, she lifted her head and looked squarely into his eyes.

“I’m okay with it, I’m okay with everything.”

He smiled, his hand came around her neck, and meandering his mouth over hers, he lovingly kissed her, then wrapped her up in his arms.

“I’m so happy right now,” she murmured, “which is crazy considering this mess we’re in. What do you think about it all?”

“What do I think? I think Jack saved our asses. He must have known there was a chance those people would show up and that’s why he had us hide the hamper and the suitcases and sent us around the point to spend the night. He knew the tide would come in and it would cut us off. He was counting on it.”

“Why didn’t he just tell us?”

“He didn’t want to put me in an impossible situation. I’d want to stay and help him, but that would’ve put you in danger.”

“He’s our hero. Gosh, he’s been our hero twice.”

“You know what? I’ve got a sneaking suspicion this has something to do the gold coins you found.”

“Seriously?”

“I just remembered something. A while back he said something like, treasure hunting sounds like an adventure, but there are some ruthless people in the business and you have to watch your back every minute.”

“Maybe there really is treasure here, but wait... I think the sound of that engine is fading?”

Rising to his feet, Cole stared down at the beach.

“You’re right. Yep. They’re leaving.”

“What a relief, but now what? We’re totally stuck here.”

“Howard Hickson and the authorities will be sending out a rescue team in the morning, that’s a given,” he declared as he sat back down, “but if Jack was right, and that cloud messed up his instruments, there’s a chance they’ll have no idea where we are.”

“My head is spinning,” Paige mumbled. “I can’t think about this anymore.”

“And you shouldn’t. I’m feeling a bit that way myself. We need to get some rest.”

“I feel like I’ve been hit by a truck,” she sighed, an unexpected yawn sweeping her up.

“Maybe in the morning we’ll be able to hike a bit higher and walk across so we can see down into the cove where we left Jack. We need to make sure it’s empty before we retrieve our bags and that hamper, then we can decide what to do from there.”

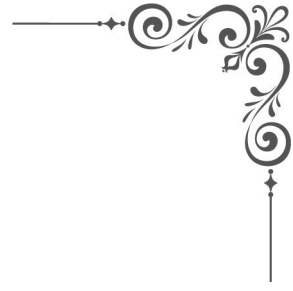
“Works for me,” she said, yawning again as she lay down and rolled onto her side. “I wonder why the ground is so soft.”

“It’s cushioned by all the vegetation.”

“Cuddle me.”

“All night,” Cole promised, and as he stretched out next to her, she rested her head into the crook of his shoulder. “Don’t you worry. I’m going to make sure nothing bad happens to you.”

Closing her eyes, Paige snuggled close and sank against his body. She believed him, and in spite of their frightening circumstances, she wouldn’t have traded their tropical forest bed for a suite at the Ritz. Anywhere she was with Cole was the only place in the world she wanted to be.



Chapter Ten



When Paige awoke, she found Cole snuggling her from behind, and as his hands softly fondled her breasts, and his rock-hard cock pressed against her, she let out a long happy moan.

“Are you just happy to wake up with me,” she murmured, “or did a banana fall off a tree last night?”

“Someone must have slept well,” he whispered, moving one of his hands between her legs. “Mmm, already so wet, and I don’t know about any bananas, but yes, I am extremely happy to wake up with you.”

“I did sleep well, surprisingly well, but I’m sure that’s because of you,” she purred, shifting onto her back and reaching down to wrap her fingers around him.

“Ooh, Paige, that does feel very good, and as much as I’m enjoying it, I want you to roll over and lie the way you were.”

“Orders so early in the morning?”

“Are you complaining?”

“Me? Complain? Never,” she mumbled, languidly shifting her body around.

“You are what the Brits would call a very cheeky girl.”

“Uh-huh—ow.”

His palm had landed on her backside with a solid smack.

“Was that really necessary?”

“It was, and so is this one!”

“Ow!”

“Your ass really needs to be kept pink,” he declared, sliding into her sex, “and I’m going to make sure of it.”

His threat sent a fresh flood through her pussy, and as she groaned gratefully, he dropped his mouth to nibble her neck,

but a moment later his fervent thrusts became strong and demanding, and closing her eyes, she surrendered to the sensations sweeping her away. He was artfully riding her toward her release, bringing her closer with vigorous strokes, then slowing down as he swirled his fingers against her clit, teasing her into mind-numbing euphoria. The birds were singing, indistinguishable sounds of the forest filled the air, and as Cole carried them into their mutual climaxes, their cries of pleasure joined the chorus until falling still and quiet they fell back asleep, their limbs locked together as they dozed in their post-orgasmic serenity.

Cole stirred first, and as he sat up and stretched his arms above his head, he couldn't recall taking off his clothes. He also couldn't remember pulling the second blanket over them, but he did remember feeling utterly exhausted when they'd lain down and Paige had curled her lusciousness against him.

"Is everything okay?" she murmured, opening her eyes, blinking at the brightness of the morning sun.

"Yes, fine, but do you remember undressing last night?"

"Vaguely. Everything is vague, though I do remember reaching for the other blanket."

"Oh, it was you. Damn. I guess I was really zonked."

"Me too, but considering the day we had..."

"No shit."

"Are you worried about Jack?" she asked, sitting up next to him. "Sorry, that's a stupid question."

"I'm very worried about Jack, and that damn fog is still out there."

Raising her hand to her forehead to shield her eyes, she stared out at the horizon; the ominous fog bank was clearly visible.

"Is it my imagination or does it look lower, or maybe flatter is the word?"

"I think you're right. Maybe it's finally abating."

“Odd how it changed from a towering cloud down to that.”

“The whole thing is odd,” he muttered, “and why aren’t there more reports about it? People studying it?”

“Probably what Jack said. Tourism is what keeps this place afloat, no pun intended. I wonder how those guys in the boats got past it last night.”

“They must have come from another direction.”

“Yes, of course. Duh. Hopefully the rescue teams looking for us can do the same thing, but as you said, how will they know we’re here? Do you think we should write a big SOS in the sand or something?”

“I was just pondering that,” Cole said thoughtfully. “The problem is, if those characters come back before we’re found we could be in more of a mess than we are already.”

“Shoot,” she muttered, then turning her head back to him, she said, “Cole, something just struck me. How did they know Jack was here?”

“How indeed? That’s another thing I’ve been mulling over. There’s only one thing I can think of, they must have been watching him, maybe tracking his plane. I wonder if he’s been warned off this island, and when he came here they swooped down on him.”

“It’s so scary. I hope he’s okay.”

“They could have hurt him last night and we didn’t hear any gunshots or screams.”

“That’s true.”

“And that gives me hope,” Cole murmured. “Jack’s a smart guy. Look what he did with us. I have a feeling he can get out of tight situations. Come on, let’s get moving. We need to get our provisions. Are you hungry?”

“Starving. What should we do with the blankets?”

“Why don’t we leave them for now. If we find a better place as a base we can come back and get them, though I do like it here. It’s sheltered and it has a great view of the beach.”

“I like it too,” she agreed as she pulled on her dress and shoes, then running her hands through her hair, she let out a groan. “My hair’s a rat’s nest. I must look a sight.”

“It’s the JF look, and it’s hot, trust me.”

“The what?”

“The JF look.”

“What’s the JF look?”

“Think about it,” he said with a wicked grin as he zipped up his pants and pulled on his shirt. “You ready?”

“JF... Cole! You are so bad.”

“You figured it out?”

“It’s not brain surgery. JF... just fucked.”

“Exactly.”

“I suppose it’s appropriate,” she said with a laugh, “and why are we in such a good mood? Your good friend Jack has been taken away by bad guys, at least, we assume they’re bad guys, we’re stranded here, and there’s a totally bizarre, evil cloud just a few miles away.”

“Would being miserable and worried help us?”

“Good point. So, what are we doing now?”

“I want to check the other beach from up here and make sure there’s no one around before we go down there, but this plateau,” he said thoughtfully. “I don’t think it’s a plateau at all. Look ahead, it seems to wind around the hill. It’s almost like a wide path that was cut from the mountain an eon ago. I bet it will take us around the point and we’ll be able to see directly down to the other beach.”

“How great is that? I wish we’d seen it last night.”

They started off, and after only few minutes not only were they perched above the beach where Jack had landed the plane, they realized where they’d spent the night was the starting point of a gentle trail that traveled to the top of the island.

“This is amazing,” Paige declared, gazing out at the ocean. “It’s an even better view than where we were.”

“We’re a bit higher, but I don’t see a way down,” he said solemnly, staring at the lush tropical forest. “The vegetation looks really thick.”

“Actually, it might be safer if we were to have our base here. If we can’t get down, no one can get up.”

“Worth thinking about. Let’s go back. We’ll go over the rocks and collect our things.”

“Won’t the hamper be too heavy to lug up the hill?”

“We can hide it somewhere and just take up what we need, and I don’t know why I’m saying this, but I do feel we need to move it from where it is.”

“Yeah, it’s weird, I do too.”

“Okay, let’s go.”

“I can’t wait to get out of this dress,” she declared as they started back, “and we need to get some sun block.”

Cole started laughing. He couldn’t help himself. He had little doubt they were in danger, and Paige was worried about her clothes and sun block. She was an intoxicating combination of smarts, courage, and femininity.

“What’s so funny?”

“Nothing,” he replied, though unable to suppress his wide grin.

“You didn’t laugh at nothing!”

“I laughed because you’re adorable.”

“Adorable? That makes me sound like a puppy.”

“I can assure you, I wasn’t thinking of puppies when I said that.”

His comment made her giggle, but as their overnight spot came into view he paused and looked around.

“What?”

“Let’s roll up the blankets and stash them.”

“Why?”

“I’m probably being paranoid, but…”

“But?”

“When I’m making a movie I try to look at all the variables.”

“I’m not sure I understand.”

“Don’t you do that when you’re working on a campaign? You look at what can go wrong and prepare for it?”

“Yeah, I guess I do.”

“When we came around that bend just now, those blankets were—”

“Evidence that we’d been here!”

“Or worse, that we *are* here. What if those guys return and we can’t get back here to stash them?”

“Yikes. You’re right.”

“We need to start thinking defensively and being smart about things. I’m probably being overly cautious, but—”

“I suddenly felt a chill,” she muttered. “We really are in trouble, aren’t we?”

“We could be.”

Taking a deep breath, Paige scanned their surroundings, half-expecting to see a shadow duck behind a tree.

“I don’t think anyone’s on the island,” Cole said, putting his arm around her, “and I can hold my own even if there is. You don’t have to worry.”

“Why do I believe you?”

“Because it’s true.”

“Sorry, I guess I just got a bit spooked there for a minute. Should we take the flashlights with us?”

“Let’s stash them and pick them up on our way back.”

They rolled up the blankets and hid them with the flashlights in the bushes, then started down the hill. It was much easier to find their way through the lush vegetation with the sun shining than it had been in the dark the night before, and as they broke through the forest and onto the beach, Paige stared across at the water's edge

“After we eat I'm going to take that swim.”

“After we eat I'm going to spank you.”

“What?”

“You heard me. I said I would, and I always keep my promises.”

“But...”

“If you want to take a quick swim now, go for it. I'll walk around and dig out the hamper and our bags.”

“I wish we didn't have to worry about those guys coming back.”

“They may not, but they could, and if they do we'll hear the sound of their boats before we see them. Even so, I'd rather you finish your underwater expedition quickly and get it out of the way.”

“I still can't believe you said that,” she mumbled as they started down to the shoreline.

“What? That I'm going to spank you?”

“What else? How am I supposed to concentrate with that in my head?”

“Would you rather I spank you now?”

“I cannot believe I'm having this conversation!”

“It seems you can't believe a lot of things,” he chuckled, and as they reached the hard, wet sand, he paused his step. “Paige, put your hands on your knees.”

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me. Put your hands on your knees.”

“Cole—”

“If I have to ask you again...”

“Why?”

“You know why!”

“I mean, why are you doing this?” she asked as she leaned over.

“You know the answer to that as well,” he said, wrapping his arm around her waist and pushing her skirt out of the way. “To keep you out of trouble. I don’t want you jumping the gun again.”

“I won’t.”

“You also know this is who I am. Right?”

“Uh, yeah,” she muttered, wishing her face wasn’t flaming red.

“Should I stop?”

Though she was deeply embarrassed, being bent over with his firm grip around her waist was sending thrills through her body, and the idea that he was about to spank her was producing the expected response between her legs.

“No.”

“I didn’t hear you.”

“No!”

“Why am I spanking you?”

“Good grief.”

A hard slap landed in the center of her backside.

“Ow!”

“I asked you a question,” he said calmly. “I expect an answer.”

“To punish me for not talking things over with you last night, and to prevent me from doing something like it again.”

“Was that so hard?”

“No, but this is really weird.”

“Get used to it.”

“Ooh, Cole,” she moaned, feeling more butterflies burst to life. “I’ll behave, I swear.”

“Of course you will, and if you don’t you can expect more of the same. Are you ready?”

“Yes.”

“Keep your hands where they are. Understood?”

“Yes.”

His hand began slapping her bare bottom with a flurry of hard, stinging smacks. His discipline felt determined, and though she bit her lip she couldn’t stop a few cries from escaping. As the hot sting increased, and his palm landed in the same area over and over again, she kept expecting him to stop, but he didn’t, and suddenly she’d had enough.

“No more!”

As she’d wailed out her plea, she’d wriggled in his grasp and kicked out her feet.

“Did you just yell at me?” he asked, pausing his hand.

“Yeah, it really hurts. Please, you don’t need to spank me anymore. I get it.”

“It doesn’t work that way.”

“What do you mean?”

“Hmmm. I’m sorry, Paige. Because of our situation I haven’t taken the time to explain the rules. You can straighten up.”

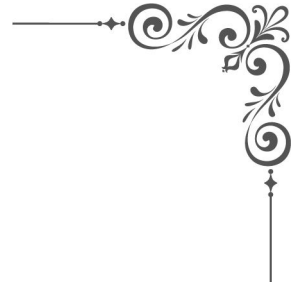
Taking her into his arms he gently hugged her, moving his hand down her back with gentle strokes.

“Rules?” she murmured. “You have rules?”

“Of course I have rules. I’m a dominant, remember?”

“If one of your rules is that you have to make my ass sting, you’ve succeeded.”

Cole let out a long, happy sigh. She was a challenging, smart, exciting woman, and he suddenly saw her blindfolded and tied her to his bed, perhaps wearing a corset he'd purchased for her. He'd unlock the door to his hidden closet and let his instinct lead him to the right implements. There was so much to share with her, so much to teach her and to learn about her, and standing on the beach, the sun on their bodies, he was hard-pressed not to throw her on the wet sand and ravage her for the second time that morning.



Chapter Eleven



Cole had been oddly quiet for several minutes, and wrapped up in his arms, her bottom burning and her head resting on his chest, Paige was filled with erotic heat. She wanted his caress, she wanted his lips on hers, she wanted his cock inside her, and she finally decided to break the silence.

“Earth to Cole,” she whispered, shifting his hold to look up at him. “Are you okay?”

“Mmm, very okay. I was just thinking about all the decadent things I’m going to do to you when this trip is over and we get home.”

“Ooh, Cole... you just made my knees buckle.”

“Then I’m glad I’m holding you.”

“You were saying something about rules.”

“Ah, well, rule number one, no disappearing on me when we get back to L.A.,” he said firmly. “If you do, I’ll find you and spank you silly.”

“You don’t have to worry. I’m not going anywhere.”

“Making your ass sting isn’t a rule, it’s a consequence. The rule is, the extent of your discipline is my decision. Too many protests will only increase the punishment.”

“Would have been nice to know that,” she muttered, staring up at him with a woeful expression. “My butt really is burning.”

“I know it is, but I didn’t add to your spanking because you kicked up a fuss, and I don’t believe that sad sorry face you’re giving me. Not for a minute.”

“Ooh, does that mean you’re going to spank me more?”

“If our circumstances were different I certainly would, and believe me, there are many other things I’d love to do to you,

and I will when we get home, but I'm afraid that will have to do for now. I hope I made my point."

"You did, I swear!"

"I care about you, Paige," he said warmly, lowering his voice. "I don't want anything happen to you, but you have an impetuous streak. We have to be careful. We have to think things through before acting."

"I've never been stranded on a desert island with ruthless treasure hunters in the mix," she quipped, "so forgive me if I'm not exactly brilliant in my decision-making."

"Hey. Stop that."

"Sorry," she sighed. "I didn't mean to snap at you. I am sorry, honestly."

"What am I going to do with you?" he sighed, gazing down at her. "I love your wit but this is serious, and we don't even know if those people are treasure hunters. Maybe Jack is in trouble about something else."

"Yes, I know. Sorry. Comments like that just slip out of me sometimes," she apologized, dropping her head. "I know things are serious."

In spite of her retort, he knew she was sincere. Her penchant for sardonic comments was just her way of coping, and moving a hand under her chin, he tilted her head back up and smiled at her. Her face was still pink, her eyes were twinkling, and her mussed hair sent his mind back to their glorious lovemaking just a short time before. She was absolutely irresistible. Unable to stop himself, and not wanting to even if he could, he plunged his mouth onto hers, and as their lips melted together his cock sprang to life.

Pressing her body against him, Paige found herself suddenly filled by unexpected passion. His fever was engulfing her, and as her hunger rose up she let out a low moan of longing.

"I want you," she whispered. "You make me feel things... things I've never..."

“Me too,” he murmured, “but...”

“But?”

“I think...”

“Can you not think? Please? I want you.”

Unable to deny her, hurriedly stripping off his slacks and lifting her dress over her head, he abruptly pulled her down on to the wet, hard sand, laid on top of her, and immediately thrust inside her soaked channel. The rub of the sand against her tender backside fueled her carnal heat, his cock was hard and forceful, and as he raised himself up and bent her knees into her chest, she closed her eyes and gave herself up. He was taking her, consuming her, ravaging her, his powerful strokes firing her fervor. She felt his fingers in her tangled hair, his lips returned to hers, his tongue fucked her mouth as his manhood rode her pussy, and out of the blue her orgasm began racing through her, her muffled cries proclaiming its advance.

“Already?” he grunted, lifting his head. “You’re there already?”

“I can’t stop it,” she gasped. “I can’t.”

He was suddenly still.

“Cole! Ooh, why did you stop?”

“Ask,” he panted.

“What?”

“Ask. Ask for permission.”

“Ooh, Cole.”

“I’m waiting,” he growled, staring down at her, convinced his cock would burst if he dared move.

“Please, may I come?”

“Please, *Sir*, may I come?”

A fresh wave of energy pulsed through her pussy. She moaned loudly, then gripping his powerful arms, feeling as though it was a prayer, she muttered the words.

“Please, Sir, may I come?”

Plunging forward, he pumped with abandon. She was his and she was loving her surrender, and as her orgasm engulfed her, and as he erupted inside her, he felt himself soar.



They cuddled for a short time, enjoyed a quick frolic in the ocean, then Cole decided to head to their suitcases while Paige did her underwater exploration. Before diving below the surface and returning to the area in which she found the gold coin, she watched him don his slacks and shirt over his damp body and march down the beach toward the rocks. The tide had gone out, and not only were the boulders exposed, there was a small patch of sand that made passing around them even easier. As he disappeared around the point, she took a breath, dove under the water, and kicking herself forward she could see everything she'd missed the night before. The coral and plant life were breathtaking, but there was far less sand than she remembered. She was sure the gold coin had been in an area void of the underwater vegetation. Then she saw it; just a short distance ahead was a swath of clear sand. It was as if someone had vacuumed up all the sea anemones, shellfish, and other plants.

She was running out of air, so rising to the surface she popped her head up, took a breath, and checked her position. Though she thought she was further from shore than she had been the night before, she realized the tide was giving her a different perspective, but she was dead center of the horseshoe, just as she had been when she'd found the doubloon.

Taking a breath she dove back down, and reaching the empty area she carefully traced her fingers through the sand, her eyes peeled for the hint of anything interesting. When she saw the tiny piece of gold pointing from the sand just as the coin had, she reached down and closed her hand around what she hoped would be another doubloon, but as she lifted it up she was astonished to discover she'd found a magnificent gold cross beset with jewels. Had Cole been right? Had she stumbled across evidence of something extraordinary? She needed to return with scuba gear for a thorough scavenger

hunt, and rising to the surface, too excited to worry about her clothes, she swam naked around the point and paused to look across to the area where the hamper and suitcases had been hidden; she wasn't prepared for what she saw.

Cole was on his feet, and in front of him was another man holding him at bay with a gun.

Diving back underwater, Paige propelled herself forward, moving with remarkable speed. She often imagined she'd been a mermaid in another life, and the fantasy felt real as she moved effortlessly over the ocean floor. When she cautiously came up for air and to check where she was, she was surprised at the distance she'd traveled. Swimming to the shore just below the surface, reaching the beach she stayed low as she darted across the small expanse of sand to the cover of the tropical forest. Hugging the wall of lush foliage, as she approached the back of the man with the gun she was surprised at his slight build. He was tall, but skinny, and would be no match for Cole if he wasn't brandishing a weapon. As she drew closer she could hear Cole talking in a calm, measured voice.

"If there was a woman with me, where is she? I told you, the small plane scared her. She refused to fly in it. I really wish you'd tell me your name."

"What does my name have to do with anything?"

"Nothing, but it might make things a bit more comfortable for us both. Seems like we'll be here together for a while, and what am I supposed to call you. Hey, you? You already know my name's Cole. You look like a Sam, or maybe..."

"Okay, okay, my name's Joe."

"Thank you. Hello, Joe. Why do you feel the need to wave that gun around? It's not like I can go anywhere."

"I'm following orders, now tell me where the lady is. That's what I was told. There'd be a man and a woman."

"Joe, I already told you! She refused to get in the plane. It scared her."

It was obvious Joe wasn't the brightest bulb in the chandelier. Paige thought he sounded young, and it was clear Cole was trying to win his confidence. She had habit of mentally listing her options and her mind jumped into gear. She could a) throw something close to him and with any luck it would startle him and he'd spin around, giving Cole the opportunity to jump him; b) grab a big stick, sneak up behind him, and hit him on the head; or c) hide in the forest and let out a bloodcurdling scream to cause a disruption. The consequences of the last idea felt too unpredictable so she decided to go with plan b. She'd hit him on the head. She never hit anyone in her life, especially not in the head, but it seemed to her the situation called for drastic action.

Looking around, she saw many pieces of wood from which to choose, and placing the precious cross into a bright pink conch shell and leaving it in a conspicuous spot, she quickly found a heavy branch she thought was the ideal weight and length. Creeping forward, she reached the point where she had to leave the cover of the foliage if she was going to approach the gun-toting Joe directly from behind. It would mean Cole would see her, and hoping he wouldn't inadvertently give her away, she stepped out onto the sand. Sure enough, as she moved into the light his eyes caught hers. He frowned, then jerked his head sideways. Was he telling her to move back? Surely not. She could knock the guy out, and deciding what she'd seen was a jolt of surprise she continued on, then unexpectedly, Cole broke into a grin.

"Why the smile?" Joe demanded.

"It appears the lady stowed away after all. She's walking up behind you right now with a very large piece of wood in her hands. I think she plans to club you on the head."

Alarmed by Cole's remark, she quickened her step and lifted her makeshift weapon ready to swing as Joe turned around, but once again she was in for a surprise.

"You honestly think I'm gonna fall for that?" Joe sneered.

"I'm not sure I want to watch this," Cole muttered, cringing as Paige took aim at the back of Joe's head.

“You don’t give up, do you? You think I’m stupid?”

“Uh, yeah, right now actually I do!”

Paige swung, but the wood was too heavy and pitched downward, missing Joe’s head and landing across his shoulders. Cole dove to the ground, his eyes focused on the gun, and as Joe let out a high-pitched wail and tumbled forward, the weapon fell from his fingers. Scrambling across the sand, Cole snatched it up and jumped to his feet, then darting his eyes across at Paige, he saw she had dropped the wood and was staring down at the hapless Joe still on his knees and loudly groaning.

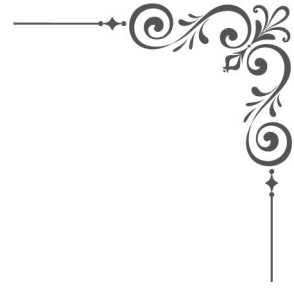
“Paige,” Cole called sharply, “come over here.”

He saw her snap out of her momentary shock, and her eyes still wide, she hurried around the injured young man and hid her naked body behind Cole.

“I’ve never, uh, done anything like that before,” she muttered. “It was so... disturbing.”

“You were great, but get back to the suitcases and put something on.”

She didn’t need to be told twice, and racing into the cover of the forest she was grateful to find Cole had pulled their suitcases and the hamper out of the foliage. Quickly retrieving a pair of shorts and a T-shirt she dressed, donned some sandals, then took a long deep breath. The prospect of danger had been in the air, but now something had actually happened. Was Joe the only one on the island, and if he was, why had he been left behind? He seemed awfully young and inadequate to guard anything, but he had a gun, so guarding something seemed the most likely explanation, but then another question crossed her mind. They may have gotten the better of him, but what the hell would they do with him now?



Chapter Twelve



While Paige had disappeared into the forest to get dressed, Cole had stuffed the gun into the back of his slacks and crouched down next to the hapless Joe who was still on his knees, groaning in pain.

“Joe, are you—?”

“Don’t hurt me,” the young man exclaimed, raising up his arms and cringing in fear. “Please, I was only following orders. Please don’t hit me.”

“I have no intention of hitting you,” Cole said calmly. “I just want to know if you’re okay.”

“I guess, it hurts though.”

“The branch has grazed your skin, but it’s not serious. You really shouldn’t threaten people with a gun. You’re lucky she missed your head.”

“I don’t get it.”

“You don’t get what?”

“Why are you being nice to me?”

“Would you rather I beat you up?”

“Uh... no... of course not.”

“Is Joe your real name?”

“Yeah, well, short for Joseph.”

“You need to answer some questions for me. My friend and I are going to have something to eat and I want you to join us.”

“You do?”

“Sure, but you need to tell me what you’re doing here, who those people are that left you, and what happened to my friend Jack.”

“What if I say no?”

“Then I guess I’ll have to tie you up someplace and leave you. Your choice.”

“They’ll kill me,” he muttered, dropping his head.

“Yeah, well, they, whoever they are, they’re gone, and you’re dealing with me now. Are you coming or not?”

“Oh, man...”

“Would your bosses be this nice to you?”

“No way.”

“Seems to me this is a no-brainer, Joe. It’s time to switch sides.” Then deciding to test the waters and see how much Joe knew, he added, “We’ve already found some of the treasure.”

“No shit?” Joe exclaimed, his head popping up and his eyes wide. “When? Where? Holy shit.”

“That’s why your boss nabbed Jack, right? It’s all about the treasure?”

“Yeah, of course.”

“Time to make up your mind. Am I tying you up or are you joining me?”

“Okay, sure. I’ll come with you.”

“Have you ever shot a gun?” Cole asked as Joe rose to his feet and they started walking back to join Paige.

“No. They scare me. I don’t wanna hurt anyone. I just want the money. Basil pays good.”

“Basil?”

“My boss.”

“I want to know more about him, but first, tell me what you’re doing here. Why did they leave you behind?”

“Your friend, Jack, he told us he was here by himself, but Basil wasn’t sure he was playing it straight. We did search a bit, then Basil said we needed to take off and asked for a volunteer to stick around in case.”

“And what were you supposed to do if we appeared?”

“Keep you here and call in.”

“Um, Joe, where could we go?”

“I mean, keep you, like, keep you under control so Basil could come and pick you up.”

“How can you call him?”

“I have a satellite phone.”

They were nearing the forest, and as they approached Paige, Cole could see the look of confusion on her face.

“Joe here has never shot a gun. He was never going to use it.”

“That’s even more dangerous!” she exclaimed. “What would you have done if it had gone off?”

“Uh, I dunno,” Joe shrugged, dropping his eyes to the ground. “I didn’t think anyone was here. I just wanted a break, that’s all.”

“Joe is going to have some lunch with us,” Cole continued, “but first I want a private word with you.”

“And I’d like a private word with you as well!”

“Joe, sit down and don’t touch anything,” Cole said sternly. “I’ll be keeping my eye on you.”

“You don’t have to worry,” Joe said quietly. “I know I’m not real smart sometimes, but I know how to follow orders.”

“Good, then we should get along just fine. Paige, let’s step over here.”

Taking her by the elbow and keeping Joe in sight, he guided her far enough away to make sure they were out of earshot.

“Did he tell you what’s going on?” Paige immediately asked. “And what are we going to do with him?”

“I’m not sure about that yet, but he can shed some light on all this and he’s harmless. He’s just a kid. I doubt they would have left him here if they’d seriously believed Jack had

passengers and they were still on the island. This is good news.”

“You’re right. I wouldn’t leave him to take care of a parakeet in a cage.”

“Forget about Joe for a second. I have something else to tell you. Jack left us a letter.”

“Oh, my gosh. You’re kidding?”

“I’d just finished it when Joe appeared waving his gun. Read it while you eat,” he said, pulling a folded piece of paper from his pants pocket.

“I have something to tell you as well,” she said excitedly. “I found another piece of treasure. A gold cross with what looks like emeralds and diamonds.”

“No kidding? Where?”

“The same place I found the coin.”

“No surprise there.”

“What do you mean?”

“The letter will explain it, but where’s the cross now?”

“I hid it in a shell when I picked up the stick to attack Joe.”

“Good thinking. Now it’s time to eat, I’m starving, and I’ll bet you are too.”

Glancing across at Joe, Paige broke into a smile.

“I am, and I know just what to do with him. He won’t be any trouble.”

“Tell me.”

“I won’t have to. Just watch,” she winked, and before he could stop her she marched away.

“Damn it,” he muttered under his breath as he followed her back. “When are you going to learn to discuss things with me?”

“Are you hungry, Joe?” she asked as she opened up the hamper.

“A bit, yeah, thanks.”

“Sorry about your back. I’m glad I missed your head.”

“Me too, and that’s what Cole said,” he murmured, managing a smile.

“I’m Paige, by the way. Looks like there’s some great stuff in here. Sandwiches, bread rolls, cheese, fruit, salads, bottles of wine, liquor. There’s plenty, and I think we could all use a drink. What would you like, Joe? Beer? Cold wine, I know! How about some champagne? That sounds good.”

“Uh, yeah, that’d be cool.”

“Here, Cole, will you do the honors and open the bottle?”

Still standing, Cole shook his head as he smiled down at her. He knew exactly what she was planning. Get the kid drunk, he’d pass out, and they’d take off. It was clever, and taking the champagne he shot her a knowing wink, peeled off the foil, popped the cork, and filled three flutes.

“To new friends,” Cole declared as he gave Joe a full glass of the bubbly.

“And to guns not going off,” Paige added, but she barely sipped her drink, then plated chicken sandwiches for her and Cole, and handed Joe a bag of potato chips, promising to put some cheese and tomatoes on a roll for him.

“I love chips,” he grinned.

“You can have them all,” she said, handing him the other two bags, “and here’s some salami.”

Cole chuckled. The salt would make Joe thirsty, and the chips would do nothing to fill his stomach.

“Could you hand me some water, please, Paige?” Cole asked. “I think I need than more just wine.”

“Sure,” she grinned, passing him over a bottle. “I’m thirsty for some water too. I’m sure Joe will be happy to finish off the bubbly for us, won’t you, Joe?”

“Uh, yeah, sure, thanks,” he replied with a wide smile.

They settled into their meal, and as Cole settled next to Joe to eat his sandwich and buddy up to him, Paige unfolded the note from Jack, and filled with curiosity she began to read.

Cole,

I don't know how much time I have to write this, so I'll start with the most important thing first. I had to send you over the rocks and around the point to keep you out of harm's way, and if you're reading this it means I was right and I've run into trouble. You know I've been quietly searching for treasure for years. It wasn't just any treasure, but from a particular ship, and it is on this island. I've been scattering the few pieces I've found into the water so the thugs who have been after it—and after me—will keep looking in the wrong place. They'll do anything to get their hands on it. What you must know, Cole, is that the treasure isn't for me (though I might keep a bit for my old age), it's for the Ladies of Love orphanage.

If you are up to the task, please, find it and get it to them. Howard Hickson has been a generous benefactor, but he can be extremely difficult and I won't say more than that. The ladies need to be independent, they deserve to be, and finding this treasure for them is all I've cared about for a very long time. The book has all my notes, and a map showing where you have to walk to find the waterfall. I'm sure the treasure is hidden in the cave just behind it, but there are two entrances, and I'm not sure which is the safest.

Your starting point is the beginning of the trail that winds around the mountain. To reach it you have to climb up through the forest from the beach I sent you to. You'll run into it. It starts as a wide flat area then leads off into a comfortable trail, but you need go in the opposite direction, away from the trail.

*I don't know who hired the goons who have been threatening me and trying to keep me off the island, but trust no one. NO ONE. I hear boats. I have to go. Be careful, and I hope I see you soon, my friend. God speed and keep you safe.
Jack.*

Paige's heart was racing. Murderous treasure hunters. A diary with notes. Precious cargo hidden behind a waterfall. Her mind flashed back to a retro cinema night she'd attended just a few months before where she'd thoroughly enjoyed a film released in 1984 called *Romancing the Stone*.

"Holy crap," she mumbled. "I'm living a movie."

Pushing the letter into the pocket of her shorts, she raised her eyes and stared across at Cole. He was on the last bite of his sandwich, and she could see Joe was thoroughly enjoying his salty chips, salami, and champagne. Catching Cole's gaze, she stared at him wide-eyed and nodded her head. She was in. She was one hundred percent in. He smiled back at her, then refilled Joe's glass.

"So, Joe," he began, "who is it you work for?"

"Basil Holt, but he works for some other guy."

"Do you know anything about this other guy? Does he live in Nassau? Ever heard a first name, or maybe the name of a boat he owns? Anything at all?"

"I've heard he's rich, like stinking rich, but he doesn't live here, he just visits a lot. Don't know anything about his boats and stuff."

"Why did Basil take Jack?"

"Basil's boss thinks Jack knows where the treasure is even though he says he doesn't," Joe replied, gulping down the champagne, "and Basil told Jack he couldn't come back here and if he did he'd be sorry."

"How did Basil know Jack had landed here?" Cole pressed, continuing to top up Joe's glass.

"Um, there's some kind of gadget on Jack's plane. Basil's boss can track it all the time, but I heard Basil say the reading got all messed up. I think they just knew he was here because he was close when the reading went all wonky."

"Do you know where Jack has been taken?"

"Yeah. I heard Basil say he was taking him to the big boss."

“But you don’t know where that is?”

“Not a clue. Hey, this champagne is great. I’m already feeling a cool buzz.”

“Glad you like it. Does Basil have any plans to come back here soon?”

“In a couple of days, I guess, unless I call him.”

“And where is this phone of yours?”

“Oh, uh... here,” Joe replied, fishing into a pocket of his baggy pants.

“Ah, I’ll take care of that,” Cole said warmly, taking it from Joe’s hand. “Did he leave you with supplies?”

“Oh, sure. I have a backpack.”

“Where is it?”

“Just down the beach leaning against a palm tree.”

“Good. Now you can relax. You’re officially on vacation. I’ll fetch it, then Paige and I are going to take a hike.”

“You said you found some treasure?”

“Just a few pieces in the water. Apparently that’s where it’s hidden. In the water.”

“Yeah, that’s what Basil says too,” Joe nodded as he let out a yawn. “It’s definitely in the water.”

“Cole?” Paige interjected. “I think we should get started. I can’t wait to take a walk to the top and look at the view.”

“I agree. We should take off. Why don’t you get Joe’s backpack, and I’ll move our stuff onto the beach so we can get it around the rocks.”

“Will do.”

As she set off, Cole closed up the suitcases and moved them to the beach, then returning to fetch the hamper, he took out a couple of screw-top bottles of wine and some cans of beer.

“Here, Joe, in case you get thirsty later.”

“Cool, thanks.”

“You can have this chocolate cake too.”

“I’ll have some of that right now. Man, this is great. I feel like I’m rich already.”

“I’ll be back in a minute.”

Carrying the hamper onto the beach, he found Paige waiting for him with Joe’s backpack, but she had also collected the cross, and staring at it, Cole let out a low whistle.

“My God, it’s unbelievable. If I was a treasure hunter and found this in the water, I’d be convinced it was somewhere close.”

“Should I put it back?”

“Are you kidding? Absolutely not. We’ll bury it with the coin. Time to check this backpack.”

Crouching down, he unzipped it and gave it a thorough search, finding a switchblade and a pocketknife, which he kept, and a baggie of weed, which he left, some snack bars, water, and bananas, but nothing else that could hurt or help them, but as he began to close it up, Paige touched his arm.

“I just had a thought. We might be gone for a day or two, right?”

“It’s possible.”

“Let’s borrow this. We can put some clothes in it, and—”

“You’re a genius. I’ll be right back.”

Picking it up, he returned to Joe and found him devouring the cake and drinking the remainder of the sparkling wine straight from the bottle.

“Hey, Joe, do you mind if we borrow this? We’ll probably be gone overnight and it would great to carry some supplies with us.”

“Sure. Just dump my stuff here.”

“Thanks,” Cole said gratefully, and unpacking Joe’s things into a neat pile, he left the baggie of weed on top. “Take it

easy. We'll see you later."

"Yeah, later, dude. Have fun."

Walking back to the beach, and as Joe stepped from the foliage, Cole discovered Paige had already moved the suitcases to the rocks, and was sitting in the sand staring out at the ocean. As he approached she lifted her head and smiled at him, a smile he thought was almost wistful.

"Are you okay?" he asked, sitting next to her and dropping his arm around her shoulders.

"Yes, fine."

"No, you're not. I can tell. What's bothering you?"

"I guess..."

"Hey, what's the matter?"

"I'm not even sure. I'm just feeling a bit emotional."

"It's been a helluva morning," he said softly. "More than that, it's been a helluva trip. I'm feeling a bit unnerved too."

"You are?"

"Sure."

He meant it. From the moment he'd left his home in Malibu, fate had thrown him one curve ball after another, and now he was about to head off into the unknown in search of some ancient treasure. It was the stuff of movies, television shows, and novels, and danger was in the mix. Real danger. A part of him wanted to use the satellite phone, call for help, and forget about the pot of gold.

"Do you want to drop all this craziness and go home?" he asked softly. "It's okay if you do."

"No way," she murmured, letting out a long sigh. "I just needed to collect myself for a minute."



A twenty-minute boat ride away, standing on the balcony off the study in his private quarters in the twenty-thousand square foot villa on Sandman Cove, Wilfred Barker stared out at the

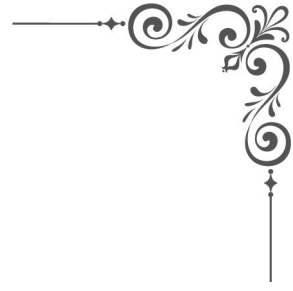
tranquil azure seas. As the confidential secretary to Howard Hickson, one of the wealthiest men in England, Wilfred had access to power brokers and celebrities, he dined at the world's finest restaurants, and flew across the globe with Howard on a private Boeing jet, but Wilfred was a frustrated and unhappy man. He was tired of being number two, of having to jump every time his boss snapped his fingers, and it didn't help that Howard Hickson made everyone call him *Mr. Hickson*. Every time Wilfred was forced to use the formal greeting it made his blood boil and his teeth clench. He'd worked for the man for two decades, but Hickson still treated him like a lowly servant.

Wilfred yearned to be free, he ached to be the one in charge, and he lusted after his own fortune. For many years he'd been shrewdly skimming money where he could, pocketing precious items and replacing them with fakes, selling the real ones to his very reliable fence who then sold them to private collectors. His coffers were growing, but several months before, a visiting art historian had spotted one of the phonies. Wilfred had acted appropriately astounded, and had assured *Mr. Hickson* he would get to the bottom of the mystery and heads would roll, but Wilfred knew his days were numbered. He needed an exit strategy. The problem was he didn't yet have the fortune to finance the life he craved.

Then a miracle had happened.

On one of his many trips to Sandman Cove, Wilfred had overheard a telephone conversation made by a local character named Jack Miller.

Wilfred knew he'd just been handed the key to his fortune, and an exit from his life of servitude.



Chapter Thirteen



Though Cole was feeling anxious and wanted to get moving, Paige needed time to collect herself, and he offered her the comfort of his arms. Attacking Joe had rattled her, and though she had carried on as if the event had been no big deal, Cole knew better. When she finally shifted and looked up at him, he could see she had settled.

“Thank you, I needed that,” she murmured, “and I just realized we have a satellite phone and a gun. When I say I just realized it, I mean, it hadn’t really sunk in. What should we do?”

“What do you want to do? You said you didn’t want to go home a few minutes ago. Do you still feel that way?”

“I do,” she said soberly, “as long as you agree. Do you want to go home?”

“No, I want to stay, but only if you’re up for it.”

“I think we’re going around in circles,” she said with a grin. “I am up for it, as you put it. I just needed to catch my breath.”

“I didn’t know it, but I did too,” Cole said thoughtfully. “I feel much calmer.”

“So, back to the question. What should we do?”

“We should get our things tucked away and see if we can find this waterfall.”

“Shouldn’t we call and let everyone know we’re okay?”

“Then they’ll send out boats to pick us up, and once we’re off this island we might not be able to come back. I don’t like the thought of everyone worried, but we have a couple of days on our side and we need to take advantage of it.”

“Maybe we should call Michael and tell him and make him swear to keep it to himself.”

“Hmm, you’ve given me an idea.”

“Which is?”

“He can contact Howard for us and tell him we got held up.”

“So no one will be out looking for us!” Paige exclaimed.

“Right. We won’t have the pressure of worrying about rescue planes and boats scrambling to find us,” he said, pulling the phone from his pocket. “I’ll call him right now.”

“That is such a relief! What are you going to say to him?”

“As little as possible.”

Dialing Michael’s cellphone, Cole wasn’t surprised it went to voice mail. Michael wouldn’t have recognized the number. Relieved he wouldn’t have to answer any awkward questions, Cole left a brief message asking him to relay their apologies to Howard Hickson.

“Done!” he declared, ending the call.

“Now we hunt!” Paige said firmly. “If there’s even a remote chance we can find the treasure we have had to take it,” then smiling up at him, she softly added, “I thought the week we had together a year ago was amazing, but it’s got nothing on this. I wonder what will happen next year.”

“Still together a year from now,” Cole repeated. “I like the sound of that.”

“Good answer,” she grinned. “What about the book? I still haven’t seen it.”

“Jack’s book? It’s in my suitcase.”

“How did Jack leave that letter for you? Surely he must have been worried someone else would find it.”

“He left a note in the hamper that said, *check out Robinson Crusoe*. The letter and book were hidden inside the log.”

“No! So that’s why he made those comments. He was setting up the hiding place. He must have known...”

“Such a clever man,” Cole sighed. “I just pray he’s still alive and okay.”

Rising to his feet, he took her hand and helped her up, then together they moved the cases and hamper over the rocks and up the beach to the tropical forest. After finding the perfect place to hide them, while Paige was selecting clothes for the backpack, Cole was trying to decide what foods they should take when he spotted a large tube of bug repellent. Lifting it out, he handed it to Paige.

“Here, cover your arms and legs. There are some nasty bloodsuckers here. You should really put on slacks and a long-sleeved shirt.”

“It’s too hot.”

“It would be safer.”

She paused, then nodded.

“Okay, I don’t want to be eaten up by anyone but you!”

“Your turn for a good answer.”

While she changed he placed a few of his things into the backpack, added some supplies from the hamper, and retrieving Jack’s diary, he stuffed it into his back pocket.

“You ready for these?” Paige asked, handing him the clothes she wanted to take.

“Sure,” he replied, but as he started to pack them he held up her one-piece swimsuit. “Are you sure you’ll need this?”

“You can stuff it into a corner, can’t you?”

“Promise me at least one naked swim together.”

“Of course,” she laughed, and now wearing long safari pants, she reached down and stuffed her pockets with energy bars and a submarine sandwich wrapped in plastic wrap. “In case we need something on the hike!”

“And a bottle of water each,” he said, handing her one, then zipping the backpack, he slipped it around his shoulders.

Covering up the hamper, they began trekking up the hill, finally reaching the flat area where they'd slept the night before. Putting down his bottle of water, Cole pulled out the small black notebook.

"There's a lot in here," he remarked, flipping through it, "but this page was folded over and it's obviously the directions to the waterfall. Look, here's the drawing of where we are now."

"Yes, I see," Paige replied, staring at the crude sketch. "This is the place he was talking about in the letter, the place he called the beginning of the trail."

"Just as we thought it was, and he also said we need to go in the opposite direction, and that's how it's drawn here as well."

"Yikes. It looks really dense," she remarked, looking across at the solid wall of plant life.

"I'll bet it clears as you get further in. He would have left it like that to ward people off. Let's see, it says, walk 1m."

"1m? A mile? Through that?"

"Apparently. Are you changing your mind?"

"No, and at least we don't have to worry about some gun-wielding kid appearing from nowhere."

"Speaking of gun-wielding kids," Cole said, shooting her a stern look, "apparently that spanking didn't stop you from jumping into the fray."

The unexpected reminder of his hard hand slapping her naked backside sent an immediate flush to her cheeks.

"Well, I wasn't going to do nothing," she retorted in spite of the heat flaming over her face, and the queasy feeling in her stomach as she remembered how it had felt to hit the skinny young man with her crude club. "He was—"

"He was harmless."

"Harmless? He had a fucking gun!"

“Paige, when you’re dealing with someone who is holding a gun, three words should always spring to mind.”

“Disarm the bastard!”

“No! Proceed with caution,” he said firmly, fixing her gaze. “I know you heard me talking to him. Wasn’t it obvious I was dealing with the situation? Did you not see me jerk my head to the side?”

“Yes, but I didn’t know what that meant, and then you smiled.”

“I had to smile. I had to change tactics, and whacking him like that could have caused him to pull the trigger.”

“Stop scolding me like a child! I was only trying to help! I was trying to save you! And I did!”

“And we had an agreement. No action without talking about it.”

“Talking? How could we talk? What was I supposed to do, walk up and say, ‘excuse me, man-with-a-gun, but I need to discuss battering you on the head with this piece of wood, so would you please step aside for a minute?’”

Cole tilted his head to the side as he studied her. She was righteously indignant, and completely missing the point.

“Let me put this another way,” he said patiently. “All I want you to do is think things through. Take a minute to assess the situation. Weigh what’s going on and the possible consequences before you act.”

Letting out a heavy sigh, Paige knew he was absolutely right, and being defensive wasn’t going to change that or help anything.

“Sorry I snapped,” she said softly. “I guess I did jump the gun a bit.”

“Was that supposed to be a pun?”

“What? Oh, no... that was a total accident. Funny though.”

“Uh-huh. So, back to being serious for a moment. We’re about to trek off and we have no idea what we might find, so

please, Paige, don't jump into things. The next time you're impetuous I will punish you again."

"You don't need to. That spanking this morning was plenty. My ass is still sore."

"Clearly it wasn't," he said, raising his eyebrows, "but I have other ways to discipline you."

"Like what?" she asked with worried frown.

"My actions are inspired at the time of the offense."

"You sound like a..."

"A what?"

"A judge or something."

"That's precisely what I am, a judge of naughty behavior and the chastisement that's warranted, but enough of this. Let's get moving."

"Yes, please," she said eagerly, wanting the conversation to end. "I'm dying to find this waterfall."

"Looking at this sketch, it doesn't look like a mile, but maybe that's just his bad drawing. Getting through that vegetation won't be easy. Oh, I almost forgot, we should take the flashlights."

"What about the blankets?"

"We should take them and the towel. I might be able squeeze them into the backpack."

Putting the notebook back into his pocket, he collected both flashlights, giving Paige the smaller one, and after looping them around their necks he opened the backpack and found just enough room to squeeze in the towel, but there was no room for the blankets.

"We'll be fine," Paige said confidently. "It's not cold."

"I think we should take them," Cole said thoughtfully. "Maybe I can roll them up and tie it on with lengths of vine."

Using the pocketknife he cut several long strands. The blankets were soon in place, and he slipped the backpack

through his arms, but as they made their way to the thick wall of vegetation, Paige stared at it in dismay. It seemed completely impenetrable.

“How do we do this?”

“I suppose we just plunge through,” Cole replied. “I don’t see any other way. I’ll go first. Stay close.”

Checking his watch so he could judge their progress, he pushed through the waist-high growth and moved slowly forward. It proved even more challenging than he’d thought, and when he saw trees ahead he paused. Was it about to become even more difficult?

“Is everything okay?” Paige asked, fighting a growing sense of unease. “Why did we stop?”

“This is crazy. We’re surrounded by the forest, there’s no clearing anywhere, nothing.”

“I feel as if we’re in the Amazon,” she mumbled. “I saw you check your watch. How long have we been walking?”

“Good question. Probably not as long as it feels like, that’s for sure,” he said, turning around to face her then glancing at his watch. “I don’t believe it. We’ve only been walking about a minute. We’ll never make it a mile. Maybe we should go back. I’d hate to get lost.”

“Cole,” she murmured, her eyes widening as she lifted her arm and pointed past him. “Look up there.”

Shifting sideways, he followed her gaze, and to his great surprise and enormous relief, he could see the top of a waterfall.

“Nooo... I’ve been so focused trying to get through what was right in front of me I didn’t look up, not for a second.”

“I know what 1m is,” she suddenly exclaimed. “It’s not one mile, it’s one minute. One minute until you see the waterfall.”

“Of course! You may be impetuous and a brat sometimes, but you’re also brilliant! Now we have a beacon and it doesn’t look too far away.”

Motivated by their goal in sight they continued on, gratefully discovering the further they trudged the less dense the vegetation, until they found themselves in a transformed landscape; the foliage had thinned out, and they were surrounded by tall trees offering plenty of space and shade.

“Cole, listen,” Paige said abruptly. “Do you hear that?”

He stopped, then smiled.

“I hear a stream!”

“Maybe we should check Jack’s book again.”

Handing Paige his water bottle he pulled out the all-important guide, and studying the sketch he saw what looked like a turn to the right, then straight again, but the waterfall was directly in front of them.

“I think this is telling us we can’t reach the falls going through this part of the forest,” Paige suggested. “I bet there’s a creek, and we can only reach the waterfall by crossing it and following the stream on the opposite side.”

“That’s entirely possible; in fact, there’s a tiny x right where the turn is indicated. See?”

She gazed closely at the sketch, then walking forward she raised her eyes and scanned their surroundings.

“Hah. Look up. The top half of those two trees forms a perfect x.”

“Oh, for goodness’ sake! You’ve done it again. You’re the best!”

“Even though I’m impetuous and a brat sometimes?” she giggled, turning to look at him.

“Maybe *because* you’re impetuous and a brat sometimes,” he declared, then laughed out loud. “You know what, I can’t remember the last time I had this much fun. Sure beats standing around drinking cocktails for an hour.”

“If only all those VIPs could see us now.”

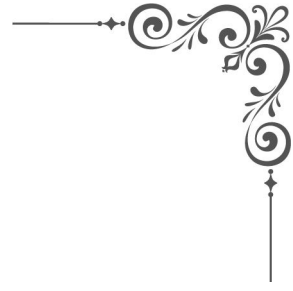
“I’m glad they can’t,” he replied, his voice suddenly softening. “I’m glad we’re here like this... in the middle of

nowhere... just the two of us.”

As he stared at her across the small space between them, he caught his breath. She had inadvertently stepped into a shaft of sunlight and was shrouded in its radiant golden aura. Her hair was sparkling as though covered in diamond dust, her green eyes were shining back at him, and her puckered nipples were teasingly probing the thin cotton of her white shirt.

“You look very lovely right now,” he whispered, and placing the book back into his pocket, he moved slowly toward her.

Paige could feel her pulse tick up. She was sure time had abruptly stopped. He was in front of her, sharing the shard of light spilling through the trees. His hands moved up to hold her face, and dropping the water bottles, she moved her arms around his waist. Wordlessly he lowered his lips onto hers, gliding them slowly, warmly, lovingly over her mouth, then pressing firmly as his fervent passion bubbled over, until breathlessly breaking away he swallowed her up in his arms.



Chapter Fourteen



It was a moment frozen in time, and when she finally shifted in his arms he was loath to let her go.

“Magic,” she purred. “That was pure magic.”

“Totally,” he whispered, “and if this forest has spirits, I think they just blessed us.”

“Ooh, Cole, I love that.”

“I suppose we need to press on,” he sighed, “but Paige, I’ll never forget this moment... how you look... how you feel.”

Not sure what to say, she responded by pressing her lips against his in a warm, soft kiss.

“I think we need to start moving again, or we’ll never leave this spot,” he murmured. “You are seriously irresistible.”

“I’m glad you think so!”

“So,” he began, stepping back and trying to ignore his stiffening cock, “we’re at the x. I guess that means we should start walking over there.”

“Makes sense to me,” Paige agreed, “and I have a feeling it’s not very far.”

“I hope you’re right. That trip through the Amazon might have been short but it was enough for me.”

“Me too,” she said, picking up the water bottles and handing him one. “Here you go.”

With enough room to walk side-by-side they started off and it soon became apparent Paige had been right; the sound of the creek was growing louder.

“Oh, I can’t wait to see it,” Paige exclaimed, and before he could stop her she abruptly darted forward, striding across the ground ahead of him.

“Stop!”

Cole's voice had been loud and sharp, and startled, she spun around to face him.

"Why?"

"Paige... very slowly I want you to walk back to me."

"I'm sorry?"

"I said, walk very slowly back to me."

His voice was grave, his face was worried, and she realized he wasn't looking *at* her, but *past* her and staring at the ground. A chill shivered through her body.

"Don't look back, just come here, slowly."

Pulse racing, she cautiously moved one foot in front of the other, and finally reaching him, she stared at him with frightened confused eyes.

"What is it?" she asked, her voice almost a whisper. "Can I turn around?"

"Yes, but no sudden moves."

Carefully shifting behind him, she gazed across the short distance to where she'd just been standing.

"I don't see anything. What am I looking for?"

"See that rock with the ferns around it?"

"Uh-huh."

"Look at the log lying next to it."

Her eyes traveled down the boulder to an old fallen tree trunk, and as she stared, trying to spy what was scaring him, she saw a multi-colored, coiled snake.

"Oh, my gosh! Is it poisonous?"

"Very. It's called a yellow jaw, otherwise known as a fer-de-lance viper. There was a reason I was moving so slowly this whole time, and it wasn't just the thickness of the vegetation. We're in a tropical jungle, Paige. There are a ton of venomous creatures here. Spiders, bugs, scorpions, snakes, and that's just for starters. I was keeping my eyes peeled."

“I didn’t even think about it. I’m so sorry.”

“Weren’t we just talking about how impetuous you can be?”

“I won’t do it again, believe me. That is really scary, like, really, really scary.”

“Please, Paige, you must contain yourself. If you don’t you’ll end up getting hurt. I’ve spent a lot of time on these islands and they’re beautiful, but ruthless treasure hunters aren’t the only dangerous creatures here.”

“I will. I will absolutely restrain myself, but how are we going to get past it?”

“We’re not. We’re going to move up a bit further and then turn right. I’m not fooling with that reptile. Now stay beside me or behind me. Got it?”

“Absolutely.”

With Paige next to him, Cole backed further away from the lethal snake, keeping his eyes on it until he felt they were at a safe distance, then turning toward the waterfall they started off again, traveling about a hundred yards before Cole paused and looked off to his right.

“The sound of the water is even louder here.”

“There are more rocks around here as well.”

“Let’s turn down and see where it leads, and by the way,” he said sternly, “if we reach a creek, the frogs are poisonous as well.”

“Seriously? Good grief.”

“I was told the natives would use the venom on their spearheads,” he continued as they started forward. “The toxins are on their skin.”

“Don’t worry, I don’t make a habit of touching frogs.”

“Just as well... wow...”

“Oh, my gosh!”

They had unexpectedly come upon a gently sloping bank, and just short distance below them a creek was flowing over rocks, tree limbs, and foliage.

“This is so gorgeous,” Paige breathed, “and look, Cole, the other side has far less plant life and it looks wider.”

“Are you game to cross?”

“Sure. There are plenty of boulders, and it looks as if we’ll have an easier time following the stream up to the waterfall on that side.”

“I agree. Let’s go. Careful, those rocks will be slippery.”

Crossing the brook wasn’t as difficult as Cole thought it would be, and as they reached the other side and started moving upstream, the narrow creek dramatically widened, and they found themselves at the side of an expansive column of flat rock ledges, gushing water cascading over them.

“This is amazing,” Paige exclaimed, having to speak loudly over the sound. “It’s like a flat waterfall.”

“I’ll bet when we reach the top of this slope, we’re going to see a gorgeous pool and the waterfall behind it!”

“This is so exciting, but don’t worry, I promise I’ll stay behind you and not run ahead.”

“I don’t think you could anyway. There’s no running over these boulders.”

“This is true, but if there is a pool at the top I’ll be tempted to take off my clothes and dive right in!”

“Don’t you dare.”

He shot her a look, and Paige burst into a fit of giggles.

“Gotcha!”

“Come on,” he said, grinning broadly and taking her hand, “let’s get up to the top and see what’s waiting for us.”

They began clambering up the boulders, and when they reached the top, though they’d been prepared for the waterfall, they were both awestruck by the sight that greeted them. The

falls were spilling down a steep hillside into a sparkling, perfectly round pool of crystal blue water, and a picturesque flat area below them was covered in small, shiny pebbles.

“Have you ever seen anything so exquisite?” Paige said softly. “It’s... it’s like something out of a fairytale.”

“It’s like a...” Cole murmured, unable to finish the sentence for lack of a word.

“A what?”

“Paradise.”

They stood for several minutes taking in its wonder, then moving carefully off the huge boulders they made their way down to the flat, dry ground, and discovered the pebbles were surprisingly smooth.

“These are way more comfortable than I thought they’d be,” Paige remarked as she sat down, then looking across the pond she let out a long sigh. “I never want to leave this place. It’s a shame it’s so difficult to get to.”

“Don’t be. If it wasn’t, Jack’s treasure would have been discovered long before now.”

“I’m glad we brought the blankets. I’d love to stay here tonight, though...” Paige said thoughtfully as she stared at the stony ground beneath her.

“Though what?”

“I’m not sure how comfortable it will be to sleep out here.”

“Maybe...” Cole said thoughtfully.

“What are you thinking?”

“I can’t imagine Jack enjoying the hike here either. Once he’d found this place I doubt he would have come here for just a few hours. Surely he would have brought up supplies.”

“Take another look through his notebook, see if anything like that is mentioned.”

“Paige, that’s a brilliant suggestion. There’s so much in here,” Cole said, pulling it from his pocket. “He seems to have

kept a record of absolutely everything.”

“Do you think it would be okay to walk over to the water’s edge?” she asked as Cole began flipping through the pages.

“You thought to ask me!” he exclaimed, lifting his head and grinning at her. “We’re getting somewhere.”

“I’m trying.”

“Maybe I won’t spank you quite as hard as I was going to.”

“Cole!”

“Just don’t jump in.”

“Are there poisonous eels or something?”

“Not usually,” he winked, “and I’m being overly protective, though I’d like to join you.”

“I’d love that. I’ll be back in a minute.”

Rising to her feet, she made the short walk to the water’s edge, and staring down into the glassy blue pool, she couldn’t believe how crystal clear it was. Raising her eyes to the waterfall, she thought she could make out the cave behind it. She was about to move closer to get a better look when she heard Cole calling her, and turning around, she saw him gesturing for her to return.

“Did you find something?” she asked as she hurried back.

“I did. Listen. A few pages after the map there’s a list. Supplies Behind Grandpa’s Rock. Sleeping bag, porta-stove—”

“Porta-stove?” Paige interrupted as she sat down. “Is that like a stove we can boil water on?”

“I expect so, now shush, it says here, coffee, and listen to this, slickers.”

“Slickers? As in raincoats?”

“Apparently. Huh, that’s interesting. Mind you, spontaneous rain showers—”

“Cole, I’m sure I saw the cave behind the waterfall,” Paige interrupted again. “Maybe he brought slickers so he could walk through the waterfall without getting completely drenched.”

“Looks like we have our starting point,” he grinned. “Anyway, it goes on. Three cans beans. Three boxes powdered milk. One carton sugar and so on.”

“It’s a regular grocery list. How could he have brought up so much?”

“He must have done it on frequent trips. What we need to do is figure which is Grandpa’s rock. There are dozens of rocks around here.”

“That one!” Paige said triumphantly, pointing across to a tall boulder at the far end of their rocky beach.

“What makes you think so?”

“Can’t you see the handlebar mustache? Look, right in the center.”

“Well spotted!”

“Cole? Are you okay? You look as if you’re pondering something.”

“I am,” he said softly, staring at her.

“What is it?”

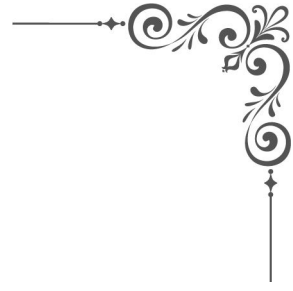
“Hmmm. I’d like to make a toast,” he said warmly, raising his water bottle. “To the most beautiful place I’ve ever seen, and to sharing it with the most beautiful woman I’ve ever known.”

“Cole...”

“You are, Paige. Everything about you is beautiful, and being here with you like this is... well... there are no words.”

His voice had fallen quiet, so quiet she’d barely heard it, but his adoration of her was flowing from his eyes as surely as the water was flowing down the mountain into the stunning blue pool. She could feel her heart beating, and she was sure

she knew what he was about to say. Holding her breath, praying she was right, she waited.



Chapter Fifteen



Cole wanted to say the three words he'd not muttered since he was nineteen years old in his first year at USC Film School when he'd fallen head-over-heels for a stunningly beautiful actress. Why couldn't he bring himself to mutter them? Was it too soon, was it not the right time, or was he just a coward?

Sensing his struggle, Paige leaned forward and kissed him, and as his fingers tangled themselves in her hair she moved closer and pressed her body against his.

"I, uh..." he muttered as they broke apart. "I care about you, Paige, I care about you more than I can say."

It was the truth. He did. He cared about more than he could say. Literally. For whatever reason, the words *I love you* were caught up in his throat.

"I feel the same," she said with a soft smile, then kissed him again, a reassuring, warm kiss that she hoped would tell him she understood.

"I suppose we should head over to Grandpa's rock," he managed. "I would really like to stay here overnight if it's feasible."

"Why can't we? We have the blanket and some food and a change of clothes."

"You're right, but we should still check what's there," he murmured, trying to ignore the stirring in his loins.

"I know, but I could stay here with you like this forever."

"That's a long time," he grinned. "Come on, we need to make the effort."

Rising to their feet, they walked across the pebbles, and as they approached the huge rock there was nothing to see until they moved behind it, and what greeted them made them both gape.

A large gray tarp had been laid across the top of several boulders to create a makeshift roof, and held in place by smaller rocks, it draped down the three sides. A second tarp had been set on the ground with many tiny rocks running along the inner edges hiding where the two tarps met, and off to one side was a tent with a closed, zippered front.

“He must have already been staying up here,” Cole declared, deeply impressed by the shelter Jack had constructed.

“Was there nothing in the book about this?”

“You’d think there would be. I should probably read that thing from cover to cover.”

“Why is this so elaborate? I mean, the tarp covering the sides of the rocks and the ground, and a tent as well?”

A deep frown abruptly crossed Cole’s face.

“What?”

“We’re really lucky,” he said solemnly.

“Then why do you look so worried?”

“This is set up to stop the bugs and snakes and other creatures getting to him while he’s sleeping. All we had was a blanket. It’s a miracle we weren’t bitten. I’m an idiot.”

“Cole, it’s fine.”

“No, it’s not fine, it’s not fine at all.”

“But nothing happened.”

He didn’t look convinced, so deciding to switch gears, Paige walked into the enclosure and across to the tent.

“Hey, Cole, you have to see this,” she called, peering inside.

Trying to shake off his feelings of guilt, Cole walked across to join her, and though he was somewhat surprised at the sophistication of the setup, he wasn’t surprised by the organization he found in the cozy tent. Jack had always struck him as a thoughtful, methodical man. The sleeping bag and its

foam underlay had been rolled up and pushed to the back. Utensils were neatly arranged on top of a small table, and inside a wide plastic tub they found an assortment of clean clothes.

“I wonder how much time he spent here,” she murmured. “To bring all this stuff he must have been coming and going for... wait... what’s that?”

Underneath the sleeping bag and mat she could see the edge of a plastic package. The tent had a sloping roof, and bending over, she walked across the small space and pulled it out.

“What is it?”

“I think it’s rain gear, and it’s brand new. Cole, this package has never been opened; at least, that’s how it looks to me.”

He moved across to join her, and as they sat down she unsealed it and pulled out a pair of waders and a heavy raincoat.

“I think we were right. I think this must be to pass through the waterfall. What a shame he never got the chance,” Paige murmured, feeling a wave of sadness for the man who had worked so hard and had been prevented from pursuing his dream.

“It must have taken him ages to do all this.”

“Ages,” Paige repeated. “We have to make this happen for him... for that orphanage.”

“Jack was always singing the praises of that place. It makes me think there might be more behind his fondness for it than just the admiration of the women there and the amazing work they do.”

“You think he might have grown up there?”

“It’s possible. Howard is one of their major donors. That’s how I met Jack in the first place. It was several years back and Howard held a fundraiser specifically for the Ladies of Love. Jack was there and we hit it off right away. I’ve been a

contributor ever since. When the business starts making me crazy I come down here and Jack takes me off fishing, or to an island for some peace and quiet, and we have long philosophical talks about all kinds of things, but now that I think about it, I don't remember him talking about his family."

"Maybe the orphanage is his family."

"Could be!"

"And you said he didn't talk much about his treasure hunting either."

"Only briefly, almost as if it was a hobby. Now I see he was just being careful."

"If he was so careful, how did those thugs find out?"

"Good question, but at the moment that's not important. I want to see inside that cave. From all this work he's done he truly believes it's in there."

They locked eyes for a moment, the notion they were on the verge of something extraordinary wordlessly passing between them, then Cole started out of the tent, but Paige didn't follow him. As she placed the wet-weather gear back into the packaging, she wondered why hadn't Jack hadn't immediately put it on and gone under the waterfall to start his exploration.

"Sweetheart, are you coming?"

Sweetheart! Cole had called her sweetheart!

Breaking into a huge smile, she started out of the tent. She wanted to throw her arms around his neck and hug him, but having to bend down to get through the opening, she dropped to her hands and knees to crawl out. Cole was standing outside the shelter, and still on all fours she continued forward across the tarp-covered ground out onto the pebbles, and as she looked up at him, rather than rise to her feet, she remained on her knees.

He stared down at her, a slightly puzzled expression on his face.

“Isn’t this how it’s done,” she softly asked, “if I want to, uh, be, uh, submissive with you?”

She knew it had been an impetuous gesture, but impetuous was her middle name, and it had felt right. Nothing had ever felt more right in her entire life.

Feeling his heart swell, Cole crouched down and traced her face with the tip of his finger.

“Are you doing this because you think that’s how it’s done, or because it was something you felt, something you were moved to do?”

“Uh, both, and, uh, sorry, but I’m feeling emotional. I don’t know why.”

“Paige...”

“I don’t know much about this stuff, just what I read a while ago... a year ago to be exact,” she said, dropping her eyes. “It was a blog, but then I saw Jasmine in your office and I stopped reading it, and now I’m talking too much. Sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry, don’t be sorry about anything you just said,” he said tenderly, cupping her chin and tilting her head up to look at him. “You just made me very happy.”

“So... this was right? It felt like it was.”

“Very right,” he breathed, then out of the blue, without any thought, the words spilled out of him. “I love you, Paige Brooks.”

“Cole... I love you too, I love you like crazy.”

A hot lump was swelling in the back of her throat, and as he sat down and brought her into his lap, she felt a few stray tears escaping down her cheeks.

He could feel her emotion, and closing his eyes, shutting out the distraction of the sparkling paradise surrounding them, he focused all his attention on her, how she felt in his arms, how his heart was thumping against his chest, and it hit him: there may be gold and jewels and amazing riches hidden in the cave behind the waterfall, but the only treasure he cared about was in his arms, and she was melting his heart.

The cave, and whatever it might be hiding, could wait.

Lowering his lips onto hers, he deeply kissed her, traveling his hands down her blouse, his fingers unfastening the buttons, peeling it down her arms and off her body. Her muffled moan sent his pulse racing, and moving his mouth to her naked breasts, he gently lowered her back on to the smooth, polished stones. Pulling off his T-shirt, he quickly stripped off her slacks, and then his, then lay on top of her and gazed down at her beautiful face.

“Is the ground too hard underneath you?”

“What ground? I’m in heaven and I’m floating on a cloud.”

Cole lost himself in her body, sending his tongue to lap languidly against her inner thighs, then seeking out her clit he made her moan loudly as he tormented her, bringing her to the edge of her orgasm countless times. After what felt like an eon he slid up her body, and resting on top of her, he found her panting with need.

“You must let me come,” she begged. “My body is tingling, I’ve never felt like this. I’m dying.”

“I told you I had other ways to chastise you,” he purred. “Do you remember me saying that?”

“Yes, but why are you bringing it up now?”

“If you’d been very naughty, I’d spank you right now, very hard, then tie you up, and leave you desperately wanting.”

“You wouldn’t.”

“Absolutely I would.”

“You won’t do that now, will you? Not now?”

“No, but if it’s ever warranted...”

“Ooh, Cole, I’ll be so good. Please, will you slide inside me?”

“What are you going to say when you’re ready to climax?”

“Please, Sir, may I come?”

“Move your arms above your head.”

She did as he said, and as he gripped her wrists he thrust inside her, pumping with strong, slow strokes, then lowering his mouth to her ear he began to whisper.

“Close your eyes and listen carefully. Are you paying attention?”

“Yes, Sir.”

How could she possibly listen to anything he might say? His cock was devouring her, with every stroke her tender backside rubbed deliciously against the stones, and his wiry chest hair was exquisitely scratching her nipples. He was asking her to pay attention! How could she?

“At home I have a special room hidden behind a bookcase,” he began, “and in that room I have many wicked toys. I have several floggers, and each one delivers a different kind of sting. I can use them to deliver punishment or pleasure.”

He heard a gasp, then a groan. The thought of his whips lashing across her backside was tantalizing her, and he tightened his hold around her wrists as he accelerated.

“But my floggers are only a small part of what I have waiting for you,” he murmured, his tongue darting out to tickle her ear. “I have shackles, I have riding crops, I have all sorts of vibrators and dildos...”

“Ooh, Cole, I’m so close,” she whimpered, his words sending thousands of butterflies fluttering through her stomach.

He grit his teeth. His orgasm was looming, and in his mind’s eye he was seeing her standing up, spread-eagled, her wrists and ankles tethered to the posts at the foot of his canopy bed.

“I’m going to spend hours learning about your body. Your nipples will come to love, and sometimes dread, your nipple clamps. I’m going to buy a pair just for you, with tiny diamonds, and you’ll—”

“Please, Sir, may I come? Oh, please, please.”

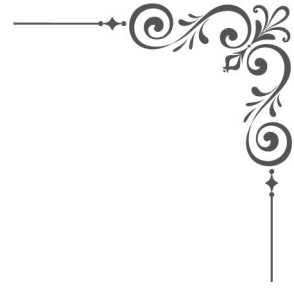
He could picture the tiny clamps twinkling on her stiffened buds. He’d make her wear them beneath her dress and take her out to a fine restaurant and tease her under the table—

“Ooh, Sir, please, may I come?”

Her plea was loud and dire, and abruptly plunging with abandon, he raised his head so he could enjoy the sight of her in the throes of her climax.

“Yes, come for me now,” he commanded, “show me how hard you can come.”

As her body writhed under him, and her cries sent a flock of birds flapping into the air above their heads, he exploded inside her, but even after his spasms had waned, hers continued. It was a glorious sight, and only when she fell limp and breathless did he slip from her depths and roll onto the pebbles beside her. The small stones were cool and comforting, and as she snuggled into him, he let out a heavy sigh. He had, indeed, found paradise.



Chapter Sixteen



Basil had made it abundantly clear to Jack that if he was found on the island again, he'd be carted off to the big boss and things would not end well. Knowing Basil would probably carry out his threat, Jack had made sure Cole and Paige were around the point by themselves. Jack's fears had been realized, and as he'd seen the boats motoring toward the beach he had concealed a small piece of shell in the palm of his hand.

He'd known Basil Holt for years. The man was a low-level member of the local criminal underground, and suffered from a superiority complex and visions of grandeur. Jack hadn't doubted from the beginning Basil was working for someone else, but the identity of the 'big boss' had remained a mystery. It had been a little over a year since Jack had noticed Basil shadowing him. A few months later the pursuit had become obvious, then things escalated and Basil had confronted Jack at gunpoint.

"You're not to go back to that island," he'd exclaimed. "The man I work for won't tell you twice."

"I just go there for some peace and quiet."

"Get real, Jack, we both know that's a lie. Whatever is on that island is gonna be found by him. Stay away or else."

From that moment forward, everywhere Jack went Basil was there, and he could no longer risk visiting the island in daylight. At best he'd be assaulted and end up in the hospital; at worst... at worst he didn't even want to think about.

But he hadn't given up.

In the early hours of the morning he'd slip from his modest bungalow and cruise off to the island, returning home before daybreak. It had been exhausting, and it hadn't been easy navigating his way through the tropical forest at night using a miner's hat to light his way. Many of the deadly creatures were nocturnal and the lamp attracted them, but if he wanted to find the treasure it was a risk he had to take.

When he'd become convinced the precious cargo was hidden in the cave behind the waterfall, he'd carried in supplies, setting up a campsite so he could live there. He'd hoped scattering ancient gold coins into the water off the beach would persuade Basil and his mysterious 'big boss' of the treasure's location. The waterfall wasn't a place anyone would simply stumble upon, so Jack was confident he could stay there undetected.

Everything had been going according to plan, and he'd been on the verge of telling everyone his cover story—he was taking some time off to visit friends in Miami—but he had one last commitment. The charity event at Sandman Cove. Howard Hickson's support for the Ladies of Love obliged him to attend, but after the event he'd climb into Betsy and fly off to the US mainland where he'd spend a couple of days, then have a friend return him to the island where he'd camp at the waterfall until he found the precious cargo. All the supplies were there, except for the satellite phone he'd rent in Miami.

The best-laid plans of mice and men often go awry.

The famous quote had flashed through his head when disaster had struck. Flying Cole Barrington and his young lady, Paige Brooks, to Sandman Cove had been a routine flight, but then he'd come face to face with the deadly cloud. Landing on the island had been his only option, and as Jack had wrestled the plane to safety, having no idea what the 'big boss' might do to him when he was discovered, he'd decided to hand the treasure-hunting baton over to Cole. If there was anyone who was resourceful enough, and who had the heart to understand the importance of finding the treasure for the Ladies of Love, it was Cole. The girl he was with, Paige, Jack didn't know very well, and that had worried him, but only fleetingly. He'd have to leave that question mark up to Cole.

It had been no surprise when Basil had arrived, gun in hand, and Jack had explained it had been the threatening cloud that had sent him from the sky. Jack's claim could not be disputed. The evidence was still hovering over the water, and Basil was fully aware of the bizarre and sometimes fatal encounters with the ominous phenomenon. He'd had to go

miles out of his way in order to avoid it himself, but it hadn't helped Jack's cause.

"I've been told I've gotta bring you in. It don't matter to my boss why you landed here, you did, and now he's gonna deal with you personally."

"Basil, just tell him it was the island or the ocean. What was I supposed to do?"

"He don't care. He said to bring you in so that's what I've gotta do. We're gonna tow your plane around to the other side and leave in that other cove where it'll be easy to hide."

"Is that really necessary?"

"Hell, yeah. People will start asking about you, and everyone knows that old clunker you fly. Sometimes it's not good to be popular, and my boss doesn't want any attention brought to this island."

"How long will I be gone? I don't like the idea of leaving it here."

"Dunno, and Jack, you were pickin' up a couple in Miami. Where are they?"

"They bailed. The female passenger was scared of the small plane."

"You sure they're not here? You wouldn't be lyin' to me, would you, Jack?"

"Look around, scour the island, they're not here!"

Much to Jack's dismay Basil had ordered his men to take a good look around, and during the search Jack had held his breath. Would they find the suitcases? Would Cole think the boats were there to rescue them and make himself known? When Basil declared the search over, Jack had been exhausted from the worry.

As they'd left the island and plowed through the dark calm seas, taking a wide berth around the menacing fog, Jack hadn't been told where they were headed but he knew the waters better than anyone. With seven hundred islands and islets making up the archipelago, Jack could boast he'd visited them

all, and as he'd gazed out the window of the cabin during the journey he'd had a general sense of their location. When he realized they were pulling into a remote beach on Sandman Cove, initially he'd thought his calculations must have been wrong. Why would Basil be taking him to Sandman Cove? Surely Howard Hickson wouldn't be Basil's big boss. That made no sense, but it could be one of the celebrity guests there for the charity event. Once off the boat he'd been hustled across the beach and down a narrow track to a cabana where he'd been left blindfolded and tied up, his ankles together, and his wrists behind him, sitting in a chair.

But he had his small piece of shell.

He'd had no sense of time as he'd patiently worked it against the rope, and his thoughts had been consumed with Cole. Had his dear friend found the letter and notebook? Had he been able to get the better of young Joe? Jack felt sorry for Joe. The poor kid was in way over his head. When Basil had ordered Joe to stay behind in case Jack's two passengers were somewhere on the island, that's when Jack had known Basil thought the island was deserted. The big boss must have told Basil to leave someone there, and Joe, the lowest man on the totem pole, was the obvious choice.

Jack had great confidence in Cole. He was a smart guy, a wily guy, a guy who could figure things out, and Cole could think on his feet. With help from the copious notes in his journal, Jack believed Cole might actually find the treasure, and he was just starting to think about Paige's involvement when the rope was suddenly falling off his wrists.

He was free!

Hurriedly pulling off his blindfold, he realized it was daylight, and fumbling with the rope around his ankles, surprised at how poorly the knots had been tied, he jumped to his feet and was about to bolt, but he paused. Some of Basil's men could be loitering outside. Should he try to slip away, or should he run like the dickens? Should he head to the beach, see if there was a boat moored there, or try to walk to the main house? Then it dawned on him.

Basil had said his boss would be dealing with him personally. It was Jack's chance to find out who the 'big boss' was!

He needed to stay, but how could he remain out of sight? Walking across the room, he opened a door and found the bedroom. Could he lie under the bed? No! Not only was it blatantly obvious, but studying the space between the bed frame and the floor he'd be lucky if he didn't get stuck. Then he saw his watch; it was sitting on the dresser. A quick glance told him it was almost eight o'clock, but not wanting to take the time to buckle it around his wrist, he stuffed it in his pocket.

Moving to the bathroom, he peered inside. There was nowhere to hide, but there was a large window. He could find out if there were any men outside guarding the place. Opening the cabinet under the sink he found it full of supplies, and picking up several bars of soap he moved to the window, opened it up, and threw them in quick succession into the foliage. Instantly birds flew from the trees kicking up a racket, and seconds later he heard shouting. Heart banging against his chest, he raced back to stand behind the bathroom door, and a moment later he heard the front door open, then a man yelling.

"Hey, Bill, the fucker's gone!"

Footsteps charged around the cabana and into the bedroom, then the bathroom door, already ajar, was shoved further aside as the man stormed through, almost banging it into Jack's face. Seeing the open window the panicked guard raced across to it, climbed out, and shouted to his friend as he jumped to the ground.

"This way! Bill, over here!"

Jack let out a heavy breath. In spite of the long white robe hanging on the hook in front of him, had the guard turned around Jack would have been spotted. Listening intently to the shouting back and forth he was fairly certain there were only two of them. They'd be busy for a few minutes chasing down a phantom. It was time to find a hiding place and he had to be quick.

Hurrying back to the living room, the moment he entered he saw a tall armoire set diagonally in the corner. If it wasn't too heavy he could slide it out, duck behind it, and slide it back into place.

Praying it wasn't full of electronic equipment and a million wires, he strode across and opened the doors. He couldn't believe his luck. It was being used as a linen closet! There was nothing that could fall over and break, nothing that weighed a ton, and best of all, not a wire in sight. Holding his breath and saying a prayer of thanks, he took hold of the sides. To his great joy it was amazingly light, and he was able to scoot it out with little effort. The artsy piece of furniture was wide, and as he slid behind it he found a generous amount of space. He couldn't have asked for anything better. Sliding down, he leaned against the wall and willed his heart to stop racing. Now all he had to do was wait. It wasn't long before he heard the stomping of feet and loud conversation. He knew one of the voices. It was Basil. The men entered the room, and he heard another new voice. His pulse, which had finally started to settle, ticked right back up again. It was upper-crust British. It rang a bell but he couldn't quite place it.

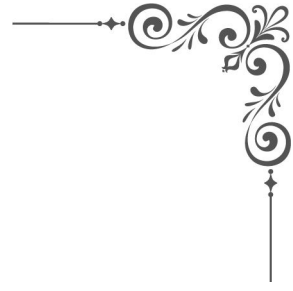
“You fool,” the Brit bellowed, “you clumsy, incompetent fool!”

There was sound of a loud slap. Jack almost laughed. It was so wonderfully English, slapping whoever it was, not punching them in the nose or gut.

“Now what the bloody hell am I supposed to do?” the British man demanded. “He could be anywhere. What if he shows up at the event? You know Hickson has a soft spot for him and that confounded orphanage.”

“The boys will catch him, Mr. Barker. He can't have gone far, and they know all the shortcuts. If he gets anywhere near the house they'll grab him.”

Jack's eyes grew wide. Had he heard right? Wilfred Barker was the big boss? Howard Hickson's right-hand man? What the hell?



Chapter Seventeen



Staring across the serene pond, Cole and Paige stood hand-in-hand watching the powerful flow of water gush down the steep slope. Though they could make out what looked like a large hollow in the cliff behind it, getting there without being dangerously dumped on by the waterfall seemed impossible.

“Any ideas?” Cole asked. “I’m stumped.”

“From where I’m standing it looks as if there’s only one way, and that’s straight through the water. I don’t see any rocks we can climb over to reach it, can you?”

“No, and climbing down from the top looks way too perilous. I take that back. It’s absolutely out of the question. How in the blazes are we going to do this?”

“I wonder how Jack discovered the treasure was in there? Something must have told him.”

“I’d like to know the answer to that question myself. Maybe he didn’t. Maybe he was speculating, though his notes did seem to suggest he knew.”

“I could swim over there and—”

“Stop right there,” Cole said firmly. “You’d have to swim to the base of the falls, and look how turbulent it is. No, it looks way too dangerous.”

“Actually, it’s not,” she insisted. “If it’s too rough I’ll get out of there. We have to do something. We’re not going to learn anything standing here and staring at it; besides, you know I’m a strong swimmer. It’s not a big deal.”

Cole didn’t reply, but stood silently staring at the falls, then turned to face her with a puzzled expression.

“I don’t understand why Jack brought up those waders and that coat. Where was he planning to use them? He couldn’t walk to the cave, not unless we’re missing something. Can you think of any way he could use them to reach it?”

“Are you changing the subject, or did that just occur to you?”

“Uh, no, sorry, it just occurred to me. We’d assumed he’d brought them up to walk through the falls, but did he?”

“Okay, let’s switch gears and see if we can answer that question. Why did Jack bring up waders and a coat, and a second question, one that hit me earlier. Why did he bring them up and not immediately use them? Surely he would have been anxious to get in there.”

“That hadn’t occurred to me. You’re right, that’s strange, but that aside, could he have been planning to walk into the pool? Is it possible it’s shallow there and we don’t know it?”

“Oh, Cole, now that’s interesting, and it’s possible. Why don’t we get closer? Maybe we’ll be able to gauge the depth, though it would be easier if I just jumped in.”

“I’m still thinking about that. The pool itself is really calm and I’d love to go for a swim with you, but the thought of you getting close to all that whitewash makes me nervous.”

“I can understand why you’d feel that way,” she said patiently, “but like I said, it’s no big deal, not for me. Why don’t we see how close we can get by foot to start with?”

“For sure,” he replied, “though this pebbled area hits that thick vegetation and there’s nowhere to go after that, not unless you trample through the foliage again, and it looks much worse than what we went through to get here.”

“I can see that,” she said as they started walking forward, “but I still think you’re onto something.”

Moving across the stony beach to the edge of the forest, they found themselves being sprayed from the waterfall, but the perspective of the area had unexpectedly changed, and the entrance to the cave was much clearer.

“Look at that!” she exclaimed. “There’s plenty of room in front of the cave. The problem is getting there. Please let me jump? I promise I’ll be careful.”

“I suddenly feel like saying me Tarzan, you Jane. Are there any vines around here that I can swing on and swoop down to lift you to safety if you get in trouble?”

“I’m not going to get into any trouble, and I might spot something underwater we can’t see from up here. Look how well we can view the cave now, and we didn’t come that far.”

As much as he didn’t want her to go in, he knew she was like a human fish, but the thought of her ducking under the falls and being in danger, no matter how slight, was still unnerving.

“Promise me you won’t take any chances!”

“I promise,” she said solemnly, and taking his comment as his approval, she immediately began pulling off her clothes.

Cole had expected her to step cautiously forward into the pond, but she moved away from him, studying the sparkling blue pool, then reaching a particular point she did a picture-perfect dive and disappeared. He felt his heart begin to hammer, but it was only a few seconds before her head popped up just outside the ring of turbulence.

“It’s fantastic,” she yelled. “Wonderfully warm, and the energy off this is minimal. You have to join me for some fun later. Going down now for a look-see.”

Cole could swim, but nothing like Paige, and while he was tempted to leap in and join her underwater exploration, he didn’t want to end up in some kind of trouble. All he could do was loiter and it wasn’t easy. The seconds ticked by, and staring at the whitewash, as he began to pace he kept reminding himself she could hold her breath for an amazing amount of time. Even so, when she finally surfaced and began to swim toward him, he realized how deeply concerned he’d been.

“You have no idea how I worry when you’re under so long,” he exclaimed as she brought herself to shore, rising from the pool like some gorgeous sea siren.

“You don’t have to,” she laughed. “I held the record for time underwater at my swim club for years, but Cole, I have

news.”

“You saw something?”

“I sure did. There’s a rock shelf, and it runs all the way across the width of the cliff. It sort of rises up to the cave. That must be why Jack has the waders and coat. You’d have to climb around the edge of the forest, and then you could lower yourself down to it and literally wade directly behind the falls.”

“You’re kidding?”

“I’m not. From underwater it looks totally doable. Personally I think it would be much safer to do it without wearing all that gear. If you fell off the ledge you’d be in trouble, although,” she added thoughtfully, “there’s all that foliage you can cling onto. The only scary part would be those last few yards.”

“It sounds like something I could manage, though I wouldn’t want the waders.”

“There’s something else!”

“Besides the rock shelf?”

“Yes, there’s a second cave. I was really tempted to swim inside it, but I promised you I wouldn’t take any chances.”

“Oh, my God, Paige... if you had!”

“I know, I’d be in all sorts of trouble.”

“Yes, you would, but only because I love you so much,” he said, softening his voice. “Any time I put my foot down, it will be because I love you. Remember that.”

“Or you slap your hand on my butt?”

“Especially when I slap my hand on your butt,” he replied, then abruptly holding her face in his hands, he kissed her. “I should spank you for being such a temptress.”

“But you won’t. You wouldn’t want me any other way.”

“The sun’s starting to go down. We still haven’t searched to see if Jack left any provisions up here. I think we should do

that now.”

“The best place to start is in the book,” she suggested. “There were no supplies behind Grandpa’s rock, but remember what he had us do at the beach? It was as if he’d done it before.”

“You mean, hiding our bags and the hamper under all the plants?”

“Exactly.”

“I’ll check it out the edge of the forest, but you can’t, not naked like that. Too many damn bugs. You should dry off and get dressed.”

“Ah, right. I have to remember that,” she nodded. “Okay. I’ll see you back at the shelter.”

Picking up her clothes, she turned to walk back when he unexpectedly grabbed her arm.

“Paige, one second.”

“You look so serious. What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, nothing’s wrong. It’s just... you’re amazing.”

His voice had been soft and warm, and staring up at him she felt like the luckiest woman alive. The man she’d been crazy about for so long was crazy about her too, and he had been the entire time they’d been apart.

“Not half as amazing as you,” she murmured, then worried her words had sound trite, she added, “I mean it. I wasn’t just saying that.”

“Paige, I wasn’t either. Watching you dive into the water so fearlessly is incredible, and when I think about how brave you’ve been, how you’ve tackled everything...”

“But Cole, you’re the one who realized those guys on the beach were bad news, you got us here safely, and you saved me from that snake. You’re my hero.”

“I’m no hero,” he said with a heavy sigh, bringing her wet luscious body into his arms. “I’m just not going to let anything happen to you. No amount of gold—”

“You don’t have to worry,” she murmured, interrupting him. “I’m not going to risk life and limb, besides, if I did, I wouldn’t be able to sit down for a week.”

“You’ve got that right... except... maybe a month! I’ll see if Jack stashed anything in the foliage, and in the meantime take the book,” he said, pulling it from his back pocket and handing it to her. “Check if there’s anything in there that might help us figure out which cave he’s talking about. Now we have two!”

“No kidding. His waders suggest the one behind the waterfall. How could you hide treasure in an underwater cave? I don’t think they had scuba gear back then.”

“You mean they wouldn’t have had wet suits and oxygen tanks on board the galleons?”

“I was being sarcastic!”

“Really?”

“Stop,” she laughed, punching him playfully.

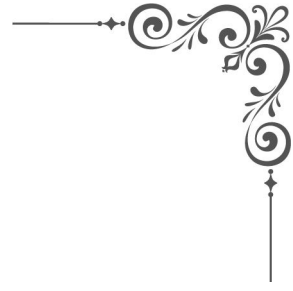
“We’re losing light. I’ll meet you back under the shelter shortly. It won’t take me long to have a dig around.”

“Hurry. You can pretend you’ve kidnapped me and brought me here to ravage me.”

“I like that idea,” he grinned. “Now go get dressed. As much as I love watching you run around naked it’s far too tempting, and there are bugs, remember?”

“Yeah, yeah.”

As she turned to leave he slapped her butt. She squealed, spun around, and shot him a look, then giggling she hurried away. Cole felt his heart swell. He’d never felt so much for a woman. She was *the one*, there was no doubt in his mind, and he’d do anything to keep her safe.



Chapter Eighteen



Inside the tent Paige retrieved the towel from the backpack and wiped away the last beads of water, then pulled out a pair of shorts and a T-shirt. Deciding to lay out the mat and the sleeping bag, she was delighted to discover the mat covered much of the ground. She also discovered the sleeping bag was a single, but that didn't worry her. They had the blankets and the nights weren't cold. Leaving the tent, she returned to the shelter and settled down to read Jack's journal and wait for Cole, but after a while she began to worry. It was getting dark. Where was he? Why was he taking so long? He said he'd only be a few minutes. Unable to stay patient, she picked up her flashlight, left the shelter, and walked across to the edge of the forest.

"Cole? Cole!"

"Paige?"

His voice had sounded a long way off. Why had he gone so far in?

"Cole? Are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm on my way but it's tough going. Could you please get a flashlight?"

"I have one."

"Shine it into the forest toward my voice."

Lifting the light from around her neck, she held it out in front of her. The beam was far brighter than she'd expected, and it lit up the area like a streetlamp.

"That's great, I can see the beam," he called, his voice sounding closer. "It got really dark in here."

A moment later he abruptly appeared, stepping through the thick foliage carrying a large duffle bag.

"Thank goodness! There you are. It was my turn to get worried. What's that?"

“All kinds of supplies, and I found three more bags just like it.”

“Good grief.”

“I know we’ve already said this, but Jack must have spent a lot of time getting all this up here,” Cole continued as he trudged closer. “There’s no question he was planning to stay and I know why. There’s another cave,” he said, breathing heavily as he finally reached her. “I went inside but only a short way. There was a lantern in there and some other supplies, and ropes and tools, but I was losing light fast. I should have grabbed that lantern and used it to come back.”

“Another cave! Remember what he said in his letter? The cave has two entrances. This is so exciting,” Paige exclaimed. “How did you even find it?”

“I’ll tell you everything, but first I need to sit down and catch my breath.”

As they started back, the last rays of daylight seeming to fade even as they walked the short distance, and as they reached the shelter Cole dropped down with a weary sigh.

“You poor thing,” Paige said, sitting next to him. “You look totally exhausted. Was it really heavy going? Is that a bump on your head?”

“It’s nothing, and heavy going? Yeah, it’s a jungle in there, like a real jungle. Check inside the bag. I only did a quick look but I saw a ton of dehydrated camping food, and even some water sterilizing tablets. He was being really careful. I always knew he was a smart guy.”

“Why is there a combination lock on this?”

“Oh, I’ll tell you later, but the numbers are written out along the top.”

Flashing her light on the heavy canvas bag she undid the lock, unzipped the bag, and shining the flashlight inside she began rummaging through the contents.

“I don’t believe it,” she breathed, pulling out a bottle of bourbon. “What the hell?”

“I didn’t see that,” Cole laughed. “Jack does love bourbon. Huh. Well, I have to say, if I was going to stay someplace for a while I’d bring up some adult beverages as well. It just confirms what I thought. He was planning on being here for some time.”

“This is fantastic,” Paige beamed, studying the various foil packages, then suddenly let out a cry of triumph. “Look, a lantern.”

“Great, but isn’t there one in the tent we can use?”

“Oh, shoot, I totally forgot. Yes, there is.”

“Hey, having two is better than one,” he said, switching it on, flooding their enclosure with light. “There, that’s better.”

“I’m suddenly starving. Shall I dig that sandwich out of my safari pants?”

“Absolutely, and granola bars for dessert, and I’ll have some of that bourbon as well. In fact, I could use a drink right now.”

“It’s all in the tent,” she said, handing him the bottle. “I’ll be right back.”

As Paige left to fetch their dinner, Cole opened the bourbon and took a swallow. The warm liquor glided down his throat and he let out a long grateful breath. The thick foliage wasn’t the only thing that had held him up. His ankle had become tangled in a plethora of vines, and when he’d fallen he’d hit his head on an exposed tree root. Though it hadn’t knocked him out it had been a truly frightening moment, made even more so by the arrival of a curious creature who sat very near where Cole’s foot had become stuck.

In his slightly dazed state and the fading light, it had taken Cole several minutes before he’d been able to recognize the small furry animal staring at him. It was a monkey, a very cute monkey, but Cole knew even very cute monkeys could be aggressive. Remembering he still had a granola bar in his pocket, he’d slowly pulled it out, torn off the end of the wrapper, then tossed it near the little creature but off to the side. If the animal could be distracted, Cole figured he could

sit up and try to free himself. Immediately the monkey chased after the bar, dancing around as he picked it up, and after playing with the paper, the cute chimp began devouring with it with gusto.

Cole had sat up and untangled his ankle, the curious creature watching him the entire time. When Cole had found the thick duffle bags, he'd wondered why Jack had put combination locks on them, only to write the combinations across the top of the bags with a black marker. Now he knew. The monkey—possibly monkeys—must have figured out the zipper and pillaged Jack's supplies.

“Here we are,” Paige said happily, walking toward him holding the sandwich in one hand, granola bars in the other, and a bottle of water under each arm.

“I know you're a multitasker, but that's impressive,” Cole chuckled as he relieved her of the water bottles.

“I didn't want to make two trips.”

Settling next to him and unwrapping the long submarine sandwich, she found it was already sliced in two, and handing him half, she took a big bite of hers.

“Mmm, that's good, much better than I thought it would be,” she declared, taking another bite. “So tell me, how did you find a cave so deep in that tangled mess of a tropical forest?”

“It was shockingly simple.”

“Really?”

“I was looking around for hidden bags in the foliage and spotted a chain lying on the ground.”

“Did you say a chain?”

“Yep. Not a big heavy thing, just a light chain, and when I picked it up I discovered it was wrapped around the base of a tree and led off into the forest. I followed it and it took me directly to the cave.”

“Oh, for goodness' sake.”

“Believe me, I can see why Jack did it. Getting lost in that forest wouldn’t be difficult. The entrance to the cave though, is small and tough to see. It’s surrounded by oddly shaped boulders, but inside it’s a huge cavern.”

“Sounds like it’s our first port of call in the morning.”

“I really hope Jack’s all right,” Cole said solemnly. “How the heck he found that place is a total mystery.”

“Hmm, I wonder if it has anything to do with Mannix,” Paige murmured. “Maybe he took him there.”

“Mannix? Who’s Mannix?”

“Oh, that’s right. I haven’t had a chance to tell you. Jack mentions someone named Mannix in his notebook. He says, ‘I’m really happy that I met Mannix. We’re becoming great friends, but the chain scares him so I have to be careful.’”

“I know exactly who Mannix is,” Cole declared, finishing his sandwich and taking another swig of the bourbon.

“You do?”

“I’m pretty sure Mannix is a monkey. I met him, and that explains why he was so brave when he saw me.”

As Cole relayed the story of his fall, and the cute little animal who had hung around, Paige finished her sandwich, then let out a long, heavy yawn.

“So Jack has befriended a monkey,” she murmured, leaning her head against Cole’s shoulder. “I don’t know Jack well, but I can see him doing something like that.”

“You’re tired.”

“You are too. You looked as if you’d run a marathon when you came out of that forest.”

“I admit, I’m exhausted. It’s hitting me hard.”

“Shall we crawl into the tent and lie down? Everything’s ready. The mat covers almost all the ground. It’s going to be very soft to sleep on.”

“Lying down on anything anywhere would work for me right now,” he said wearily, and gathering up the bits of paper from their snack he dropped them into the duffle bag. “I’m going to move this to the very back of his shelter, then I’ll turn out the lamp and come in.”

“Okay. See you in a minute.”

Taking their water bottles and the bourbon, she made her way to the tent and slipped inside, then switched on the small lantern and stripped off her clothes. As she lay down on the soft foam mat and flapped open one of the blankets, Cole came in, and closing down the tent zipper, he undressed, placed the satellite phone and the gun between the mat and the edge of the tent, then stretched out next to her.

“Please turn out that light,” he murmured. “Do you mind?”

“No, I was going to suggest it myself, and Cole?”

“Yes, Paige?”

“Is this a dream?”

“Of course it is. This could never happen in real life.”

“I thought so. Now I can go to sleep. I just wanted to be sure.”

“Uh... one thing.”

“One thing?”

“How much I love you,” he murmured, “that’s real.”

“Oh, for sure,” she sighed as she closed her eyes. “Me too. That part I know.”



Jack had remained in his hiding place behind the armoire all day hoping he’d overhear more conversations. Several times he’d thought about creeping out to see if he could find something to eat, but then thought better of it. Basil had been in and out of the cabin a few times, and it simply wasn’t worth the risk. At some point in the late afternoon he’d fallen into a

doze, but when he woke up, he not only discovered night had fallen, he had a vague memory.

He'd been at Howard Hickson's villa meeting with the great man himself about some much-needed roof repairs for the orphanage. They'd not been in Hickson's office, but in the study near the entrance hall. Hickson had been called away, and moments after he'd left Jack's phone had chimed. It was a friend of his who managed a bookstore in Miami. Free to talk to him, Jack had asked him if he could locate any books documenting the life and voyages of a famous Spanish sailor from the sixteenth century called Captain Lorenzo Montoya. When the manager had asked him why Jack was so interested, Jack had told him the truth: he was treasure hunting, and believed Montoya had been captaining a ship that had gone down carrying a large amount of gold. Shortly after the call had ended, Jack thought he'd heard something behind him, but when he'd turned around he was alone and the door was closed.

"The door..." he muttered as he came fully awake. "Hickson must not have shut it all the way when he left. That damn Barker was listening. I can't believe it. That's how he found out."

The room was suddenly flooded with light, and Wilfred's voice once again boomed through the air. The cool, collected, detached businessman was ranting and raving and threatening to cut off Basil's balls if he didn't locate their missing prisoner. Though Jack had spent little time in the man's company, Wilfred had always been austere and erudite, and now he was shrieking like a banshee.

"That man has been missing all day. He can't have just disappeared," he heard Wilfred bellow. "Find him, and so help me if this goes wrong I'll have your fucking guts for garters."

Jack heard stomping footsteps, the lights went out, then the front door opened and closed with a bang. Jack took a breath. He'd been smart to stay there. They were still searching, but under cover of darkness he'd at least he'd have a fighting chance, but where would he go? He was on Sandman Cove.

Not a lot of choices. He had many long-time friends in Nassau, but he was loath to put any of them at risk.

Then slowly, the answer began to dawn on him. He knew exactly where to go and what to do.

Checking his watch, he waited ten minutes, and he was just about to slide the armoire away from the wall when he heard the sound of a phone ringing. He froze. To his shock, a second later, he heard Wilfred's voice and the lights came back on.

"Yes, Mr. Hickson, I'll be right there—yes, sir. I'm terribly sorry, I got detained. Yes, Mr. Hickson, I'm on my way."

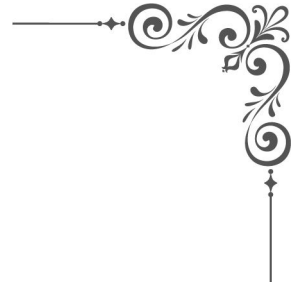
There was a momentary pause, then Jack heard Wilfred pacing.

"Damn you to hell, Jack Miller! I could've sworn you were still in this bloody cabin. You won't get far! Basil and his goons will find you. Fuck! What a bloody mess. Think, Wilfred, think. You're Jack Miller. What would you do? Fuck. I don't have time for this. Bloody Hickson."

The sound of footsteps marching across the floor was followed by the lights going out and the sound of the front door opening and slamming shut for the second time. Jack let out a long breath. Wilfred had been sitting in the dark waiting for him to emerge. It was unnerving. A short time later he heard shouting, a car engine, and peeling tires on gravel as the vehicle roared away. Believing it was now finally safe, Jack slid the armoire away from the wall and stepped out, taking comfort in the thought that at least he had some time; Basil and his cohorts would be back in the forest hunting him.

Absolutely ravenous, Jack headed to the kitchen. Though it was dark and he wasn't about to turn on the lights, he found some instant coffee, several unopened packages of cookies, and a bunch of bananas sitting in a bowl on the kitchen table. Filling the hot water kettle, he set it to boil, wolfed down two bananas, then opened a package of cookies, hungrily devouring one after the other as he waited for the water to boil.

Feeling almost human again, he carried his steaming coffee into the bedroom, hopeful he might find a change of clothes. Basil and his thugs would be looking for a man in a white shirt and slacks, and when he opened a drawer and spied a man's dark green track suit, he couldn't believe his luck. Between gulps of coffee, using a small towel he washed the grime off his body as best he could, then gratefully changed. The track suit was on the large side, but better too big than too small, and rolling up his own clothes to make them easy to carry, he hurried back to the kitchen, rinsed out the mug, and placed it back in the cupboard. He paused, then picked up another package of cookies and a bottle of water, dropping them and his clothes into a cloth bag hanging on a kitchen chair. After a last look around, he started for the front door. He was met with complete silence, and feeling optimistic, he hurried toward the beach.



Chapter Nineteen



The following morning a loud squawking woke Cole and Paige with a start. Alarmed, heart racing, Paige bolted upright.

“What the hell...?”

“Is that right outside the tent?” Cole asked, sitting up next to her.

“What should we do?”

“Whatever it is I’m sure it will take off when we go out there.”

There was a small area above the zipper where Cole could open a flap and look out, and crawling forward he unfastened it and pulled it aside.

“It’s a huge parrot! Come and take a look.”

As he spoke the bird let out another shriek, and scrambling forward, Paige kneeled up next to Cole and peered into the shelter.

“It’s absolutely gorgeous. Why would it come in here?”

“I don’t know anything about birds. Maybe Jack made friends with it like he did with that monkey. Maybe he’s a regular Dr. Doolittle.”

“This place is nothing but sheer entertainment,” Paige laughed. “I hate to quote a hackneyed cliché but it’s like a whole other world.”

“It is a whole other world,” Cole grinned, then grabbing her around the waist he pulled her backwards and rolled on top of her, “but now it’s time to make some entertainment of our own.”

“Um, like what?” she giggled. “What could be more entertaining than a squawking rainbow bird outside our tent?”

“How about this?” he whispered, pushing her legs apart with his and guiding his cock inside her. “Mmm, waking up to

a lovely wet pussy, the only way to start the day.”

“Cole, the things you say...” she murmured, her voice trailing off as he began slowly thrusting and nibbling her neck.

With the sound of the bird’s occasional caws for company, Cole took his time, bringing her to the edge, then backing off and drawing her nipples into his mouth to leisurely devour them until she was begging him to fuck her, or deeply kissing her, lingering his lips and teasing her mouth with his tongue. He continued his tantalizing torment until her pleas for permission sounded sufficiently desperate, then clinging together as their mutual orgasms shuddered through their bodies, they fell apart, breathless and drained, and would have dozed off but for the screeching of their feathered friend.

“My God, he’s worse than a rooster,” Paige muttered, “though I can’t really say that. I’ve never heard a rooster.”

Rolling over and glancing at his watch, Cole was surprised it was almost nine o’clock.

“We should probably get moving anyway. No telling how long it will take us to find this pot of gold, if we even do.”

“At least we have the biggest bathtub in the world right outside our door. Are you game?”

“Of course, and when we’re done we’re coming back to the shelter and I’m going to lean back against that tarp-covered rock wall and put you over my knee.”

Rolling on top of him, she looked at him with wide eyes.

“Why do you think you need to do that?” she murmured as she planted tiny kisses across his face.

“Because we’re about to go into a new environment, and I need to remind you—”

“Not to go marching off. See? I already know. You don’t have to remind me.”

She had kept her voice soft, and moving her kisses to his mouth she pressed her mouth lovingly against his. Though he kissed her back, he also brought his hands to her bottom and clutched her cheeks.

“Your sweet little kisses, as much as I’m enjoying them, are not going to get you out of this, and I suspect you’re a candidate for maintenance as well.”

“Maintenance?” she queried, raising her head and staring down at him.

“You didn’t read about that? Maintenance is a spanking delivered at the same time each week, or month, or whatever, to keep things in balance.”

“Don’t you mean it’s to remind me who’s in charge?”

“That too,” Cole laughed, squeezing her cheeks, “and clearly it’s going to be necessary.”

“You just like spanking!”

“No, I love spanking, and so you do you, love being spanked I mean, even if it does sting.”

“I can’t talk about this anymore. It’s too weird,” she declared, rolling off him, and a moment later the parrot let out a particularly loud screech. “See, he agrees with me.”

“I’ll be gallant and go out first,” Cole grinned. “If that mad bird decides to attack me, grab the gun and shoot it.”

“I will not!”

“I was kidding.”

“Where is it, by the way?”

“I put it with the satellite phone against the edge of the tent, right there,” he said, pointing them out, “and we should take both with us when we head off.”

“For sure. I just hope we don’t need them.”

As Cole predicted, when he unzipped the tent and began crawling out, the large, multi-colored parrot bounced away across the tarp, then spreading its wings, took flight. Emerging from the shelter they found a typically glorious day, and moving across the pebbles they stepped into the tepid pool. They hugged and splashed for a few minutes, then Paige slipped away and began gliding through the water displaying her flowing graceful style. He moved to a shallow spot to

stand and watch her, and when she finally swam over to him and rose from the water not the slightest bit breathless, Cole tilted his head to the side with a wide smile.

“You’re a marvel, and if nothing else we’ve found our own private getaway.”

“We have. It would be wonderful to leave our crazy lives and come here for a break. We’ve only been here a day and I feel as if I’ve been away for a month.”

“Me too. Are you ready to go in?”

“You shouldn’t ask me that,” Paige said, staring back at the pool. “I could stay in here all day, but sure. We have some exploring to do. I wish we had another towel. Do you think he might have some tucked away in those other bags?”

“Highly likely,” he replied as they started up the pebble beach. “I have a feeling Jack brought up everything.”

Rounding the big rock they entered the shelter, and picking up the towel Paige briskly rubbed herself dry, then handed it to Cole, but as she turned to walk away he grabbed her arm.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

“To get my clothes, they’re in the tent.”

“No, not yet, you’re not.”

“But... uh...” she muttered, feeling her stomach flip.

“I told you I was going to spank you and I meant it.”

“And I told you I’ll stay right by your side, or right behind you. I won’t do anything impulsive, I promise.”

“No, you won’t, because I’m going to make sure of it,” he declared, sitting down and pulling her with him. “Lie over my thighs.”

“Seriously?”

“Another rule; do as I ask the first time. If I have to repeat myself...”

He was looking at her with one raised eyebrow and a warning glint in his eye, and in spite of their early morning

romp she felt a fresh wave of wetness between her legs. Wondering for the umpteenth time if there was something wrong with her, and why his authority made her blood run hot, she crawled over his lap.

“Good girl,” he said softly, moving his hand over her cheeks.

She caught her breath. Two simple words, yet they sent her pulse racing.

“I’ll make this short and sharp,” he continued. “Make as much noise as you want, but do not put your hands behind you and do not kick your feet up. Any questions?”

“Why do you think this is necessary?”

“I’ve already told you. Must I spell it out?”

“If I’m going to get my ass spanked, then I’d like to know why... specifically!” she said, adding the last word with a hint of defiance.

“After I expressly told you not to jump the gun, and after you expressly promised you wouldn’t, you attacked a kid who was pointing a gun at me. I know your heart was in the right place, but your impulsive streak got in the way of your common sense. The same thing happened on the way here. You abruptly took off toward the creek. If you’d been bitten by that snake you’d have more to worry about than a sore bottom. Does that answer your question?”

“Uh, I guess,” she mumbled, wriggling on his lap. “I feel weird lying here like this.”

“You’ve got a dominant in your life so get used to it. I love you, Paige, and part of my job description is to do whatever is necessary to keep you out of trouble. If that means reddening your backside, then I’ll redden your backside. That’s how it works, you know that, don’t you, or... you wouldn’t be testing me, would you?”

“Um...”

His hand landed with two hard smacks on her sit spot.

“Owww,” she yelped, instinctively throwing a hand behind her and grabbing her hot skin. “Why did you do that?”

“You know why, now move your hand and answer me. Were you testing me just now?”

Cole’s voice was stern, and looking over her shoulder she uttered a soft whimpering sound.

“I suppose I was... sorry.”

“Do you still want me to be your dominant?”

“Yes, yes, I do.”

“Your spanking was going to be short and sharp, now it will be a bit longer and a bit sharper.”

“But I told you! I owned up!”

“Only after I asked you point blank. I’m going to make sure you understand testing will get you what you want, but more than you want, and I’m also going to make sure you *will* control that impulsive streak, understand?”

“Uh-huh.”

His hand landed with a hot slap.

“Excuse me?”

“Ow, yes, Sir,” she said hastily.

“Are you ready?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Remember, no hands behind you, and no kicking up your feet.”

As he began spanking her, moving his flattened palm with a fast-paced rhythm from cheek to cheek, Paige bit her lip and squeezed her eyes shut. She’d purposefully pushed the envelope to see what he would do, and now she had his answer. Even though she’d only read the blog for a couple of days a year before, she’d devoured the posts and they’d stuck with her. Seeing if Cole was the man she believed him to be had seemed like something she simply had to do. It had almost felt like a rite of passage, but he was spanking her much harder

than she thought he would, and unable to stop herself, she began to wriggle and yelp out her protests.

“You will learn two things about me, Paige,” he declared, his hand continuing to rain down its hot sting. “First, if I tell you I’m going to do something, I will absolutely do it. Take my threats as promises. Second, test me and you will not be disappointed.”

“Oh, Sir, I believe you,” she panted. “Ooh, ow, it hurts, it really does.”

“I’m punishing you. Don’t worry, I’ll spank you for pleasure as well, but that’s not what this is about. Now,” he said sternly, pausing his hand after delivering several hard smacks, “repeat after me, I will think before I act, Sir.”

“Ooh, I will think before I act, Sir.”

“And what will happen if you don’t?”

“You’ll punish me, Sir.”

“Correct. Six hard slaps to underscore the point.”

As he delivered the half-dozen with significant force, Paige couldn’t stop herself from yelling out loud, but she didn’t throw her hands back, nor did she kick.

“Repeat after me, ‘If I test, I can expect to be punished, Sir.’”

“Sir, please, my bottom is so hot now, and it’s stinging like mad.”

“That’s not what I said. Are you going to make me ask again?”

“Ooh, if I test, I can expect to be punished, Sir.”

“Six more to underscore the point, then we’re done.”

Cole chose to land the six slowly, wanting to make sure Paige felt the impact of each slap. This was her first full spanking and he needed her to understand he wasn’t queasy about making her bottom sting smartly if necessary, especially given the fact he was about to lead her into an area of tropical forest that was heavy going and probably offered even more

hidden dangers than their first foray through the thick vegetation.

“There. We’re done. Now you’ll thank me, but before you do, I want you to tell me why.”

“Why I’m thanking you?” she bleated.

“Yes.”

“Because you love me enough to punish me.”

“Is that from the blog you read?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Do you feel that way?”

“Yes, Sir, I do. Thank you.”

As the two words slipped from her mouth and his hand smoothed itself over her burnt backside, she felt a sudden swell of emotion, and shifting her body on his lap, she circled her arms around his neck and leaned against his chest.

“Why is this so amazing?” she whispered as his arms came around her. “Why do I feel so much?”

“We’re connecting.”

“It’s incredible.”

Cole closed his eyes as he cradled her, smoothed his palm down her back, and sank into the deep feelings cloaking them both. He held her until she slowly pulled back and raised her eyes to stare at him, then supporting the back of her head with his hand, he lowered his lips to hers, lovingly kissed her, then gently moved the hair from her face with his fingertips.

“How are you feeling?”

She let out a heavy sigh, then thought for a moment.

“Serene.”

“You sound almost drugged. Do you still want to plow through the forest with me?”

“Oh, very much. I can’t wait to see the cave and explore, but I do feel drained. Maybe I just need something to eat.”

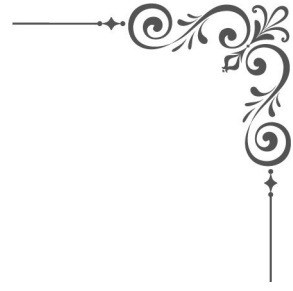
“Breakfast, what an excellent idea.”

“There’s powdered milk and instant coffee in that duffle bag, but I didn’t see anything that resembled a mini-stove.”

“Why don’t you go through the bag, and I’ll have a hunt around in here and in the tent. Maybe it’s tucked away some place.”

“Sounds good,” she nodded, then gazing up at him, she murmured, “Cole, I love you like... I love you like I didn’t know I could love someone.”

“I know what you mean,” he said softly. “It was as tough as walking through that forest to get here, but we’ve found paradise, and it was worth it.”



Chapter Twenty



Cole found what Jack had referred to as a porta-stove tucked away behind the tent at the back of the shelter. Initially he thought it was just a round zippered canvas bag, but when he opened it he was shocked to find a two-burner stove that was fueled by a small propane cylinder. The result was hot coffee, along with powdered scrambled eggs that were surprisingly good, and bread rolls Cole had brought in the backpack. Buoyed by the meal, Paige found her second wind, and after they had cleared everything away, she donned her safari pants and long-sleeved T-shirt.

“I’m excited,” she grinned. “Wouldn’t it be incredible if we actually did find something?”

“I’m excited too, but don’t be too disappointed if it’s a dead end. Just because Jack found a few pieces doesn’t necessarily mean there’s a treasure chest still waiting to be found.”

“I know, but based on his notebook he was pretty convinced, and even if we come up empty-handed we still have the cross and coin.”

“*You* have the cross and coin. You found them,” he declared, stuffing the firearm into the waistband at the back of his pants and the phone in his pocket. “Did you put that bug repellent on your face and hands?”

“Yep, all done, and we mustn’t forget Jack’s notebook,” she said, picking it up and placing it in one of the button-down pockets on her slacks.

She’d flipped through it during their breakfast but hadn’t found anything about the cave, though Mannix was mentioned a few times. It suggested Jack and the monkey had created a bond.

“I wonder if he’ll make an appearance,” Cole remarked. “He sure was cute. Chimps can be trouble though, so if he

does show up, ignore him. Don't try to feed him or make friends."

"You don't have to worry," she promised, kissing him on the cheek. "I got the message loud and clear, or rather, my poor butt did."

He smiled down at her, and after securing the tent and making sure everything was packed safely away, they set off, walking across the pebbles to the edge of the forest. As they started into the vegetation they had only traveled a short distance when Paige began to realize what Cole had meant when he'd talked about how challenging the forest was. Though the sun had been shining brightly when they'd entered, the density of the trees blocked out much of the light, and the sounds echoing around her were so abundant it was almost frightening.

"Talk about another world," she muttered, gripping Cole's arm. "How much further before we reach the chain?"

"It's around here someplace," Cole replied, pushing aside the plants. "I found it when I picked up the duffle bag, and look, there's the second bag I told you about. We'll take that back to the shelter when we return. I couldn't manage both of them last night, and here's the chain."

Lifting it from the ground, he started slowly forward, pulling it through his hands as he walked.

"Be careful where you step," he warned. "There are a ton of vines and exposed tree roots. They're easy to trip over."

"The light's so bad I can barely see my feet let alone what's under them."

The thick plant life had forced her to walk behind him, and looking ahead she felt a wave of dismay; it appeared to be even thicker.

"How are we going to get through this? How long does it last?"

"I know, it's pretty grim. It's not far, but it feels like it is."

"How the heck did Jack find it?"

“I was wondering the same thing, believe me.”

“Aaahh!”

Paige’s sudden cry sent Cole spinning around just in time to see her fall but too late to catch her.

“Paige. Are you okay?” he asked urgently, dropping to the ground next to her.

“I think so, it’s just my ankle.”

“Is it bad?”

“No, I don’t think it’s sprained, but it does hurt a bit.”

“Dammit,” he grunted, moving her foot out of the tangle of thick green vines. “This is exactly what happened to me! I’ll help you up. See if you can put weight on it.”

Bringing her upright, he held her around the waist as she gingerly put her foot down. After a few tentative steps she found she could walk, but with a limp.

“I’m so sorry, Cole.”

“It wasn’t your fault. You can’t see them. I swear it’s as if they leap out from the dirt and wrap themselves around you. I know they don’t but that’s what it feels like.”

“It does,” she exclaimed. “They just curled around me and tripped me up.”

“At least you didn’t hit your head like I did, but you can’t keep going with a bad ankle. There are rocks ahead. You’ll never get over them. I need to take you back. At least it’s not too far.”

“I’m so disappointed.”

“I don’t see an alternative. You could hurt yourself so much worse if you push it, and carrying you out of here would be really difficult. Maybe you’ll be better tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow? What about this afternoon? There’s a first aid kit in that duffle bag. If there’s a bandage I could wrap it for support.”

“I don’t blame you for wanting to try, but getting over those rocks... you could fall, like, fall badly.”

“Tomorrow then,” she said with a resigned sigh. “I don’t want to put you at risk by being an idiot.”

They made their way slowly back, and when the edge of the forest finally came into view she let out a relieved sigh.

“I’ll carry you over the stones to the shelter,” Cole said, lifting her up. “They’re too unstable under your feet.”

“At least they don’t hide ankle-eating vines!”

“You weigh an ounce,” he grinned as he swept her up. “I should have carried you the whole way back.”

“Why didn’t you. I like this.”

“I thought about it, but I was worried I’d trip myself.”

“And you thought nasty bugs and snakes were all we had to worry about.”

“My mistake,” he said as he entered the enclosure and set her down. “Wait there. I’ll get the first aid kit.”

“Where am I going to go?”

“Sassy girl,” he chuckled as he unzipped the duffle bag and retrieved the compact nylon bag.

“It’s not puffing up much,” she remarked, studying her ankle. “It’s too bad we don’t have any ice, but I can soak it in the pool. It’s not very cold but it’s better than nothing, and Cole, you need to go back to the cave.”

“I don’t think so,” he replied, pulling out a bandage. “I don’t want to wrap this if you want to soak it first.”

“But you must go to the cave,” she insisted, ignoring his comment. “We can’t waste an entire day, and nothing’s going to happen to me here. I’ll be fine.”

“I wouldn’t feel right about it,” he said, shaking his head. “I’d be worried.”

“You left me here last night. Please, Cole, at least check things out. You have to, for Jack.”

“This is very difficult,” he murmured. “I wish there were two of me.”

“Do some exploring then come back for lunch. If you’re up to it you could go back again.”

“Here, take these,” he said, pulling out the gun and placing it on the ground, then reaching for the phone.

“No, you need them much more than I do. What if you fall like you did last night, but you really hurt yourself. You need the phone. At least you’ll be able to call Michael to raise the alarm if something awful happens.”

“No, you need the phone,” he frowned. “If I don’t come back, you’ll need to call for help.”

“What do you mean, if you don’t come back?”

“I’m sure I will, but if something should happen to me, you must have a way to call for help,” he insisted. “It’s a no-brainer. You’re not going to debate this with me, are you?”

“What? And risk another spanking? Are you crazy? My ass hurts more than my ankle.”

“It does?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Maybe that will keep you out of trouble.”

“Does that mean you’re going back to the cave?”

“You’re right, I need to, and as long as you have a way of reaching the outside world if you need to, I feel okay about it, but I’m not going to be long. Do you have your watch?”

“It’s in the backpack. It’s a Cartier. I didn’t want to wear it tramping through the forest yesterday.”

“That makes sense. Let’s see, it’s ten-thirty. I’ll be back here by twelve-thirty. That will give me about an hour or so to explore the cave.”

“Perfect, and I’ll have lunch ready when you get back.”

“You won’t do anything without thinking it through, right?”

“Right! I will probably go into the pool though.”

“No doubt,” he smiled. “I know how much you love it.”

“I do, now please go and find me some treasure.”

Kissing her warmly, he headed off, and as he disappeared around the corner of Grandpa’s rock, though Paige was deeply disappointed she wasn’t going to be exploring the cave with him, she let out a weary sigh. The drama the day before, and the intense sex and spanking had worn her out; she was almost glad of the respite. Placing the phone carefully into one of her buttoned pockets, she picked up the first aid kit, rose carefully to her feet, then hobbling slowly across to the tent she crawled inside, zipping it closed behind her. Gratefully sitting on the soft mat, she found some aspirin, and washing them down with the last of her bottled water, she retrieved her watch, buckled it around her wrist, then letting out a long yawn she stretched out for a nap. As she closed her eyes a second yawn captured her, and listening to the faint sounds of the nearby forest, she felt herself drifting away.



Pushing his way back through the forest, Cole soon found himself holding the chain and following it along. As he arrived at the rocks and climbed to the top, he was once again confounded that Jack had found the cave. It must have been dumb luck, there was no other explanation, but as he clambered down the other side the surprising answer was directly in front of him.

Mannix!

The adorable monkey was sitting on the ground playing with a silver goblet.

“You,” Cole muttered. “Jack saw you with something and followed you. Of course! I wonder how many wild goose chases you led him on before you brought him here.”

The chimp lifted his eyes and stared at him, then jumped up and down and scampered into the cave. Cole quickly followed and found Mannix sitting near the lantern.

“Are you waiting for me to turn that on?”

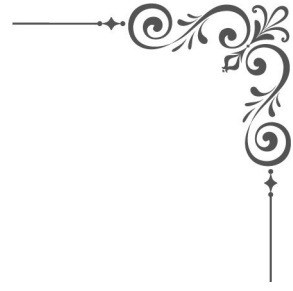
As Cole slowly reached down to pick it up, Mannix began squealing and chattering excitedly.

“You do want me to switch it on. I guess that granola bar earlier won me some trust.”

Lifting it off the ground, Cole pushed the power button. It was powerful and flooded the cavern with light, and Mannix immediately scampered into the tunnel. Cole’s heart began to race and his head began to spin. Was he right? Had the cute monkey led Jack to the treasure? Was Mannix leading him there now? Was that why Jack hadn’t used the wet-weather gear, because he hadn’t needed to? Was the second entrance to the cave behind the waterfall?

As he progressed the passage grew narrower, the ceiling lower, and it curved around. The monkey was moving confidently onward, and wishing Paige was at his side, Cole continued to follow him, but an unexpected sound brought him to an abrupt halt. Listening intently, trying to identify it, he moved cautiously forward. The tunnel was taking a sharp turn to the left. The sound grew significantly louder, and in a flash he knew what it was. The waterfall! His heart began thumping wildly. He knew he was going to find the treasure, and as he came around the corner he held his breath.

The passageway opened into a vast cavern similar to the one he’d just left, and beyond it was a rippling sheet of pale blues and grays bathing the chamber in an eerie iridescent glow. It was the back side of the waterfall, but as stunning as it was, there was something even more astounding. In the center of the cavern was large chest, complete with a barrel lid. Loudly chattering, Mannix scampered ahead, and as Cole moved forward and the trunk was illuminated by his lantern, the scene was beyond Cole’s wildest imaginings. Gold coins and jewelry were scattered on the floor, but as he drew closer his gaze fell on something else. Something that made him catch his breath. Something that made his blood run cold. Something that made him glad Paige was back at the shelter.



Chapter Twenty-One



Blinking open her eyes, Paige stretched and yawned. She'd needed the extra sleep, and rubbing her hand over her face, she slowly sat up and glanced at her watch. It was only eleven o'clock. She smiled. She felt as if she'd been out for hours.

"Nothing like a power nap," she mumbled. "Hmmm, maybe I'll take a swim. I have plenty of time."

Leaning over, she studied her ankle. There was some faint bruising but it wasn't terrible, and feeling a pang of hunger she rummaged through the backpack and found an energy bar. Munching it down, she thought about the underwater ledge that ran along the side of the cliff and ended in front of the cave behind the waterfall. It had looked easy to access. She could hoist herself onto it and make her way to the cave.

Think things through. Take a minute to assess the situation. Weigh what's going on and the possible consequences before you act.

As Cole's wise words echoed through her head, her tender bottom reminded her to follow the sage advice. What were the dangers?

The ledge could have some rough spots. If she wore her one-piece swimsuit, that would help to protect her body. The spray from the falls would be significant, and the rock ledge could be slippery; there would be a risk of falling where the ledge met the tumbling water. She could swim below the surface and just above the ledge. She didn't have to walk, and she was always more comfortable under the water than on top of it anyway. The turbulence? No, it wasn't bad. What else? Could she scrape her hands on the ledge? What did she have to prevent that? Nothing she could think of... unless...! Opening the first aid kit, she found a small package of latex gloves. The label boasted three pairs. She could wear all three. That would offer some protection.

Excited at the prospect of reaching the cave, she dug out her bathing suit, and gratefully removing the overly warm slacks and shirt, she slipped it on. Her hair. It would be better if it was tied back in a ponytail. It wasn't imperative, but it might help to keep it from landing across her face and in her eyes if the whitewash stirred it up. She vaguely recalled that Joe had a rubber band wrapped around his baggie of weed. Might there be some left in his backpack from previous baggies? She found several in one of the side zippered pockets. Pulling her hair back, then placing the phone safely in the backpack, she donned the gloves and was about to crawl from the tent when she decided to take the waterproof flashlight. Looping it around her neck, she headed out.

Moving gingerly on her ankle through the enclosure and across the small smooth rocks, she found it bothered her, but not as much as she feared it would, and wondered if she could have made her way through the forest with Cole after all. Reaching the shore, instead of diving in as she usually did, she waded up to her knees then glided gracefully forward. The water felt divine, and swimming languidly toward the ledge, she dropped under the surface and approached it cautiously, lightly touching her palms to the surface. Other than a few jagged spots along the edge, it was remarkably smooth, and maneuvering her body above it she began flowing forward, using her hands on the slab to propel her so she didn't have to kick as much, but as she approached the chaotic water it began bouncing her around. She likened it to air turbulence, and riding through the bumps as she followed the gentle incline of the ledge, she soon found herself rising out of the water behind the gushing falls and directly in front of the cave's entrance.

She'd never been behind a waterfall or in a cave, and the exotic combination was breathtaking. The sound of the crashing water was strangely muted, and the eerie glow inside the chamber, though beautiful, was unsettling. Looking back at the sheet of water she saw colorful prisms in the spray, and though the dancing rainbows were mesmerizing, an odd movement across the pond on the pebbled shoreline caught her attention. Taking a couple of careful steps to the side of the falls to get a better view, she was astonished to Jack moving

quickly past Grandpa's rock toward the forest. She was about to call out but realized it would be a waste of time. Not only would her voice be drowned out, he was already disappearing into the vegetation. Puzzled and somewhat unnerved by his unexpected appearance, she thought about going after him, but a second later she saw something far more startling. The unmistakable tall, thin frame of Wilfred Barker, and next to him a man who looked like one of the thugs she'd seen on the launch towing the seaplane. They were hurrying after Jack, Wilfred's long legs taking exaggerated strides while the other man was almost running as he tried to stay at Wilfred's side.

Panic seized her. What should she do?

Ducking back inside the cave, she tried to calm herself. She needed to think. Pursuing them would be pointless. She'd be no match, and with her unstable ankle she could end up in real trouble. There was only one thing she could do. She had to risk returning to the enclosure to call Michael and have the authorities come to the island, but Jack's warning flashed through her head. *Trust no one*. Did that mean the local police as well? But she had no choice. She had to do something, and Michael wasn't stupid. She'd tell him about that as well. He'd know how to handle things.

Satisfied with her reasoning, she took a long deep breath. She had to move cautiously as she left the cave. The last thing she needed was to fall and bang her head on the hard rock, but just as she took a step a strange squeal pieced the air. She froze. Afraid to look back and afraid not to, the morbid desire to see the source of the shriek compelled her to slowly, breathlessly turn her head, but there was only the eerie glow washing over the front of the cavern, beyond which there was only darkness. She reached for the flashlight, and with her heart banging against her chest and her fingers trembling, she managed to switch it on and lift it into the air. Moving the beam across to the opposite wall, what she saw sent a rush of cold terror through her body. She was staring at a skeleton. Another shriek punctured the chamber, but it was hers.

"Paige?"

Snapped from her horror, gasping for air, the icy hand of fear holding her in its clutches, she was afraid to believe what she'd just heard. With her hands holding the flashlight in a white-knuckled grip she swung it around. Her eyes caught sight of a large trunk, its rounded lid closed and a monkey sitting on top of it, then a moment later a man's shape moved out of the shadows and into the beam of her flashlight.

"Cole?" she shouted, starting toward him. "Thank God!"

"Paige? Don't move!"

His brusque command shocked her, but stopped her dead.

"What is it? Another snake?"

Suddenly the cavern was filled with light, and Cole was in plain view standing a few feet behind the chest holding a large lantern.

"I'm sorry, honey, but stay where you are, and no, it's not a snake. Are you okay? Try to stay calm. Whatever you do, don't come any closer."

"Why were you standing in the dark? Why can't I come over there? What's happening? Fuck. There are skeletons over here. I'm freaking out."

"Take a deep breath, everything's okay. The people, the skeletons, they were killed by arrows or falling rocks. I could be wrong but I'm pretty sure when you get close to the trunk there are booby-traps."

"You're kidding?"

Suddenly Cole was plunged back into darkness, except for the beam from Paige's flashlight.

"Sorry," Cole said quickly, "it's this damn lantern. There," he declared as it came back on. "It has some kind of a loose connection. It's been driving me crazy."

"Oh, for goodness' sake. I was scared enough already. Is that why you were in the dark?"

"Exactly. I had to keep jiggling it to see where I was going. I was on my way out when I heard you scream. Thank God

you did.”

“Oh, my gosh. Cole, I was so freaked out I forgot to tell you. Jack’s here, and Wilfred Barker, and some other guy, one of the thugs I saw on the launch.”

“What? Jack? Wilfred? Are you sure?”

“Of course I’m sure. I was about to go back and call Michael for help.”

“How long ago did you see them?”

“Uh, when I first stepped into the cave, so I guess about, well, since you heard me scream.”

“About five minutes... and they weren’t together? I mean, Wilfred and Jack.”

“No. I caught sight of Jack hurrying to the forest just past Grandpa’s rock, then shortly afterwards Wilfred and the other guy arrived and followed him in.”

“What the hell? Wilfred is behind all this?”

“I guess he must be. Should I go and call Michael?”

“You can’t. There might be more men on their way.”

“I thought about that too, but I thought I had no choice. Cole, I didn’t ask... are you all right?”

“Fine, yes, but dammit. I wish I could reach you.”

Mannix, who had been sitting quietly, unexpectedly began leaping up and down, chattering loudly.

“This is all so crazy,” she declared, staring at Mannix as he jumped from the chest and picked up a gold box lying next to one of the skeletons, “but Cole, we found the treasure! Can you believe it?”

“Yeah, it’s fantastic, but right now all I care about is the two of us staying alive to tell the tale.”

“I’m dying to dash over there and find out what’s inside that trunk.”

“You and me both, but look at what happened to the poor sods who came before us.”

“I’d rather not, thanks very much.”

“I wish I could get to you,” Cole muttered. “It’s like there’s a deadly no-man’s-land between us.”

“What about the monkey?” Paige asked. “He’s okay. Maybe all the arrows and rocks have been used up, or maybe the booby-traps are so old they don’t work anymore, or he’s too light, or too short, or something.”

“That’s it! I can crawl over to you.”

“Are you sure? Cole, please don’t. We’re just guessing.”

“I don’t know how ancient booby-traps work, but arrows fly through the air, not across the floor. There must be ropes on the ground that trip them. I’ll be able to see them, or at least feel them. Move back to the front of the entrance and keep watch. See if anyone else shows.”

“Cole, I’m scared, I don’t want you to.”

“Listen to me. If Wilfred and that other guy are following Jack they’re going to be here soon. With any luck it’s just the two of them, but even if they’ve come alone they’ll be armed and I don’t want to be sitting around here waiting for them.”

“Don’t you want to stay there and help Jack?”

“Paige, the only thing I know for sure is that I want to be with you. I have no idea what to do about Jack and Wilfred, not yet. Please, do as I say. Get to the front and keep watch while I slide across.”

“I’ll lay my flashlight on the ground in case your stupid lantern goes out again,” she declared, taking it from around her neck and laying it at her feet facing him, then added, “I don’t see any ropes anywhere.”

“That was a wild guess. Who knows what they used. Anyway, thanks, that’s a good idea.”

Lying on his stomach, placing the lantern on the ground, Cole began shuffling forward, but only a few moments went by before the unpredictable lantern died again. Grunting with annoyance, having only the flashlight’s beam to light his way, he left the lantern where it was and continued on, pausing

briefly to raise his head to make sure Paige had moved to the mouth of the cave. If the area did have booby-traps and he did happen to trip one the arrows, he didn't want her in harm's way.

Of the five skeletons he'd seen, three had arrows sticking from their bodies, but two had their skull smashed. Were rocks about to come tumbling down from the ceiling, or were his memories of *Romancing the Stone* and *Indiana Jones* making his imagination run wild? Regardless, the bones were a gruesome sight, though as he progressed he wondered why there were three directly in front of the chest, and one along the side of each wall. It was strange.

He was passing the treasure chest, and as he slithered across the ground Mannix decided to join him, scampering alongside. A short time before Cole had thrown the cheeky chimp a second granola bar he'd found in one of Jack's duffle bags. The monkey had been so excited he'd jumped up and down and danced in joy before peeling back the paper and devouring the delicious treat with gusto.

"Sorry, matey," Cole muttered, continuing to feel the ground with his hands as he ventured forth. "I don't have any more treats on me."

Crawling past the skeleton against the wall, Cole felt a chill. In spite of the triumphant discovery it was a grim scene, but spying a rock laying nearby, he was momentarily distracted from his moribund thoughts as a theory abruptly came to mind. Had the two men with cracked skulls lying against the wall been attacked by the three who had met their fate in front of the treasure chest? That made sense. Maybe it was the trunk that was lethal. Though there were precious items scattered around it, the lid was closed. Perhaps someone opening it up was met by a fatal surprise. He was a movie producer, his mind worked visually, and he could see the scene playing out in his head, but he'd reached the point where Paige had been standing, and taking hold of the flashlight he slowly rose to his feet and moved quickly to her side.

"Thank God," she murmured as they hugged. "I've never been so scared in my life."

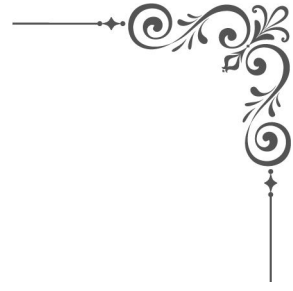
“That’s understandable,” he said reassuringly. “At least we can get back to the tent much faster than going through the forest, and I’m only guessing, but I think I know what happened here centuries ago. Right now though, we have to figure out what to do. Any signs of anyone else?”

“No, not a soul.”

“Great. In that case—”

“There!”

It was Jack’s voice echoing through the chamber. Darting their eyes back into the darkness they saw he was shining a small flashlight on the treasure chest, and bathed in a smattering of light, Cole recognized Wilfred and Basil standing behind him.



Chapter Twenty-Two



Gripping Paige by the upper arm, Cole carefully guided her from the entrance of the cave and a few feet down the ledge out of sight. The spray from the falls was hitting them, but gently, like an early morning mist.

“I’d ask you to run back to the tent and call Michael, but I’m still worried about more of those thugs showing up,” he said with a worried frown.

She stared across at their empty campground, then turned her eyes back to him.

“You know what I just realized? That won’t happen. Those two were following Jack. They had no idea where they were going. How would anyone else know how to get here?”

“I’m an idiot,” he muttered, shaking his head. “You’re absolutely right.”

“What should I tell Michael?”

“Everything, and make sure he understands we don’t know if Wilfred is acting alone or if Hickson is involved. Also, ask him if he can get his LAPD cronies to call Miami and have one of those cops show up. It worries me that Jack told us to trust no one. I realize this isn’t their playground, but they can say they’re here because of us.”

“Because of you. I’m a nobody.”

“You are far from a nobody. You’re my precious treasure,” he said solemnly, “and I wouldn’t trade you for all the riches in the world. Damn, that sounded totally cheesy and like a line from one of my films, but I mean it.”

“I feel the same. Please, please be careful.”

“I will, now let me have the flashlight. Go! Hurry! Make that call.”

Looping the light around his neck, he watched her move down the ledge, then admired her dive into the pool. Though

he wanted to glance into the cave and see what was happening, he needed to make sure she got to the other side safely. When she rose from the water and hobbled forward he remembered her twisted ankle. In the drama it had slipped his mind, and he wished he'd told her to stay in the enclosure. Knowing Paige, she'd make the call then return. There was nothing he could do about it now, and silently cursing himself he moved back to the entrance and peered around. Jack's small flashlight wasn't offering much, and Cole reasoned it was probably all Jack had because he'd anticipated having the lantern when he arrived.

Cole could see the three men were talking. Wilfred was waving his arms around, and though Cole could barely see the other man, the gun the man was holding was apparent. It was impossible to hear their conversation from where he was standing, but if he could slip through the first few yards of the cave's entrance unseen he'd then be cloaked in darkness. Should he risk it? He'd be close to the dangerous no-man's-land of flying arrows from manless bows. The positioning of the skeletons came to mind, and once again, like a movie, the scene played itself out in his head. The three who had bashed in the skulls of the other two had opened the trunk, and voila! Arrows flew through them before they could blink, but there was a catch. Three men. Three arrows. How did a booby-trapped trunk know there'd be three of them?

Pushing his thoughts away, he focused back on the pressing problem; he had to get closer, and hugging the wall he sidled through the eerie light into the shadows. It only took a few seconds, but as he began picking up smatterings of the conversation, something in the cavern was wrong. He paused, trying to figure out what it was, then it hit him. Mannix. The chattering chimp. Where was he? Why had he fallen quiet? He hoped the chimp had run away when the strangers had come into the cave, but if Wilfred and Basil had dared to hurt the adorable monkey, Cole would put his hands around both their necks and squeeze the life out of them.

He was beginning to doubt the viability of the cave being booby-trapped, but he decided to lie on the ground and shimmy forward the way he'd come out to join Paige just to play it safe. He needed to get close enough to hear more, and

wait for an opportunity to get the jump on the two men. He had the gun, and more important, the element of surprise.

“You can believe me or not,” he heard Jack declare. “I’ll say it again. I’ve contacted Hickson and the authorities and they know everything. They could be landing at the beach right now. Go ahead and kill me. I don’t care. The only thing that matters to me is that the orphanage gets the fortune in that chest, assuming there’s a fortune to get, and now I know they will, but if you pull that trigger you won’t just go down for kidnapping, you’ll go down for murder. Do you really want that, Basil? I’ve known you a long time. You may be a crook, but you’re no killer.”

Now Cole knew the name of the man working for Wilfred. It was Basil, and while his voice was gruff, the supposedly tough thug sounded cowardly. Cole was once again impressed by Jack’s brilliant mind. Wilfred may have been the one with a weapon, but Jack had him pinned in a corner.

“Mr. Barker, what if he’s telling the truth?”

“Shut up, you sniveling fool,” Wilfred snapped. “Let me think.”

“Tick tock, tick tock, tick tock.”

Cole cringed at Jack’s taunt. He doubted Wilfred would lose his cool, but he didn’t know Basil, and he was worried that Jack’s jibe would cause the thug to react violently.

“Yes, that will work nicely,” Wilfred muttered. “Yes, very nicely indeed.”

“What will? Does that mean you’ve thought of something?” Basil asked anxiously, sounding like a foolish teenager.

“Of course I have,” Wilfred retorted. “We’re going to take off our shirts and turn them into bags, then Jack is going to stuff them for us and carry them out of there. We’ll cart off as much as we can and leave him tied up on the island. If we ever find that flunky of yours he can keep an eye on him and call us if the authorities do show up. If Jack here is telling the truth

he'll be rescued and we'll take off. If not, we'll come back and get the rest of it."

"Hey, that's a good plan."

"Just shut up and take off your shirt, and his as well."

Cole had to agree, it was a good plan, and he considered letting them take their treasure and leave. Paige was calling Michael, so even if Jack had been bluffing, Wilfred and his sidekick would still be caught and the goods recovered. But the adventurer in him had sprung to life. He wanted to live the movie. He wanted to beat the bad guys and rescue his friend. And he wanted to be Paige's hero.

Continuing to pull himself along the ground, he could hear the sounds of the two men removing their shirts, but as he was about to pass the skeleton against the wall, peering ahead through the dim light, he saw something that made him freeze.

Mannix!

The little monkey was sitting next to the lantern. Was the chimp staying there still and quiet because he was afraid? Why hadn't he bolted? Had he developed a bond with Jack that was so strong he didn't want to leave him? There was only a shred of light, but as Mannix turned his head and stared at Cole, their eyes met. Cole heard a tiny squeak. Instinctively Cole squeaked back, and he could sense they had just become allies.



While Cole had been creeping up on Wilfred and Basil, Paige had been frantically trying to reach Michael. She'd called his office, but was told he was out at a meeting. She'd tried his cellphone. When he didn't pick up she knew it was because he didn't recognize the number, but then she had a brainstorm. Sending a text, she wrote, *SOS. Paige. Call me at this number. Urgent urgent.* A moment later the phone chimed in her hand.

"Michael, thank goodness," she exclaimed, answering the call.

"Sorry. The number didn't register. What the blazes is going on with you two?" Michael demanded. "Are you all

right? Is Cole okay? He left me a—”

There was a loud beeping sound, and pulling the phone from her ear and staring down at the screen she felt her heart sink. The battery was dying.

“Michael,” she said hastily, cutting him off. “We’re in terrible—”

The beep sounded again, and a second later the phone went dead.

“No! No! You bastard,” she wailed, throwing it across the tent. “What the hell am I supposed to do now?”

Taking a deep breath, she tried to calm the panic flooding her body. She needed to get back to Cole and give him the bad news, but as she rose to leave an idea began to dawn on her. She paused, thought about it for a moment, and deciding it was the best option in an impossible situation, she pulled out Jack’s notebook, slid the pen from its holder, and tearing out two blank pages she scribbled two notes.

One said, *Check in the scrambled eggs*. She’d place it at the base of the tent zipper when she left. Cole couldn’t miss it when he came in search of her. The other outlined where she’d gone and what she was planning to do, and she signed it off with a large heart. Moving from the tent into the shelter she opened the duffle bag, found the half-used package of dehydrated eggs, and placed the note and Jack’s book inside. Zipping up the bag, she put the lock in place, then headed into the tent to get changed.

Only Cole would know what the first note meant. The second could not fall into the wrong hands.



Was the treasure chest lethal? The question had been consuming Cole’s thoughts. When Wilfred and Basil lifted the lid would they be drawing their last breath? Cole doubted it.

While Wilfred had prepared the makeshift bags and Basil had held a gun on Jack, Cole had concluded the three arrows embedded in the skeletons had been dispatched by those

tasked with guarding the treasure and had been left as a warning to others. Maybe the guards had killed the other two lying against the walls with their heads bashed in as well. Cole would never know, but the notion that three arrows could accurately be fired into three men by a trap set inside the ancient trunk was too much of a stretch. No. It had to have been humans killing humans.

“Good. These will work,” Wilfred declared, snapping Cole from his thoughts.

“Jack, over to the chest,” Basil ordered. “Let’s get moving.”

“Nope.”

“Whatta ya mean, no?” Basil sneered. “You’ll do what we say.”

“Or what? You’ll shoot me? Nothing’s changed. If you want to stuff those shirts be my guest, but you’ll have to do it yourself.”

“Do it!” Basil shouted.

“Go fuck yourself!”

Basil was a hothead, and unable to control his frustration, with a loud howl of anger he lunged at Jack. The sound of the abrupt violence scared Mannix, who bumped the lantern. Suddenly the cavern was flooded with light, and the lantern’s abrupt illumination did two things. It scared Mannix, who, with a frightened shriek, jumped on top of the chest, and it caused Basil to freeze just as he was about to punch Jack in the face.

Mannix, seeing Basil with his fist raised and about to hit Jack, leapt onto Basil’s head.

Screaming in terror and pain as Mannix’s strong nails dug into his face, and having had no idea what had attacked him, Basil became completely hysterical, and careening around in a blind panic he lost his balance. Mannix vaulted from his head a split second before Basil slammed against the hard rock wall, falling into a heap on the ground. Hearing the clatter of the

gun as it fell from Basil's hand, Cole pulled his weapon, jumped to his feet, and pointed it at Wilfred.

“Freeze!”

Wilfred jumped and spun around. Still utterly horrified from the sight of the creature ripping Basil's face to shreds, Cole's command had almost given Wilfred a heart attack, and seizing the opportunity, Jack charged at Wilfred from behind, grappling him around the neck and hurling him against the hard wooden chest. Wailing in shock and pain, Wilfred hit the ground, then curled into a fetal position with his head buried into his arms, whimpering and begging for mercy.

Spotting the gun that Basil had dropped, Jack snatched it up, and only then did he look across at Cole.

“Hey, Jack!”

“Hey, Cole! Glad you could drop by.”

The two comrades in arms stared across at each other, but just as they started forward the lantern went out.

“That fucking lantern!” Cole exclaimed, trying to find the switch on his flashlight. “You've got to get that damn thing fixed, or buy a new one!”

Jack began laughing, and as the flashlight came on, Mannix suddenly reappeared and began scampering toward Jack, then jumped onto his spot on top of the chest.

“What's funny?” Cole asked, completely exasperated by the unpredictability of the lantern. “I swear that blasted thing has a mind of its own.”

“You have to push the hold button.”

“What hold button?”

“It has a motion detector. It turns on when it's picked up, and unless you put it on hold, it turns off if it doesn't sense movement.”

“I don't believe it! That thing drove me nuts.”

“It's powerful, so it's designed to conserve battery life,” Jack said, still chuckling, “and you, my little friend,” he

continued, turning around to face Mannix, “what a hero you are. Lots of treats for you.”

At the word *treats*, Mannix began a happy dance, and as Jack leaned over the chest, the chimp jumped gently onto his shoulder.

“Meet my new best friend, Mannix. Mannix, this is Cole.”

“We’ve met,” Cole grinned. “We’ve shared granola bars. What a character he is.”

“Yep. I love this guy.”

“Jack, I have to ask, did you really call Hickson and the police?”

“I had to. It’s a story, but yeah, I did. I’ll tell you the details later. They should be arriving soon.”

“Okay, so, what should we do with those two?” Cole asked solemnly, staring at the still whimpering Wilfred and the badly injured Basil who was shaking and crying on the ground.

“Let’s take a good look at them. Turn the lantern back on and push the power button all the way across.”

“Yeah, sure! There’s an idea!” Cole muttered. “You’re lucky I didn’t smash this thing to bits.”

The powerful light showed them Basil was badly in need of medical attention, and Wilfred had begun holding his ribcage, suggesting broken ribs.

“They’re not going anywhere,” Jack remarked, “but one of us should stay here and watch them until the cavalry arrives.”

“I need to let Paige know what’s going on, but Jack, what’s in the chest?”

“I have no idea. I haven’t opened it. That’s the other reason I had to call in for help. I’ve been afraid to.”

“Because of the skeletons?”

“Of course. I don’t want to end up like them.”

“I have a couple of theories about how they were killed, but I’ve just thought of a way we can do it safely. We don’t

have any rope, but we could tie the shirts together, knot one of the sleeves around the handle, and pull the lid up from back here. As long as we're standing behind it we should be okay."

"Damn, Cole, that's brilliant," Jack said excitedly, picking up the shirts and hurriedly creating a makeshift rope. "There. You want to bend over and tie on the handle?"

"Sure," Cole agreed. "I'd be honored. I just wish Paige was here. She'd love this."

"Do you want to fetch her?"

"No, this is probably for the best," Cole said as he leaned over the trunk. "Who knows, we might blow ourselves up."

"You don't think...?"

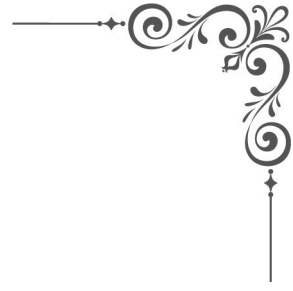
"No," Cole laughed as he threaded the sleeve through the heavy iron handle. "There. We're set."

"I hope it's not locked," Jack remarked as Cole joined him.

"Ah, good point. If it is we'd need a crowbar. We might anyway. You ready?"

"I've been ready for this moment for years!"

Placing their hands around the shirts they began to pull, and as the hinges squealed in protest, eliciting a shriek from Mannix, the lid slowly lifted up.



Chapter Twenty-Three



Cole and Jack ducked behind the trunk. The seconds ticked by. Nothing happened. There were no flying arrows, no explosions, no rocks tumbling from unseen hiding places, and no antique guns blazing.

“You think it’s safe?” Jack asked, lifting his head.

“Of course it’s bloody safe,” Wilfred groaned, still curled up on the floor a few feet away. “You Americans are such cowards.”

“You want another broken rib, buddy?” Jack growled. “Or maybe I can ask my monkey to keep you company. Now shut the fuck up.”

“Yeah, I think it’s fine,” Cole interjected. “Let’s go take a look.”

“I can hardly stand it,” Jack muttered as they moved slowly around the trunk. “I’ve waited so... I don’t believe it.”

“Damn.”

Cole had barely spoken the word. They were staring down at nothing. The so-called treasure chest was completely empty.

“What about all the coins and things lying around on the ground?” Jack lamented. “If someone was here before us they wouldn’t have left it all behind, would they?”

“Yeah, that’s weird, unless there was so much they didn’t care, or they had to leave in a hurry.”

“I don’t believe it,” Jack repeated. “I just don’t believe it.”

“You know, now that I think about it... neither do I. None of it,” Cole murmured with a heavy frown as his eyes traveled around the cavern.

“What do you mean?”

“I think this whole thing was staged. Look at where the trunk is,” Cole began, “it’s set dead center. Walk in the cave

from the waterfall and it's right in front of you. It's saying, here I am. Come on in and check me out. Three bodies are smack in the middle of it, and two more are precisely positioned on each side. It's too perfect. If those men had been victims of a bow and arrow attack, especially one housed in the trunk, they would have fallen backwards. They're virtually sitting up and propped against the chest. And why arrows? They had guns back then. Wouldn't it be easier to set up a booby-trap using the trigger of a gun than a bow and arrow? Whether it was meant as a warning or not, I truly believe this scene was staged. If I was going to put this in a movie and make it believable, it wouldn't look anything like this."

"So... you're saying...?"

"This is nothing but an elaborate distraction. Whoever left the treasure—"

"Captain Lorenzo Montoya!" Jack exclaimed, interrupting him.

"Okay, Captain Lorenzo Montoya didn't booby-trap anything. He did something much smarter. He set this up to scare people off, and left a few coins on the ground so if intruders were brave enough to move past the skeletons and open the lid, they'd assume as we did that the loot had already been taken. Considering what's scattered around I don't think anyone was brave enough, but the treasure hasn't been taken, Jack, it was never here."

"Then..."

"Then obviously it's somewhere else."

"All that work," Jack groaned. "It could be anywhere."

"You're still going to get a shitload of money."

"I am? From where?"

"From my production company. I want to option the rights to this story. It's fantastic. It has everything. Mysterious hidden treasure, bad guys, and a searing romance."

"You and Paige?"

“No, you and Mannix,” Cole laughed, “and speaking of Paige, I have to get back to her. I sure don’t welcome pushing back through all that damn vegetation though.”

“Why don’t you swim back? You can wade down that ledge.”

“Is that why you bought the wet-weather gear?”

“No, no, I got that because we can have downpours here and I didn’t want to get soaked on my trips back and forth through the forest. I only discovered that ledge after Mannix led me in here and I walked to the front of the cave and saw it, but I’ve never used it. I much prefer the hike. I like being on top of the water in a boat, not in it, but you’re strong and fit. You should do it.”

“I’d like to, but I want to keep my gun with me.”

“Hmm. It’ll probably be okay, but you can always try to swim across holding it above the water, although,” Jack murmured, staring at Basil, “look who’s wearing rubber boots.”

“Just what I need!”

Quickly relieving Basil of one of his waterproof boots, Cole dropped his gun inside and held it up triumphantly.

“Well spotted, Jack. That’s going to be perfect. Are you sure you’re okay staying here with these jokers?”

“Are you kidding? Mannix and I will enjoy babysitting. I’ll be praying the entire time that one of them will try something stupid. What was that famous line?”

“Clint Eastwood. Make my day.”

“Yeah, that’s it. I hope one of them will make my day.”

“I’ll go and talk to Paige then come back. You know, I just had a thought. Those rocks around the entrance off the forest, they might be worth thinking about. There could be some hiding places in them.”

“I can barely think about starting all over again,” Jack said with a heavy sigh.

“Maybe you’re not. It has to be close by if this was the distraction.”

“That’s true. Thanks, Cole, but I’m still reeling.”

“Yeah. Sorry, Jack. I’ll see you in a bit and you can drown your sorrows in your bottle of bourbon.”

“Don’t think I won’t!”

Leaving the flashlight with Jack, Cole walked to the edge of the large cavern, stripped off to his underwear, and leaving his clothes behind, gripping the boot, he began cautiously wading down the ledge. The surface was smooth, and not as slippery as he’d feared, and when he reached the place from where Paige had so gracefully dived into the pool, he sat down and slipped into the water holding the boot in front of him. It was wonderfully refreshing, and swimming across the pool with the boot in the air was easier than he thought it would be.

Nearing the shore he realized how overprotective he’d been. It had come from his deep love for her, and as he reached the shore he promised himself he’d lighten up. Moving swiftly up to the shelter he called her name, but receiving no answer he began to worry. Walking into the enclosure and finding it empty, he hurried to the tent and immediately spied the piece of paper sticking out below the zipper. Reading the cryptic message, *Check the powdered eggs*, his concern grew. Hastily popping the padlock and unzipping the duffle bag, he found the dried egg package sitting on the top, and pulling out the second note he began to read.

Dearest Cole,

The phone battery died but Jack and Wilfred must have arrived by separate boats. I might be able to find another phone on one of them, and if not I’ll be able to use their radio, assuming Cupid’s Cloud is gone, which I pray it is. That’s where I’ve gone and I’ll be back soon.

I love you.

H.

Letting out a groan, Cole hurried into the tent. She'd be climbing over the rocks and trudging through the thick vegetation with a twisted ankle, but worse, Wilfred could have left men on his boat. Digging out a pair of pants and T-shirt from the backpack, he hurriedly dressed, donned his loafers, and stuffing the gun in the waistband of his trousers, he hurried off after her.



Paige hadn't gotten very far. She'd managed to make it over the rocks and past the cascading water that flowed over the wide steps, but as she'd crossed the creek she'd reinjured her ankle. But that wasn't what held her up.

As she'd moved through the area that offered so much space and the many trees, she'd been brought to an abrupt halt. A yellow jaw had been sitting directly in her path. Afraid to move past it, she'd decided to do what Cole had done when they'd come through: cross back over the creek, travel further down, then try again, but as she'd turned to walk back she spotted another. It was curled on a rock not far from where she was standing. She realized she'd either not been paying attention, or the reptile had wriggled there after she'd walked by. Either way she was trapped.

She felt as if she'd been standing there forever. She was afraid to move, afraid to sit down, afraid to do anything. Her ankle had started to throb, her lower back was hurting, her clothes were hot and clinging to her sweating body, and her fear was feeding her imagination. The place where Cole had so lovingly kissed her, the place where time had stood still, the place where she had melted into his arms, would be the place she would die. At some point her legs would no longer hold her up and she'd collapse, then the snakes would slither across the ground and bite her, and that would be the painful, miserable, tragic end to her days on earth.

"I love you, Cole, and I'm so, so, sorry," she whispered as the tears fell. "Michael, I love you too, and Mom and Dad, you guys are the best. This is so horrible. I can't even leave you a note... a note..."

As her murmurings faded, a sliver of hope emerged from her dark thoughts. Maybe Cole would decide to come after her after he read her message.

“Oh, Cole, please, please come and look for me. Please... I can't stand up much longer... I'm so scared...”



Moving swiftly, Cole had made it over the rocks and was crossing the creek, but as he reached the other side, though he was anxious to catch up to her, he slowed his step. This part of the forest was the easiest to navigate, but it was probably the most dangerous. There was plenty of room for creatures to move around, and the abundant sounds were evidence of their existence. As he walked forward his eyes darted from side to side, and as he neared the area where he needed to turn left and follow the track, he heard her before he saw her. She was sobbing, and as the profile of a lone figure standing stock still in the middle of the open space came into view, he caught his breath. His eyes had fallen on the yellow jaw between them, but that didn't explain why she was crying, and why she was standing there like a statue.

“Paige. Paige, I'm here. Sweetheart, what's wrong?”

“Cole? Oh, Cole, thank God. I'm so scared. The snakes... there's one in front of me and one right over there. Do you see it? It's right over there. I'm afraid to move.”

“I see it, but I'm here now,” he said, hoping he sounded reassuring. “It's going to be fine. Just try to relax. Everything will be fine.”

“How will it be fine? I can't go forward and I can't come back to you.”

Her voice was high-pitched and terrified, and looking past her he could see the second snake. Obviously the yellow jaws liked the environment. Cole felt a shiver. There were doubtless many more lurking that he couldn't see.

“Paige, I'm going to shoot the one nearest me. It's going to scare a lot of creatures. You'll hear a ton of birds taking off

and probably noises in the brush, but everything will be running away from us, not toward us. Okay?”

“Yeah. Okay.”

“Do you think you can stay still? I don’t want you to jump in fright when I shoot.”

“I’ll try.”

“Hold your breath and block your ears and watch me, and as I take aim freeze your body. It’ll be over really fast. Then you need to start backing slowly away, just like you did last time. Got it?”

“Uh-huh. Yeah, I’ll be fine. I will. I’ll be fine.”

Shooting the snake that sat between them was the only option, and though Paige would probably be startled by the shot in spite of his efforts to prepare her, he prayed the other snake was far enough away that it wouldn’t react when she flinched. Lifting his gun from his waistband, he raised it up, took aim, then glanced across at her. She was staring at him.

“Hold your breath, remember, freeze. Don’t jump when it goes off. Ready?”

“Yes,” she said, slowly raising her hands to cover her ears.

He squeezed the trigger and the shot rang out, echoing through the air as the forest came alive and a thousand birds took to the sky. Squinting at his target, as he saw his success he felt the relief flood his body, then stuffing the gun back into his waistband, he darted his eyes back to Paige. She was already walking slowly toward him, but as he moved up to meet her, he could see she was visibly shaking.

“I’ve got you,” he said tenderly, wrapping her up in his arms. “Come on, let’s get you back.”

“I... uh... my ankle... my back... I’m so hot...”

“It’s okay, honey, it’s over now.”

Picking her up, he carried her to the creek, his eyes peeled as he moved, but at the edge of the stream he had to put her down; carrying her across would be too risky. He moved over

the stream first, and as she started he could see the concentration was helping her gather her wits. She crossed safely, but then had to climb up the slope and over the rocks. By the time they'd made it back to the enclosure, though she looked wrung out and she was limping, she was no longer trembling.

"Have some water," he said, sitting next to her and handing her a bottle. "You poor thing. How are you feeling?"

"Like I've been hit by a bus, but at least I'm not shaking anymore. I'm sorry I was so freaked out."

"Hey, I'd be scared shitless too if I was trapped between a couple of deadly vipers. You did great. Seriously. You didn't panic and you didn't try to run."

"I couldn't. Now I know what it means to be scared stiff. Damn, I'm hot. I need to take a swim."

"I'm sure, but you need catch your breath first. How's your ankle?"

"Hurts like hell, and..."

"And?"

"I, uh, I honestly thought I was going to die back there," she mumbled, fresh tears threatening. "My ankle was throbbing, my back... it was aching so badly. I didn't know how long I'd be able to stand there. Thank God you came after me. Why did you?"

"How could I not? I was worried sick about you trying to get through the forest with your bad ankle, and there might have been some thugs waiting for Wilfred on his boat. There was no way I could stay here, and Paige, I wasn't happy when I read your note."

"Tell me, what about the treasure?" she asked anxiously, not wanting to talk about her impetuous departure. "Did you find it? Where's Jack? What happened?"

"As far as the treasure goes, the chest was empty and there were no booby-traps. There's more about that, but I'll tell you the details later. The police are on their way. Jack called them,

and he called Howard Hickson as well, so Hickson would have contacted Michael.”

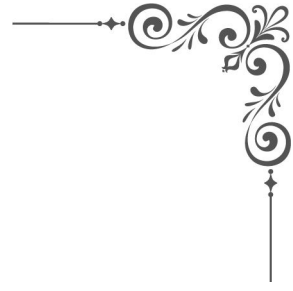
“That’s a relief, about Michael, I mean. I only got to speak to him for a minute and what I said would have panicked him I’m sure, but there was no treasure?”

“Just what was scattered on the ground.”

“You’re joking? All this for nothing?”

“Um, I wouldn’t say nothing. I found what I was looking for,” he murmured, locking her eyes. “What about you?”

“Cole,” she sighed, staring back at him, “yes, yes, I did, one thousand percent.”



Chapter Twenty-Four



A short time later, with Cole at her side and having changed into her swimsuit, Paige limped gingerly down to the picture-book, pale blue water. Cole wanted to return to the cave and check on Jack, and having quickly pulled on a pair of shorts, he was carrying their last granola bar for Mannix, still safely wrapped in its gold foil package.

“This is amazing,” Paige murmured as she slid into the pool to take her much-needed swim.

Cole saw fresh life fill her soul, and as she duck-dived, then reappeared, he swam over to her, wrapped his fingers into her hair, and planted his lips on hers.

“Mmm, what did I do to deserve that?”

“You’re alive.”

“Thanks to you,” she said solemnly. “Are you very angry with me?”

“Yes, very.”

“I did it again, didn’t I? I took off without thinking things through. I was just so worried. When the battery went dead on the phone and—”

“Hey,” he said, dropping her hair and putting a finger against her lips, “it’s who you are, I just have to accept it, and I’m sure there are times when you do something impulsive and it works out great. Besides, it will be a constant source of unpredictability. Routine is comforting but it can also be boring. Surprises keep things interesting.”

“I thought you’d be furious.”

“Oh, I’m definitely not happy with you, young lady, and believe me, you will feel my displeasure at the first opportunity.”

“I had a feeling you might say something like that.”

“I can’t just let it go.”

“Yes, you can.”

“You don’t really believe that, do you?”

“Kind of. The circumstances—”

“Called for cool, calm, collected thinking.”

“You just want an excuse to spank me again.”

“Well, there is that,” he chuckled. “Are you complaining?”

“Not yet, but I probably will be,” she replied, but his chuckle was contagious, and she found herself unable to suppress the grin that curled the edges of her mouth. “Aren’t you going to see Jack? I thought that’s why you came in with me.”

“I needed to see you first.”

“But you’d already seen me.”

“Not enough, but now I’m good. You go do your swimming thing and I’ll head to the cave. I know you’re really a mermaid. You just pretend to be human.”

“This is true! Later.”

Taking a breath she disappeared under the surface, and fighting the surge of life filling his loins, Cole swam across to the ledge and hoisted himself up. Entering the cavern he was welcomed by the happy squeals of the heroic chimp, and found Jack had closed the lid of the chest and was perched on top. The coins and pieces of jewelry that had been scattered around the trunk were gone, and Wilfred had moved and was sitting next to Basil, who looked in bad shape. His face, covered with lacerations, had swollen, and Cole suspected the violent thug would be left with permanent scars.

“Hey, Jack, any dramas?”

“Nope, but I have something for you,” Jack replied, slipping off the chest and walking up to greet him. “Let’s move over here. While I was collecting the coins off the floor I found this. I want you to have it,” he said, lowering his voice as he handed Cole a piece of jewelry.

It was a gold ring, and as he studied it, Cole realized it was magnificent, boasting a cluster of sapphires, rubies, and diamonds.

“Jack...”

“I really do want you to have it. My instinct is telling me it belongs to you, and... whoever... uh... well, you know what I mean.”

“I don’t know what to say. Thank you, it’s... well... there are no words,” he murmured, feeling an unfamiliar swell of emotion as he closed his palm around it. “Thank you, really, thank you.”

“Believe me when I say it’s my pleasure,” Jack said soberly, then added, “Everything else that was on the ground is in the chest, and what about you? Anything exciting?”

“Yes, much too exciting. Paige got herself in a spot of bother. She’s all right though. She’s swimming. Where did Mannix get to?”

“He’s on his way over here,” Jack exclaimed as he spied the chimp moving toward them.

“Hey, Mannix, you deserve this,” Cole said, pulling the bar from his pocket.

Tearing the top of the wrapper, he reached out his hand toward the monkey hoping Mannix would trust him enough to accept it. Seeing his treat, Mannix did his happy dance, then scampered across and took it from Cole’s fingers.

“Wow, that was such a high,” Cole grinned. “I wish I had more to give him.”

“I have some in the bags,” Jack offered. “He also likes peppermint candy canes.”

“No wonder he loves you so much.”

“Did you hear that?” Jack abruptly asked.

“Hear what?”

“I thought I heard—there it is again. I think Paige’s calling you.”

“Now what,” Cole muttered. “Dammit, Paige, five minutes, can’t you stay out of trouble for five minutes?”

Stuffing his hand in his pocket he pushed the ring deep into the corner, and grateful it had a buttoned flap, he made sure it was fastened before moving swiftly through the cave and out onto the ledge. Paige was in the water, paddling in place, waiting for him.

“What is it? Are you okay?”

“The flashlight. Do you have it?” she asked urgently. “I need it.”

“First, take a breath,” Cole said brusquely, “then tell me what’s going on.”

“I think I’ve found something!”

“Like what, and where?”

“Remember I told you there’s another cave below this one? When I looked inside just now I’m sure I saw something.”

“You didn’t swim inside it, did you?”

“No, I didn’t go in, I swear. I need the flashlight.”

“What was it you think you saw?”

“It could be a small casket about the size of... I don’t know... a large football.”

“Paige, you’re kidding. I’ll fetch the flashlight and tell Jack.”

“Hurry.”

“Why? It’s not going anywhere. I know it’s exciting, but this is how you get yourself in trouble.”

“You’re right, you’re right,” she declared, “but hurry anyway.”

Shaking his head, but inwardly feeling just as eager as she was, Cole moved briskly back to Jack and reported what Paige had told him.

“This makes all kinds of sense,” Jack said excitedly. “Supposedly Lorenzo Montoya was famous for having

survived shipwrecks when most of the men drowned. Apparently he was a powerful swimmer... besides being a really scary guy from what I've read."

"Initially Paige and I dismissed that cave as improbable because it was underwater," Cole declared, "but if that history is true, and the casket is small..."

"Exactly!" Jack exclaimed. "Montoya would have been strong enough to take it down and leave it there, and he put this elaborate setup together to fool everyone."

"I just told Paige to stay calm, but I'm finding that difficult myself right now. I'm going down with her," Cole said emphatically as he picked up the flashlight, "though I won't be able to stay underwater like she can."

"Damn, I wish I could join you," Jack grunted. "Wilfred and Basil aren't going anywhere, but like I said, I don't do well in the water."

"Wait on the ledge. We'll have an answer pretty quick. All Paige has to do is shine the flashlight on whatever it is."

"Yes, I'll wait on the ledge. I can't stand it. I truly can't stand it."

"Fuck me," Wilfred groaned behind him.

"It looks like you're already well and truly fucked," Jack quipped. "I won't be long. Don't go anywhere."

Wilfred muttered an inaudible comment as Cole and Jack started out, Mannix scampering along beside them, and as they reached the ledge, while Jack pulled off his shoes and socks and rolled up his trousers, Cole waded forward, handed Paige the flashlight, and slipped into the water next to her.

"I'm joining you."

"You probably shouldn't," she said gravely as she looped the flashlight around her neck. "The cave is almost at the bottom. You might not be able to hold your breath long enough."

"Hmmm. Then I'll go as far as I feel comfortable and wait. If you can see it's a box of some kind give me a thumbs up. If

it's just a rock or something, thumbs down, then I'll surface and tell Jack."

"Sounds good!" Jack called, having heard Cole as he started wading down the ledge, "but I won't come any closer. The water's getting too deep."

"No problem," Cole called back, then turning his attention back to Paige, he gave her a stern frown. "Do not, I repeat, do not attempt to pull it out, or swim in the cave, or anything else. Are we clear?"

"Uh-huh," she said soberly, nodding her head. "I promise. I've had enough drama for one day."

"Good, because I'm not Neptune, and if you get in trouble down there I might not be able to help you."

"Understood. Okay, I'm going," she announced, and taking a deep breath she sank under the water.

"Wish me luck, Jack. Here I go."

"Good luck!" Jack shouted enthusiastically as Cole sank down, but as he disappeared he heard someone shouting, and looking across the pond he saw a group of uniformed men swarming across the campground.

Calling back, he waved his arms, the men all stopped and several waved back, then he motioned for them to wait. He wasn't interested in talking to anyone until he knew what was in the underwater cave.



Cole was running out of air. Initially he'd been able to make out Paige and the flashlight beam, but then he'd had trouble focusing and the light had disappeared. He was worried she'd broken her promise and had moved inside the cave, then suddenly the light was back and he could see her moving up toward him. As she drew closer he could see her thumb was pointed upwards, and kicking himself toward the surface, as he broke through, though he was literally gasping for air, he raised his arm in triumph. Jack let out a howl of joy. Still panting, Cole moved to the ledge.

“No telling what’s in it,” Cole managed, “but—”

“Hey,” Paige exclaimed as she popped up next to him. “This is so incredible!”

“What did you see?” Jack asked eagerly.

“It looks like a large, ornate jewelry case. It’s incredibly beautiful, and you’ll never guess what else I found.”

“Don’t tease,” Cole muttered, still trying to catch his breath. “Poor Jack is dying here, and so am I, from lack of oxygen.”

“Look!” Lifting her hand from the water, she held up a large golden key. “I suspect this will open it.”

“My God, is that pure gold?” Cole mumbled. “Where did you find it?”

“The box is absolutely gorgeous, wait ‘til you see it, and it’s a fair way in, maybe twenty feet or so, but as I started to move the flashlight away I saw a rock against the wall. It looked weird, like it didn’t belong there. I had a feeling about it, like it was there to serve a purpose. It was only a few feet from the entrance so I moved in just far enough to reach out and touch it, and as it moved the key fell out. It must have been wedged against the wall. I bet if I examined the rock I’d find a groove. I swear, it was flush against the wall. You absolutely couldn’t see it.”

“That’s amazing,” Cole said, still staring at the key, “absolutely amazing.”

“Which part?” she giggled.

“All of it, but mostly that you thought to move the rock and that the key was there. Why didn’t you see if the rock had a groove while you were there?”

“I figured you’d be running out of air. I didn’t want you to wait.”

“I was, and thank you.”

“May I?” Jack asked, cautiously walking further down the ledge and reaching out his arm.

“Of course! It’s your treasure box,” Paige beamed as she handed the key to Cole. “Here, don’t let him come any further down.”

“No, it’s our treasure box,” Jack corrected her as Cole hoisted himself up and moved toward him. “I would never have found it without you. I owe you two my life, and so much more.”

“Your key,” Jack said as he handed it to him. “I hope it lives up to its promise.”

“Thank you, and the children of the orphanage thank you, and the beautiful ladies who sacrifice so much to keep it going...”

Jack’s voice trailed off, and Cole could see the usually tough guy was becoming emotional.

“It’s a great day,” Cole said warmly, putting his arm around his friend’s shoulder and guiding him back to the safety of the cavern, “but remember, we still don’t know if there’s anything in there.”

“With a key like this,” Jack said, swallowing back the lump in his throat, “I don’t think it takes a genius to figure that part out. This alone is probably worth a year’s worth of donations.”

“You need to put that somewhere very safe,” Paige suggested, having caught up to them, “like, around your neck on a chain underneath your shirt so no one can see it.”

“Great idea, but until I get a chain I’ll have to find some very strong string.”

“Here, use the cord from this,” she said, lifting the flashlight over her head. “It screws together, and it’s fitting, don’t you think?”

“Paige. That’s a brilliant idea. Absolutely brilliant.”

“Cole, in case you hadn’t noticed,” she continued, “there’s a bunch of police waiting for us. When I came up on the ledge they looked kind of frantic.”

“Yeah, I saw them, and we should go, but you take your time, Jack. I’ll let them know you’re here and safe. They can figure out how to get you and those jokers out of here.”

“Thanks. I need a minute,” Jack said gratefully. “It’s... well... I need a minute.”

Impulsively Paige hugged him tightly, then feeling a wave of emotion she quickly headed from the cave, and as Cole shook Jack’s hand, he felt it too.

“Thanks again for... you know...” he murmured, thinking about the priceless ring in his pocket, then turning away, he moved briskly after Paige.



She was already in the water waiting for him to swim ashore, and as he walked down the ledge and slipped in beside her, she looked at him with a question in her eyes.

“Cole, before we go over there, I need to ask you something.”

“Sure. What is it?”

“I don’t want to leave here, not yet. Do you?”

“What did you have in mind?”

“Let’s stay a couple more nights. We’ve got everything we need. We can relax and really enjoy ourselves without worrying about anything. We can ask for a satellite phone in case of an emergency, and have Jack pick us up the day after tomorrow, assuming he’s not too busy. What do you say?”

“You’d rather be here than at a private island with amazing food and all the amenities?”

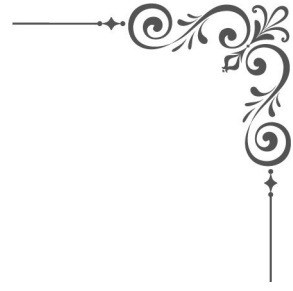
“Any day of the week!”

“Me too! Yeah, let’s do it, and there’s another benefit.”

“What’s that?”

“I’ll be able to spank you and bring you to a mind-numbing orgasm without worrying that someone might hear you screaming.”

“Well, there is that too, of course!”



Chapter Twenty-Five



The lead officer needed to question them all, but before the interviews began Cole asked to borrow a satellite phone. Stepping away for privacy, he and Paige called Michael. It turned out that Howard Hickson had been in touch and Michael knew they were safe, and he had also learned that Wilfred Barker was a closet criminal. After Cole had chatted with him for a few minutes, Michael asked to speak to Paige, and eager to hear his voice, Paige took the phone.

“Michael, I’m so pleased to speak to you.”

“You had me absolutely panic-stricken. Don’t ever do that to me again,” Michael scolded. “I was ready to call out the National Guard, if they have a National Guard out there.”

“If I’d seen the phone was almost out of battery power I —”

“Next time look,” he said sternly, cutting her off, “but you’re okay, that’s the most important thing, and apparently you’re not only okay, you’ll be coming back a very wealthy woman. You’re not going to abandon me, are you?”

“Of course not. I love working for you and I love what I do.”

“Glad to hear it, but now you can’t ask me for a raise.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” she laughed.

“I was kidding. If you keep doing a great job you’ll get compensated and promoted, you know that, and you and Cole have to join me for dinner the minute you get back. I’m dying to hear all the details of your amazing story.”

“And I’m dying to tell you.”

They ended the call, and while she and Cole settled down with the officer in charge to give their reports, with help from a couple of junior constables, Jack retrieved the duffle bags he’d left at the cave and hidden in the foliage. There were six

in all. He had brought them in relatively empty, then filled them by carrying supplies in piecemeal during his nocturnal visits.

By the end of the afternoon Wilfred and Basil had been tended to by paramedics and evacuated, and most of the police had left. The ones remaining were waiting for Jack so they could help him with his plane, and stopping into the enclosure to say goodbye to Cole and Paige, Jack was delighted to hear they'd decided to stay a little longer.

"That's excellent news. You'll have the island completely to yourself, oh, and speaking of having it to yourself, I just heard they found Joe in the forest. Apparently he'd seen Wilfred and Basil arrive and thought they were there to pick him up so he was trying to stay out of sight. He wants nothing to do with them, and from what I understand he's going to tell the police everything he knows."

"Good for him," Paige remarked, then cringing, she added, "I can't believe I almost killed him."

"Just as well you didn't know what you were doing," Jack chuckled.

"If you see him, will you please tell him I'll make sure he gets his backpack?"

"Sure, be happy to. When do you want me to pick you up?"

"We're thinking the day after tomorrow around two o'clock, but only if that cloud is gone. Has it?"

"Yes, it's vanished, thank goodness. It was gone when I came back, but are you sure you want to stay only a couple of nights? You should stay longer."

"No, I think that will be just right," Cole interjected. "I'll think we'll both be ready to go home by then."

"I have to take off. I'm eager to find Betsy and check her out and fly her back, assuming she's okay, then I've got a ton to do."

"You do? Like what?" Paige asked.

“Arrange the professional extraction of the chest, I have to meet with the minister in charge of treasure recovery, and I received a message saying Howard Hickson is anxious to see me, and that’s just for starters.”

“Can you stay for just one more minute? There are a couple of things I need to ask you.”

“Of course. What’s on your mind?”

“I found a gold cross and a coin when I was swimming that first night.”

“That’s wonderful. I hope you’ll get a good amount for them, unless you want to keep them, of course. Are they here? I’d love to see them.”

“No, we hid them at the beach, but aren’t they part of the treasure? Didn’t you drop them in the water to throw Wilfred off the scent? Don’t they belong to you, or rather, the orphanage?”

“My goodness me, no, and I’m not lying to you. I didn’t find a cross here, but even if I had I wouldn’t expect you to give it to me. What you found is yours, and you know, you’ll be receiving a share of whatever we recover, you both will.”

“Not me,” Cole said firmly. “Consider mine a donation to the Ladies of Love, and I still want to option the rights to your story.”

“Oh, for goodness’ sake, you can have my story. Just invite me to the premiere.”

“I think we’ll be discussing this further!”

“As far as my share goes,” Paige said thoughtfully. “I want to join with Cole and donate it.”

“We don’t know what’s in that box yet, but I suspect there’ll be plenty to go around, and you, Paige, are solely responsible for finding it. I won’t let that go unrewarded, and I’m not taking no for an answer,” Jack said firmly. “You said a couple of things. What was the other?”

“I’m dying to know... how did Wilfred and Basil follow you without you knowing? I mean, when you were buzzing

over here on a boat, how did you not see them behind you?”

“Huh, good point,” Cole remarked. “I hadn’t thought about that.”

“Ah, well, Wilfred is one slippery snake.”

“Don’t talk to me about snakes,” Paige said with a shudder. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to interrupt. Go on.”

“He was one step ahead of me the whole time. The only reason he nabbed me was to let me escape. He was hoping I led him back to the treasure, and it worked, I did! I won’t bore you with all the details, but he totally tricked me. Made me think he’d gone when he hadn’t. I took off to the dock where they’d moored their boat and just as I was about to climb on board and take off I saw a couple on the beach having a terrible row, then the woman started screaming for help. I had to see if she was okay, but when I got close I found her laughing hysterically. She told me I’d misunderstood. I thought it was strange at the time because that part of the island is virtually deserted. It had been a total distraction. Wilfred and Basil had climbed on board and were hiding below deck. He’d set the whole thing up. So slick.”

“I guess that’s why he’s Hickson’s right-hand man,” Cole muttered. “Scumbag. I wonder what else he’s been up to. I’ll bet he’s some kind of criminal mastermind.”

“*Was* Hickson’s right-hand man,” Paige reminded him. “He’s not going to be anybody’s anything anymore.”

“I must admit, I’m a bit embarrassed by how easily he outsmarted me,” Jack sighed, rising to his feet, “and one of these days I’ll tell you the whole story, but I have to go. You two deserve some quality time alone.”

“I agree,” Cole said with a broad grin, “and Paige and I have some unfinished business, don’t we, Paige?”

“Yes,” Paige said quickly, feeling her butterflies spring to life. “I promised Cole I’d show him how to practice holding his breath.”

“A mermaid’s secrets,” Jack chuckled. “Don’t get up. I’ll see you on the beach around two o’clock the day after

tomorrow.”

As Jack walked from the enclosure Cole broke into a grin, and leaning closer to Paige, he murmured, “You’ll show me how to do what? Hold my breath?”

“I had to say something.”

“You did? Why?”

“It was weird. I had to.”

“Were you embarrassed?”

“You know I was!”

“Wait until I spank you in public.”

“Whaaaat? No!” she exclaimed, staring at him with wide eyes. “That would be... no! You wouldn’t, would you?”

“Sure, if I think you deserve it, or even if I feel like it.”

“No, no, no!”

“You listen to me, young lady,” he said huskily, his eyes full of wickedness, “you’re going to have all kinds of adventures with me, some in private and some in public, and don’t tell me you don’t have an adventurous spirit. After what I’ve seen these last two days, that claim won’t fly.”

Though she was seated, Paige felt her knees grow weak, and when he unexpectedly dropped his mouth on hers and fervently kissed her, she felt the wonderful flow between her legs.

“Go into the tent, take off your clothes, and I mean *all* your clothes, and wait for me.”

He had whispered his command in her ear, and a warm shiver rippled down her spine.

“But there are still people here.”

“Wrong answer. What should you have said?”

She stared back at him. He was asking her to strip off while the last few officers were still roaming around. It didn’t matter than she’d be safely zipped up in a tent; it was just the thought of it.

“I’m waiting,” he pressed, raising his eyebrows. “Do you think that’s a good idea? Making me wait? What should you have said?”

“Uh, yes, Sir,” she managed, her voice barely a whisper.

“Do you have your watch?”

“It’s in the backpack.”

“Excuse me?”

“It’s in the backpack, Sir.”

She had breathed the words. Her butterflies were now in full flight, and she was aching to feel his hands roam across her body.

“Once you’re naked you’re to rub your clit for one minute. Then stop for five minutes, then continue for another minute, and so on.”

“I can’t stand it, really...”

“You really are pushing your luck. Your beautiful bottom is going to be very red.”

“Yes, Sir,” she said quickly. “One minute, then five, then one and so on, Sir.”

“When I decide to join you, I expect to walk in and find your knees up and your legs to be spread. Are we clear?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Go on, then. Go to the tent, and leave the flap open so I can keep an eye on you.”

Rising slowly to her feet, on wobbly legs she moved across the enclosure and into the tent, zipping it closed behind her. As she removed her clothes, then retrieved her watch, she was almost giddy with anticipation. For how long would he make her wait? How many times would her fingers fall against her sex before he joined her? He would spank her, that was a given, but how hard, and would he make love to her right after? The carnal craving she felt after he’d smacked her backside was nothing short of desperate.

Buckling her watch around her wrist, she lay down and spread her legs, checking the second hand as she moved her fingers into her pussy. The slick moisture that greeted her was no surprise, and closing her eyes she let her mind wander.

She was naked, he was dressed in a smart, dark suit and white shirt, and though he wasn't smiling he wasn't stern or serious either. She was lying on a king-sized, four-post bed, his fingers were trailing over her breasts and lightly pinching her nipples, and he was telling her that he was going to tie her hands to the posts on either side of the headboard, but first, he would blindfold her. Her fingers were dancing against her clit, and reluctantly she pulled herself from the delicious image to glance at her watch. Had it been a minute? No. Ninety seconds.

She'd often fantasized about such things, but never so vividly. Now she had to wait a full five minutes before she could touch herself again. Her thighs tensed. She wanted to go back to her fantasy and allow her fingers to resume stroking her clit, and as the minutes ticked by she became increasingly impatient. Finally the five minutes was up, and sending her hand back to her sex, she let her mind return to the salacious scene.

She was already tied, but he was pulling her legs up and over her head, holding them with one hand as he spanked her with the other. It was such a lewd position, yet so exciting she could feel a fresh flood wash through her sex. He was scolding her as he spanked. Her head told her they'd been to dinner and she hadn't followed his instructions at the restaurant. He'd told her to go to the ladies' room, remove her panties, and bring them back to him in her purse. She'd protested several times before she'd acquiesced.

“When I tell you to do something, I expect you to do it immediately.”

Had it been a minute? She checked her watch. Again, almost two minutes. This wasn't easy. How could she keep track of the time? Had he realized how difficult it would be, and where had that decadent spanking scene come from? Then

she remembered. There had been a picture of the position in the blog she'd read a year before.

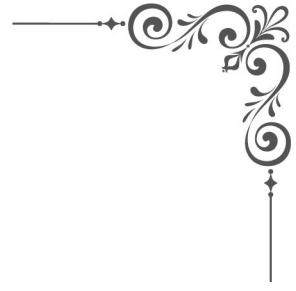
It was now excruciatingly frustrating to wait. She rolled on the mat, squeezed her thighs together, praying Cole would enter the tent. She wanted to unzip it and call out to him. Where was he? What was he doing?

“Ooh, I can't stand this,” she muttered, staring at her watch, willing it to go faster. “This is impossible. Cole... where are you? Please hurry up.”

At last the five minutes was up, and gratefully closing her eyes and returning her fingers to their prurient play, she saw herself on her hands and knees. He was approaching her with shackles, instructing her to move her hands back to her feet and raise her bottom in the air.

“Ah, yes, very nice.”

Her eyes flashed open. Thank God! He was back! She wriggled gratefully as he slowly moved over to her, but then she noticed his eyes. They were carrying a wicked glint, and the edges of his lips were barely curled into a sinister smile. Her heart skipped. He had something planned.



Chapter Twenty-Six



Sitting beside Paige, Cole roamed his eyes. Her nipples were puckered, her chest was rising and falling, and though her eyes were half-lidded he could see their erotic hunger.

“Move your hand,” he murmured. “I’m going to see if you’re wet enough.”

His words elicited a long, low moan, and moving her fingers from her pussy she let her hand drop by her side. She was aching for his touch, and as his fingertips whispered themselves over her sex she wriggled against them, only to feel them slip away.

“Is there something you want,” he softly asked, “or perhaps I should say, something you crave?”

“For you to touch me, Sir?”

“And why did I say I’m going to do that?”

“To check my wetness, Sir?”

“What will I find?”

“I’m very, very wet, Sir.”

“Are you? Let’s see, shall we? Close your eyes, and don’t open them until I give you permission. Are we clear?”

“Yes, Sir.”

Shutting her eyes she held her breath, aching for his caress, but his fingers only threatened to explore her pussy. He teased her, playing with her soft bush, dusting the inside of her thighs with a feathered fingertip, and dropping his lips to kiss her belly button. Her breathing was becoming ragged, she was desperate for more, and she was just about to cry out her anguish when his finger slid inside her slick seam.

“What do you say?”

“Thank you, Sir, thank you, thank you.”

He tickled her clit, then vigorously rubbed as he sent his mouth to devour her nipples, making her gasp and moan and wriggle.

“Do you know what that’s called?” he asked, removing his hand and sending his kiss to her neck as he spoke.

“Heaven, Sir. Sheer heaven.”

“It’s called a reward. As long as you’re a good girl you’ll get many such rewards, and the ultimate reward is your orgasm. Punishment on the other hand, well, it can be quite a bit more than just a spanking. You had a tiny taste of it before I joined you.”

“Sir, what do you mean?”

“I could have you torment yourself for an hour, but with me sitting beside you, telling you when you could touch yourself, and making you move your hand away for five minutes, or three minutes, or ten minutes. How do you think that would be?”

“Very, very difficult, Sir.”

“You’ll keep that in mind if you’re tempted to misbehave?”

“Definitely,” she said urgently, frantically wanting him to return his attention to her sex, to caress her, to hold her, to—

“What did you think about when you were by yourself and your fingers were on your pussy?” he asked, interrupting her thoughts, “and I mean everything.”

The request took her by surprise, and though she was a tad nervous, as his hand brushed between her legs and began gently fondling, her fears evaporated.

“The first time I was lying on a four-post bed and you were in a black suit and white shirt, but I was naked. You said you were going to tie me up and blindfold me, and you were pinching my nipples.”

“Like this?”

“Owww, yes, Sir.”

“Go on.”

“Uh...”

“I said, go on.”

“The next time my hands were already tied, and you, uh, you had my legs up high, they were across my head, and you held them there while you, uh, while you spanked me.”

Abruptly he placed his arm under her calves and moved them swiftly up and over her body. A hot flame crossed her face, and as his hard hand began slapping her backside she let out a wail of protest.

“You mean like this?”

“Owww, yes, Sir, owww.”

“You must have a guilty conscience to have imagined a spanking in this position, and I’m not surprised, leaving here the way you did! Shame on you,” he scolded. “I was just across the pond. It would have taken you five minutes to swim over and check with me.”

His hand had continued to spank as he’d lectured, rising and falling with surety, the force of each slap increasing, until she was squealing and begging him to stop.

“Didn’t we talk about this? I decide when the punishment will end. A few more very hard ones for that.”

She wailed and yelped and squealed, and when he’d finally finished and gently began rubbing her hot skin, she let out a long, soulful whimper.

“Permission to speak, Sir?”

“Good girl for asking. Go ahead.”

“Sir, you spanked me very hard.”

“Of course. You deserved it.”

“I know. Thank you, Sir.”

“Is that all you wanted to tell me?”

“Yes, I just had to, uh, say it. I don’t know why.”

“It wasn’t a complaint, I hope.”

“No, Sir. I just had to express myself... ow, ow, it stings.”

“While I’m rubbing away the burn, tell me what you were thinking about when I came in.”

“I was on my knees,” she panted, “and you were about to shackle my wrists to my ankles with leather cuffs.”

“Show me.”

He moved her legs down and shifted back, and as he watched her roll onto her stomach he began to undress. She was profoundly aroused, and what he’d offered her was a mere appetizer of what he had waiting for her back in L.A.

When he’d sent her to the tent, he’d waited a moment then quietly followed to observe her through the open flap above the zipper. Fifteen minutes of self-stimulation and teasing had driven her crazy. Seeing her writhe with need had made him slightly crazy as well, his stiffening cock making it difficult to restrain himself. He’d wanted to burst into the tent and mercilessly ravage her, and though she’d lost track of time as she’d dallied her fingers against her sex, it was an understandable mistake; once home he’d provide her with a timer. Her fantasies had been illuminating to say the least. Getting into her head, uncovering what made her tick, was as exciting as her physical responses. They were not just on the same page, but in the same book.

She had placed herself with her bottom in the air, her face resting on one side, with her hands pressed against her ankles. It was a lusciously libidinous sight, and now naked, he kneeled up behind her and touched his fingers to the entrance of her drenched channel.

“Imagine you’re wearing those cuffs you saw in your fantasy, and your wrists are secured. Don’t move them. Are we clear?”

“Yes, Sir.”

Paige would do exactly as he said, but she couldn’t wait to feel his shackles. The thought of what was waiting for her once in his home, the hidden closet with all his wicked

implements at his disposal, made her want to forego the two-day respite and race back to Los Angeles, but as she felt his cock approach her entrance, the rambling thoughts flitted away. He was clutching her hips, and she held her breath in wanton anticipation.

With his blood rushing through him, Cole thrust into bliss. Her wail of gratitude fed his fire, and staring at her gorgeously red backside he ravaged her relentlessly, deciding he wouldn't stop until they had reached their apex and were tumbling inexorably into their orgasms. Knowing their cries were heard only by the creatures of the forest, no longer afraid of a looming threat, and aware they were utterly alone, had given them complete freedom to cry out their joy, and as Paige's moment threatened to devour her, uninhibited she screamed out her plea to come. Grabbing a fistful of hair, he yanked back her head as he granted permission, but she was already shrieking through her climax, and as his release seized him, spinning him headlong into the powerful spasms, he groaned loudly. Never had he experienced such power surging through his body.

When he fell next to her, drained and utterly spent, he was breathless and his heart was fiercely thumping. He'd had strong orgasms many times, but nothing so all-consuming. She was curling against him, panting softly, and as he moved his arm around her and she settled into the crook of his shoulder, he felt almost overwhelmed by the surge of emotion that was filling his soul. The ring Jack had given him flashed through his mind.

It was meant for her.

Lying next to him, her body tingling and shrouded in her post-orgasmic serenity, Paige no longer regretted having walked away from him a year before. She had the strangest feeling their love had come to pass exactly as it should, that the months of suffering had brought them to this moment. She wanted to be with him forever, she wanted quiet nights in front of a fire drinking red wine, eating chocolate, and watching the classic films they both loved, she wanted old-fashioned Christmases and birthday surprises, she wanted the romantic

clichés, all of them, and she wanted him to bring her into his world of dark, decadent desires, and meet the many implements hidden away in his salacious secret closet.

“Cole?”

“Paige?”

“I’m not sorry anymore.”

“What about?”

“About ignoring your calls last year.”

He paused. What was she saying?

“I think you need to explain yourself.”

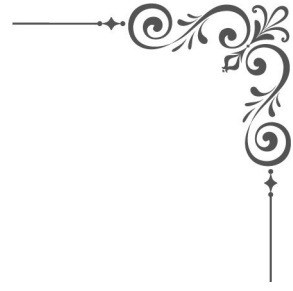
“It’s simple,” she said softly, lifting herself up and gazing down at him. “Everything would have been different. We wouldn’t be here right now, we wouldn’t have found this perfect place, we wouldn’t be in paradise.”

Smiling, his eyes shining his love, he smoothed away the loose locks falling across her face.

“We may not have ended up here in this tent, but would have ended up together. I firmly believe that.”

“You do?”

“Nothing would have stood in the way of us finding paradise, because paradise isn’t a place, it’s us, together.”



Epilogue

THE CHEST RECOVERED from the cave may have been small, but the value of its contents was not. While it contained only a few pieces of jewelry, it was chock full of gold coins, and was touted as the largest bounty of doubloons ever recovered. Cole steadfastly refused any remuneration, but he insisted that Paige take hers.

“You need financial security. You have no idea what’s waiting in the days ahead. You can be generous, but you also have to be smart.”

She finally saw the wisdom of his words and agreed, but she was determined to find a charitable cause for at least part of her windfall.

Jack was granted official permission to continue to treasure hunt on the island. It allowed for his campsite to remain intact, but that wasn’t why he wanted to keep his home away from home. It was his respite from the world, and he wasn’t about to abandon Mannix, but he hired some help and cut a swath through the heavy vegetation off the trail, though he left an intimidating frontage to dissuade any accidental visitors.

When Cole and Paige returned to Los Angeles, Cole kept his promise and began introducing her to his sybaritic lifestyle. She proved to be everything he’d imagined she would be: enthusiastic, eager to please, and adventurous, but she was also challenging, impulsive, and sometimes downright difficult.

Optioning the rights to Jack’s story, Cole discovered he and Paige had guessed right; Jack had been raised in the orphanage. He’d been the son of a single mother who died when he was just four years old, and when no relatives came forth to claim him, the Ladies of Love had taken him in. Not only had they given him a loving home, they had educated him, and had supported his efforts when he’d announced he wanted to become a pilot. In return he’d devoted his life to doing all he could to help them and the many children who

found themselves under their loving care. It was a compelling and heartwarming story and was incorporated into the script, a script Cole insisted be called *Finding Paradise*.

Eager to make up for Wilfred's nefarious actions, Howard Hickson had issued Cole and Paige a standing invitation to stay at one of his cabanas on Sandman Cove any time the spirit moved them, and six months later Cole took him up on his offer, surprising Paige with a trip there for week, promising they'd visit their very special island. She was thrilled.

Two days after they'd arrived Jack picked them up in a motor launch late in the morning. Though she knew where they were headed, as they approached the familiar shoreline her eyes widened in surprise. A large white tent had been set up on the beach where they'd laid out on the blanket and watched the stars.

"We don't have to trek through the forest and find ourselves threatened by snakes on this trip," Cole purred, putting his arms around her, "unless you really want to visit the waterfall, then I'm game."

"I'm not sure yet. Can we play it by ear?"

"That's what this is all about, doing what we want, when we want."

"But we have to take that hike to the top of the island!"

"If you say so," he laughed. "Sure. Why not?"

Promising to pick them up in a couple of days, Jack took off, and as Paige walked into the tent she couldn't believe her eyes. It had a real bed, a table and chairs, and hampers filled with delicious food and wine.

"This is fantastic," she said happily, throwing her arms around him and hugging tightly. "Thank you so much."

He smiled and kissed her, but as she stared up at him she thought she saw an odd glint in his eye.

"What are you up to?"

"Me? Nothing, why would you think I'm up to something?"

“Experience,” she giggled, “but if you’ll excuse me, there’s an ocean out there with my name on it, and I’m going to find myself some more treasure.”

“Please be—”

“Yes, I know, I’ll be careful, but I’m a mermaid, remember?”

“Uh-huh. I’ll set our lunch out then I’ll join you.”

And he did, and they spent the day frolicking in the ocean, walking around the point and back again, picking up conch shells, and dozing on the sand. As the sun slowly sank into the sea they returned to the tent for a light meal, but when the stars came out, Cole grabbed a blanket and insisted they take their glasses and a bottle of wine back to the beach.

“Wow, look at the moon,” Paige murmured as they sat down. “It’s huge.”

“I know,” Cole said softly. “I knew it would be. I planned it.”

“You planned a full moon? I am fully aware you’re an all-powerful being,” she said with a wink, “but I didn’t know you could control the heavens and magically arrange such an amazing sight.”

“Would you like to know how I managed it?”

“Are you sure you can trust me with such an important secret?”

“As long as you promise not to tell anyone.”

“I promise. How did you do it?”

“I checked a lunar calendar.”

Paige laughed out loud.

“I’m serious. I did. I planned this trip so we’d be here on the night of a perigee moon. I wanted us to share this moment, to look at that amazing sight together. I needed us to be right here on this beach... because... uh...”

A frown had crossed his face, and though she didn't know why, her heart skipped.

“Because...?”

“Because when we were here, at the waterfall, I mean, Jack found something very special and he gave it to me.”

“Cole...?”

Reaching into his pocket, he withdrew a small package covered in white silk cloth, and letting it rest in his open palm, he slowly moved away the folds of flimsy fabric to reveal a glossy golden oyster shell.

“The shell I bought,” he murmured. “I thought it was fitting. Please take it... open it.”

Barely breathing, her butterflies fluttering, she lifted it from his hand, and with trembling fingers she slowly lifted the lid. Sitting on a black bed was a stunningly beautiful gold ring with rubies, sapphires, and diamonds set in a unique cluster that shone and sparkled with a thousand hues.

“Cole... oh, my gosh...”

“Paige, I love you with all my heart. Please, will you be my wife?”

“I... of course... oh, my gosh... I love you too... I love you so much,” she sniffled, the happy tears escaping as she leaned into him and wrapped her arms around his neck. “I can't believe this is happening. You planned this? You planned to do this here? With the moon and everything?”

“I know it's probably a cliché...” he mumbled as she pulled back to gaze at him.

“I want the cliché, I love the cliché, I wanted it more than anything and you've given it to me.”

“Then I need to make this official and put this ring on your finger.”

As he lifted it from its bed, he had to fight the heat roaring to life in his throat. He knew he'd be emotional, but the extent of the feelings pouring through his heart was taking him by

surprise. Pausing, he looked across at the huge orange globe hanging low against the midnight blue sky.

“Cole?”

“I honestly didn’t think...”

“Didn’t think what?”

“I could feel all this, meet someone like you,” he breathed, returning his eyes to her. “This ring... there’s nothing else like it in the world, and I’m so happy Jack found it and I can give it to you.”

“You said Jack found it? Sorry, I was so taken aback by everything it didn’t register.”

“It was in the cave. He said he was sure it was meant for me. The minute I saw it, I felt it too. It was meant for me, because it was meant for you. The white diamonds, they’re the stars that shone down on us that first night... right here on this beach. The sapphires are like shimmering blue water in the pool, and you must know what the red is.”

“Cole!”

“The gorgeous crimson of your bottom after I’ve properly spanked you.”

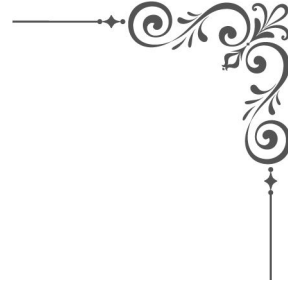
“You didn’t just say that!”

“Do you disagree?”

“Of course not, you’re right, and it’s ridiculously unbelievable. Every moment I’ll be reminded of everything.”

“Exactly. That ring was meant to be on your finger, and you and me...”

“You and me,” Paige repeated, “as long as we’re together, we’ll be in paradise.”



The End

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