

Jeanette Cooper



Desperate
Choices

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by

Jeanette Cooper

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DESPERATE CHOICES

“Welcome”

Synopsis:

Rochelle Rathbone flirts with danger and becomes involved with Tobias Chandler, Miami drug czar; thus, setting the stage for horrors she never knew existed until after their marriage. Guarded around the clock in his Miami mansion, she becomes his prisoner. She devises a desperate plan and escapes, knowing Tobias will come after her. She meets and falls in love with Michael Matheson. She knows there are only two things that will stop his pursuit of her—her death or his...

Prologue

Miami, Florida

Seventeen year-old Rochelle Rathbone walked out of the Miami Mall. Her hands and arms were laden with packages containing new clothing she purchased to spice up her wardrobe for the last weeks of her senior year of high school. After locating her mother's car in the parking lot, she put her shopping bags on the back seat. Sliding under the steering wheel, she was none the wiser that her life was about to take a turn down a path she would one day regret.

"Drive carefully. Watch the speed limit. Watch out for other drivers," Rochelle's mother had cautioned when handing over the car keys.

"Mama, I know how to drive," Rochelle rebutted with her usual defensiveness.

Settling comfortably on the driver's seat, Rochelle turned on the radio. Tuning to a station she liked, she turned up the volume. After cranking the car, she glanced to the left and to the right, trying to see around the rear end of vehicles flanking her car. She didn't see anything moving, so she shoved the gear in reverse, planted her foot on the accelerator too hard, and went flying backwards.

The sound of metal crashing against metal rang in her ears even above the blast of music on the car radio. The impact thrust her forward, banging her head on the steering wheel. A dizzy spell grabbed her, making her vision fuzzy.

Not until her car door was jerked open and an angry voice shouted, "Why in the hell don't you watch where you're going," did she start regaining her equilibrium.

“What?” she muttered, touching her hand to her forehead where it hit the steering wheel. She felt a big bump there.

The angry voice softened. “Are you all right?”

“What?”

With a sigh of impatience, his hand flew past her and turned off the car radio. “I asked if you’re all right.”

“I think I am,” she replied, turning to look at him, and seeing a businessman dressed in an expensive suit with a modest tie and a snow-white silk shirt.

“Here, let me have a look.” Somewhat impatiently he pulled her hand away from her forehead and touched the lump with his fingers.

“Ouch!” Rochelle yelled, jerking away when he pressed too hard.

“You probably need to have that x-rayed,” he suggested.

Rochelle looked at him, finally twisting in her seat to gain a look at his car. She slid out of the driver’s seat and put her feet on the pavement, silently praying her mother’s car hadn’t sustained damage or else it might be the end of her driving days.

Still feeling dizzy, she staggered and fell against the car, raising her hand to her forehead.

The man reached out to support her. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I think I am,” she said, moving toward the back of the car where her car bumper lay against a big dent in the side of the man’s car. A cursory examination of her vehicle showed a broken taillight and a nearly unnoticeable dent on one end of the bumper. “Oh God, my mother will kill me,” she whispered in near tears. “What am I going to do?”

The man shook his head. “I’m going to pull your car forward so I can move mine out of the traffic area and park it.”

Before Rochelle could object, he was already sliding under the wheel of her mother's car, cranking it, and driving it forward into the parking space.

"I'm so sorry," Rochelle said to the man after he moved his car out of the roadway.

"Do you have insurance?"

Her face fell in a worried expression before she blurted out anxiously. "Please don't file a claim against my mom's insurance. I have a little money saved, and if it isn't enough I'll get a job and pay you every penny it takes to fix your car."

"Miss, I'm sure your mother will be so happy to have you home in one piece that the damaged car won't bother her in the least."

"You don't know my mother. She'll never let me drive again. I've got to get the tail light fixed before I go home."

He looked her over carefully, from head to toe and liked what he saw. A lazy smile softened his features. "I tell you what—why don't I drive your car and take you somewhere for a drink and we'll decide how best to handle this."

Rochelle nodded agreeably, eager to do just about anything to keep her mother from learning about her wreck. She didn't think anything was wrong with her going with the man to a restaurant or soda shop, not if he was willing to work with her on a payment plan.

Instead, he took her to a disco club where everyone seemed to know him.

"My name is Tobias Chandler," he said, reaching his hand across the table after they took a booth in a dimly lit area.

Rochelle took his hand. "Rochelle Rathbone," she said timidly. "I can't stay long. I have to get the tail light fixed."

Tobias ordered a coke for Rochelle and a scotch and water for himself. "How's that bump on your head?" he asked, far more friendly now than he was initially.

Rochelle sent him a timid grin. “It hurts, but I think it will feel much better if you’re willing to let me pay for the damages to your car on a time-payment plan.”

He grinned as his eyes scanned over her alabaster skin, her full red lips, and her lovely youthful figure with firm breasts. He shifted his attention to her hair, a glorious shade of auburn red with golden highlights. It hung down upon her slender shoulders in dancing waves and curls. Tobias Chandler decided he wanted Rochelle Rathbone and he always got what he wanted.

“I think we can work something out,” he said, reaching across the table to touch her hand.

She sent him a wide, dazzling smile, her pink lips looking soft, moist and inviting. Girlishly, she grabbed his hand and clung to it. “Oh, thank you. Mother would never let me drive her car again if she learned I had a wreck. I must get the taillight fixed before I go home.”

“I know where you can take it. It’ll be repaired quickly, and then you and I can talk about how you plan to pay me,” he remarked slyly, hinting at something far more intimate than money.

Chapter One

Driving her shiny new car, the combination graduation and birthday present from her parents, Rochelle drove to the address Tobias gave her. She was now eighteen and felt all grown up from the attention Tobias showered upon her. They had met frequently at out of the way places, had talked, laughed, and petted, but nothing more serious. Then immediately after her birthday, he called her private phone to invite her to his home for the first time. The invitation

thrilled her. She drove through a neighborhood that flaunted million dollar homes with gated entrances. When she came to the house number she sought she pulled into the driveway and stopped. A stately mansion was secured by a six-foot fence with spikes around the top and boasted a wrought-iron gate with a small gatehouse. She gazed in awe at the spacious lawns on each side of the long driveway leading up to a huge modern structure of mortar, stone, steel, and plate glass windows that reflected the blue sky.

At the entrance, a guard, with a magazine in his hand, stepped from the small gatehouse. He pushed a button and the gates opened with an electrical whirring sound. “Miss Rathbone, drive forward, please. Mr. Chandler is expecting you.”

A bright smile lit Rochelle’s girlish face, and she drove forward with a sense of expectancy. Awed by such grandeur, she stopped in front of the elegant structure with fascinated interest. She opened the car door, climbing out when she spied Tobias coming to greet her.

“Is this all yours?” she blurted out childishly. Looking upward, she saw the outer walls of the house rising to a height of at least three stories.

Tobias ignored the question, and kissed her. “Come inside and I’ll show you around.” His white teeth flashed behind a wide smile and he seemed genuinely happy to see her. They were no longer strangers. They had been together a number of times since their initial meeting. All their visits had been friendly get-togethers. Now, she had just had her eighteenth birthday and was at the legal age of consent.

The tour led directly up the spacious winding stairs to Tobias’s elegantly decorated bedroom with a king size bed and beautiful furnishings. Sliding glass doors opened onto a balcony overlooking green lawns. Tobias reached his arms around Rochelle and kissed her. His hands moved over her body, taking liberties beyond the

timid familiarities exercised over the past few weeks. The age restriction no longer applied and now he would take what he had wanted since meeting her.

“I’ve been waiting a long time for this day, baby. You know I want you.” His eyes drank in her lovely, creamy smooth complexion and her young woman’s figure.

Rochelle smiled, feeling self-important. Her ego became pumped up by Tobias’s declaration of desire for her. Everything about him thrilled her. Over the weeks when they had met clandestinely, he had touched and fondled her, causing her to yearn for more. Now a simple nod of her head indicated her consent.

With easy abandon, Tobias relieved Rochelle of her clothing and shed his own. His steel-gray eyes scanned her nakedness, the act shaming and thrilling her at once. His hands seemed to be everywhere. A spark of desire struck like lightning as he walked her backward toward the bed, pushing her down until she lay on her back. She had been looking forward to this moment. Having Tobias fondle and entice her over the weeks she had known him had developed into a strong need that begged for repletion. A thrill of anticipation raced through her even while tension tightened her muscles causing her to recline on the bed like a stiff board.

Tobias’s hands slid across her breasts and along the curves of Rochelle’s body to send sensuous chills along the column of her spine. He kissed her until her lips burned with his kisses. He trailed a chain of kisses down to one nipple then the other. The kisses didn’t stop there. They followed a path down to her stomach and beyond. Rochelle’s heart pounded thunderously to her ears.

This was something all new to her. She tensed.

“Relax, baby. Just relax and enjoy it. I’m going to make you feel so good.” He fondled her round breasts to prove it and watched her tiny rosebud nipples rise to delicate pink peaks.

Rochelle was too breathless to speak. She nodded her head, her eyes beseeching him, not knowing what else to expect, but her body was attuning itself to his intimacy.

“You want this, don’t you, baby?” he asked hoarsely, his mouth, hands, and fingers enticing her as never before over the entirety of her shapely body.

Rochelle’s green eyes stretched open wide, resembling a frightened doe. Her response to Tobias’s question was a yes that sounded more like a squeak.

“You have a beautiful body,” Tobias whispered, his voice husky. His hands explored her, touching, feeling, and possessively plundering every inch of her. He slid his fingers up the inside of her thighs. He bent his head again to her lips, while his hand and fingers took liberties with every valley and curve. Although tense, Rochelle became aware of the natural response of her body beneath his bold caresses.

Stimulated by the fiery intensity of his need, Tobias moved between her legs taking a position on top of her. She lay beneath him, still and unmoving. Then he entered her, gently and slowly this first time, finally sending a stabbing thrust to deflower her youth.

“So good, so good,” he groaned hoarsely in her ear just before his explosive release.

He groaned, jerked, and shuddered, letting his full weight rest upon her. Unable to breathe, Rochelle pushed her hands against his shoulders, and he rolled off her, totally spent. He spread out his arms and legs in loose repose with no thought for modesty. Rochelle pulled the sheet up to cover her, diverting her attention to the ceiling.

Rochelle felt needy. She had reached a high point that felt like pure ecstasy in the making, and then nothing when Tobias finished with her. Was that all there was to it? Wasn’t she supposed to

experience some sort of pleasure such as he seemed to gain from their sexual encounter? An unfulfilled longing resided in her lower abdomen.

She glanced over at him, feeling slightly abandoned, wishing he would hold her. She scooted over next to him and spread her arm across his chest, snuggling her face up against his neck and cheek.

“Baby, you’re wonderful. You made daddy feel really good.”

Rochelle winced, wishing he wouldn’t use the word *daddy* in relation to their intimacy. Her daddy would kill her if he knew what she had just done. She snuggled up against him, and the throbbing need inside her was slow to dissolve.

FOLLOWING THAT DAY of lost innocence, Rochelle felt terribly grown up. What few girlfriends she still had seemed young and childish, their example of a night out being a trip to the pizza parlor with the gang. Such pastimes were too tame for Rochelle now after her induction into more grownup activities with Tobias. She had outgrown her old classmates.

Tobias took her to posh restaurants and lively nightclubs and discos. He provided her a wardrobe of expensive clothing, which she kept at his home. He gave her money to buy more anytime she wanted. She grew into their busy nightlife, and since she wasn’t twenty-one, she sipped on cokes while Tobias and his friends drank scotch, bourbon, gin, or vodka.

Following her graduation from high school, she enrolled and started classes at the local university. Her and Tobias’s secret affair—which Rochelle continually hid from her parents by telling them she was going out with friends—went on during her freshman year at the university. When she was ready to start her sophomore year, Tobias decided he wanted to marry her.

At about that same time, Joshua Rathbone, Rochelle's father, learned that all Rochelle's nights out hadn't been trips to the library or outings with her girlfriends after all. Through friends who saw them out in public, he learned of his daughter's relationship with Tobias Chandler.

Rochelle's parents went crazy with shock, anger, and dismay.

"For God's sake, you have to be out of your mind." Angela Rathbone cried hysterically. "The man is old enough to be your father, and if that isn't bad enough, he's a known criminal. Do you have any idea what kind of situation you're getting yourself into with this man? Do you know what you're doing?"

"Mom..." Rochelle started, not with an answer, but with a rebuttal.

Before she could say more, her father interrupted. "Rochelle, you will not see that man again. I forbid it! Do you understand me? I forbid it!" he said in raised voice and controlled anger. The news of his daughter having an affair with Tobias Chandler was the worse news of his life.

"Dad, you can't forbid it. I'm a woman now and have a right to make my own decisions," she quarreled, exercising an uncommon bravado not familiar to her parents.

Joshua hit the ceiling. "A woman! Good God, you're nothing but a child. A woman would have better sense than to let that criminal bastard compromise her."

"He's not a bastard, and it won't do you any good to call him names," Rochelle raised her voice. "I have a right to make decisions about my life. I'm doing what I want, and I won't listen to this."

Joshua was well aware of defiance among young people. It had become a sort of juvenile revolution with youngsters of all ages declaring their independence before they were mature enough to take responsibility for their actions. Once normal households had

become war zones where parents screamed and fought for control by attempting to exercise parental influence, often in a losing battle with their children. With a kind of feel-good mentality among youths, they sought life in the moment, in the fast lane. Drug use was rampant, as was sexual promiscuity. Youth were in turmoil, but Joshua never expected this kind of behavior from his daughter who had a proper upbringing.

Joshua and Angela raised Rochelle in a morally prudent environment revolving around church, community, and civic affairs. They submersed her in a life complemented by good up-right friends, and set proper standards of behavior exemplified by their own conduct. They never counted on outer influences compromising everything taught her at home.

Now, tormented by Rochelle's association with Tobias Chandler, Joshua looked back and wondered where he and Angela went wrong. Perhaps they had protected Rochelle too much, instead of acquainting her with the ills of a sick society filled with drugs, perverse sex, murder, rape, and a hoard of crimes against mankind. Knowing Rochelle was innocent prey to a man like Tobias Chandler, Joshua felt the urge to kill him for destroying his child's innocence.

"As God is my witness, Rochelle," Joshua exploded, a rarity for his commonly dignified manner, "I'll damn well lock you in your room if I have to rather than see you ruin your life with some low-life criminal. Everybody in the justice system knows he runs the drug trade in Miami. He's involved with every low-life who has connections to the drug cartel out of Columbia."

"That's a lie! You're saying that because you don't want me to see him," she argued.

“Do you think I’ve defended criminals in the courtroom all these years with blinders on? The State Attorney’s office has been seeking evidence on Tobias Chandler for several months now.”

“Then why haven’t they arrested him?” Rochelle countered.

“Oh they will, mark my word, just as soon as they get enough evidence to make the charges stick. He’s going down sooner or later, and you can count on that.”

“I don’t believe any of this. You would say anything to break us up. You’re just saying these things about Tobias because you don’t want me to see him.”

“What in the hell will it take to get through that thick skull of yours? Rochelle, Tobias Chandler is a known criminal. He’s an evil and dangerous man.”

Rochelle’s voice rose again. “I don’t believe it! I’ve never seen him involved in anything connected with drugs.”

Joshua guffawed with disgust. “Did you believe he would advertise his illegal dealings? Of course, you don’t see anything suspicious or illegal. Neither does anyone else or the state attorney would have squashed his organization already.”

Rochelle pursed her lips, tilting her head at a disgusted angle, and stared defiantly from the corner of her eyes at nothing in particular.

“Let me tell you a horror story about Chandler. A while back, I represented a man called Hobart Pascal, who was one of the cartel’s front men. The police charged him with murdering an innocent man who accidentally overheard a conversation about a shipment of drugs. Hobart killed the man to silence him. When the trial turned sour, Chandler feared Hobart might make a deal with the prosecutor’s office to turn state’s evidence against him. Hobart was found hung in his cell.”

“Then it was someone else. Tobias would never do anything

like you're suggesting," she stated in bitter defiance.

"No, he wouldn't do something like that directly, but he delegates. It's his job to keep the drug market running smoothly and keep the players out of jail. He has at least a fifth of the police department on his payroll. Drug marketing is big business, Rochelle, and Tobias Chandler is Colombia's kingpin, the liaison between them and drug distribution. Chandler will go down eventually and he'll destroy you with him. Can't you see that I'm trying to protect you?"

Raising her chin defiantly, Rochelle stated adamantly. "Dad, I know you and mom mean well, and I don't want to hurt either of you, but I love him. I can't give him up, and I won't give him up."

"Rochelle, I swear I'll lock you in your room before I'll see you ruin your life on a man like Tobias Chandler," Joshua declared, his face bright red with anger as he hovered threateningly above his daughter, restraining himself from actually hitting her for the first time in his life.

"It would be a tragic mistake for you to try such a thing, Dad. If you make me choose, I'll leave here and go live with Tobias."

Angela came to her feet, her face splotched red. She reached out and slashed her hand across Rochelle's cheek. "How can you be such an idiot? Your father is an attorney and has defended enough criminals that he knows what he's talking about. You need to listen to him. Even I know what Tobias Chandler is. He'll use you until he tires of you and then you'll be found in some lake or dump somewhere. Is that what you want?"

Touching her hand to her stinging cheek, Rochelle jumped up from her chair and raced from the room.

Chapter Two

A stormy Saturday morning blew in with heavy pouring rain. Thunder and lightning boomed and sliced through the atmosphere. Rochelle took advantage of the storm to sleep late. With her energy divided between college classes, studying, and time spent with Tobias, she was exhausted most the time. Last night, she made every excuse to avoid another late night out with him and his associates and their wives, but he wouldn't hear of it. Instead, he demanded she give up her classes. "You won't need college classes after you marry me," he stated offhandedly.

His subtlety didn't escape her. "Is that supposed to be a proposal?" she inquired with a saucy tilt to her head.

"If it were, would you say yes and give up your classes?"

"I like the idea of getting an education. Why should I give it up?"

"Because when you become my wife, you belong to me and I don't want you involved in other activities that take you away from me."

Tobias's possessiveness thrilled her, making her feel extremely special and important in his life. It made her feel wanted and cared for by him. She thought of all the hard work spent in keeping up with her studies, and privately agreed that she didn't need to continue her education. If she married Tobias an education wouldn't benefit her anyway since he wouldn't want her to work.

A clap of thunder cut through her restful sleep, causing her to turn over and glance at the clock. Ten o'clock. God, she was certain she could sleep the whole day through if she didn't have class assignments.

She recalled Tobias's proposal, what he said about giving up her college courses. With a groan, of indecision, she rolled over and

went back to sleep for another couple of hours.

“Chelle, darling, its nearly noon. Aren’t you going to get up? You’re not sick are you?” Angela asked, all too aware of the busy pace her daughter had been keeping with classes, assignments, and Tobias Chandler.

“Ohhhh,” she groaned, rubbing her eyes, “I’d like to sleep all day.”

“Then why don’t you, darling? You look tired. I’ll bring some juice and toast up to you in a little while.”

“No, I think I’d better get up.” She pushed herself to a sitting position, and slung her legs off the side of the bed. Like a zombie, she slid her feet heavily across the floor to the bathroom. Half asleep, she went through all the motions routinely followed for the past several years, showering, brushing her teeth, putting on makeup, combing her hair, and then dressing for the day. Finally satisfied with her image in the mirror, she went downstairs where her father finished his lunch and lingered over a cup of coffee.

“Sweetheart, you look tired,” Joshua said, glancing up as she came into the breakfast room. He and Angela both had made concessions in their feelings about Rochelle seeing Chandler. They feared she might follow through on her threat to move in with him unless they took a tolerant position. They loved her and wanted to protect her, but their frustration at not being able to do so caused a low undercurrent of anger at her defiance.

Rochelle yawned, covering her mouth while she pulled out a chair across from her father. “Just trying to wake up,” she said. The truth was, she was weighted down and tormented by the prospect of telling her parents that Tobias proposed to her.

Perhaps she would wait until dinnertime.

ROCHELLE RUSHED THROUGH her assignments so she could linger over dinner with her parents. She waited half way through the

meal before gaining the nerve to break the news about Tobias's proposal. She tensed in readiness for another unpleasant scene.

"Mom, Dad, I have something to tell you," she said, lowering her head in a thoughtful pose.

Joshua and Angela glanced at each other, looking suddenly anxious. They gazed quietly at Rochelle, waiting for the shattering news neither expected.

Perhaps her nerves were acting up, Rochelle thought, but she could swear the air crackled with electrical currents.

Best to get right to the point, she thought. She blurted out her news in one long breath. "Tobias asked me to marry him."

Angela dropped her fork. It clattered against the plate. Joshua's fork stopped midway to his mouth. He sat frozen in that position for several seconds in pure shock while he stared non-blinking at Rochelle's young face.

Angela's mouth flew open and she gasped, "Oh my God!"

Joshua's hand fell, and the fork hit the edge of the plate, bounced on the table, and fell to the floor. "No, Rochelle. You can't do this." His unusually quiet voice was a plea as the words quivered in his throat. He swallowed spasmodically, his Adam's apple bobbing from the effort.

"Dad, I love you," she said persuasively, "and I would never do anything intentionally to hurt you or mama, but this is my life. This is what I want to do with it. I want to be Tobias's wife. You have to try to understand."

"Dear God, Rochelle, what is wrong with you?" Angela cried. "Joshua, please talk some sense into her?"

Before Joshua could say anything, Angela continued in a desperate plea. "Why are you doing this, Chelle? Why, for God's sake, do you want to ruin your life? There will be other men, young

men your own age.” Sobbing, she added, “You can’t do this. You can’t!”

“Mama, why can’t I make you and Dad understand how I feel? Can’t you understand this is my life, not yours? I don’t want anyone else except Tobias. I beg you to understand. Your blessings are important to me.”

“Our blessings! Good God, do you seriously think we could ever offer our blessings for you to marry a criminal?” Joshua’s emotional control, learned from years of being at the center of public observation in the courtroom, was steadfast for the moment.

“When?” he asked solemnly, realizing the futility in attempting to argue the point. His daughter’s determination defied everything he might say to her against her decision.

“We haven’t decided yet. I’d like to finish my sophomore year first.”

“And your junior and senior years—what about those?” Angela cried heartbrokenly.

“Tobias said he wants me to give up my classes after we’re married.” She hung her head, feeling shame now when considering how much her education meant to both her parents. They had never doubted she would complete college. She had even thought at one time of becoming a lawyer like her father, but that would be out now if she gave up college.

“Chelle, I beg you not to do this? You’re going to destroy your life if you marry that man.” Her mother swallowed salty tears, her shoulders slumping like an old woman’s instead of the elegant forty-five year old lady she actually was.

“I’m sorry, mom. I never meant to hurt either of you,” she whispered with a guilty woebegone look.

The lovely dinner was ruined. Joshua pushed his plate back, unable to eat another bite.

Angela's whole body seemed to cave in, as if swallowed by the chair in which she sat. Wringing her hands nervously, she shook her head back and forth, her eyes suddenly tired and dazed.

Rochelle stared at her food, her appetite gone like her father's was.

I've broken their hearts, she thought, suddenly feeling undeserving of all they had done for her. Learning of her affair with Tobias was shock enough for them, but hearing of her plan to marry him must surely feel like downright betrayal. Quietly, she got up and left the table.

Joshua and Angela took every opportunity in the coming days to talk Rochelle out of making the worst mistake of her life. They begged, pleaded, implored, demanded and threatened. Through it all, Rochelle stood her ground, declaring, "I'm not going to listen to any more of your arguments, so you might as well stop them."

Tortured by the very idea of his daughter married to a man like Tobias Chandler, Joshua went into Rochelle's room when she wasn't home, and rifled through her nightstand drawer until he found Tobias Chandler's phone number. Joshua called him.

JOSHUA AND TOBIAS MET EARLY one morning at a small diner, that was on the way to Joshua's office. Both drove into the parking lot only a minute apart. They exited their cars simultaneously. Stepping forward, both men moved toward the front of their vehicles.

Silently, they sized each other up. Tobias spoke first. "Rathbone, I sure as hell hope you have a good reason for dragging me out here. What can I do for you?"

"I'll cut to the chase, Chandler. I'm here to ask you to stop seeing my daughter." Joshua didn't know what reaction to expect. He knew enough about Tobias Chandler to know he was not

especially versed in PR skills. His power lay in command and control, and the expertise to get things done quickly and stealthily so no trails would lead back to him.

Tobias chuckled arrogantly. “What’s wrong, Rathbone? Did you fail to convince Rochelle to break off with me, and now hope to convince me to do the deed myself?”

“Chandler you and I both know that a marriage between my daughter and a man your age will never work.”

Tobias leaned against the hood of the car. A sickening grin spread across his face. “I know that it *will* work as long as I want it to,” he answered with implied insinuations.

Joshua sucked in a deep breath of air. “I just hoped you would be honorable enough to do the right thing.”

Tobias laughed, the sound boiling out of his throat jeeringly. He reached in his front shirt pocket and pulled out a pack of cigarettes. Pulling one from the pack, he stuck it between his lips, put the pack back in his pocket, and then searched his pants pockets for his lighter. Staring Joshua in the eyes, he flicked the lighter and put the flame to the end of the cigarette, taking all the time in the world before voicing his answer.

Finally, after taking a big puff of his cigarette and blowing the smoke in Joshua’s face, Tobias replied, chuckling. “I thought I was doing the right thing. I’m making an honest woman out of her.”

Blood rushed to Joshua’s face. He seethed inside, but he held his temper. “What will it take, Chandler, to get you to leave my daughter alone?”

“You don’t have what it takes to get me to do anything, Rathbone. I never liked you in or out of the courtroom, and frankly, I like you even less now for wasting my time.”

“She’s my daughter, Chandler. You must have plenty of women friends. Why do you need Rochelle?”

Tobias laughed throatily. “I like her in bed. Does that answer your question, *Mr. Rathbone*?” He grinned offensively.

Joshua cringed internally at Chandler’s crude remark. Blood pumped up to his face in scalding hot disgust. He sucked in his breath, and then let it out slowly, doing his damndest not to let Chandler provoke him. It took all his will power to keep control. “I’d appreciate a show of respect,” he said curtly through partly clenched lips.

“Let’s get something straight, future father-in-law. I want your daughter and I am going to marry her—simple as that. If you know what’s best for you, you’ll just back off and leave the two of us alone.” He looked Joshua in the eyes with a mercury stare that was very serious now.

Such words coming from a man like Tobias Chandler was a threat. A strange sensation of caution and dread slid over Joshua when he realized what a depraved and perverted individual Chandler truly was.

“I’ll pay you. I’ll pay whatever you ask to break off with my daughter.”

Tobias threw back his head and laughed. “Do you think I need your money? Rathbone, when I am through with her, I will serve her up to you on a platter. In the meantime, you’re wasting my time.”

Joshua could feel the heat in his face. Nothing would stop this man outside a bullet. “She’s just a kid, Chandler. You have to be nearly the same age as me. You are old enough to be her father. In another ten years, you will be an old man, and she will still be a young woman. Surely, you see the irony in marrying someone young enough to be your daughter.”

“You miss the point, Rathbone. That’s what makes her so interesting,” he grinned through a disgusting twist of his lips.

Joshua reacted. All his carefully tended control was gone. He swung a hard fist at Tobias, hitting his jaw, and then following with a punch to his lip.

Thrown off balance, Chandler spun awkwardly, reaching out to grab hold of the car in an effort to keep from sprawling like a sack of potatoes on the pavement.

Joshua clinched his fist to keep from hitting him again. “You sick bastard, I’ll not rest until you’re behind bars for your illegal activities. I’ll expose you if it’s the last thing I ever do.”

Tobias rubbed his jaw and touched a swollen lip that oozed with blood. He flung aside the cigarette, its red tip searing his fingers. His eyes were dark with rage, but his words were deadly quiet as he regained his balance and locked gazes with Joshua.

“It will likely *be* the last thing you ever do, you stupid son of a bitch. You will pay for this, Rathbone. If you attempt to come up against me, I’ll see you in hell!”

“There’s ways to stop people like you,” Joshua threatened. In the back of his mind, a slight nudge warned him that his threats posed danger for him.

Tobias leaned heavily toward him, his face blood red with rage. “You stupid bastard, you have no idea who you’re dealing with. You’ve just signed your death warrant, old man!”

Joshua’s strength crumbled where he stood, and he backed toward his car. Pulling the door open, he slid behind the wheel. Never would he take Chandler’s threat lightly. The man’s history spoke for itself. He made people disappear, and nothing was beyond his sick capability. Pure terror washed over Joshua.

Turning the key in the ignition, he backed up, and then steered the car out to the street, wishing all the while he and his family never had to lay eyes on Tobias Chandler again. Outside of simply killing him, Joshua was determined to do what he could to put

Chandler out of commission. He knew he was putting his life on the line, but he could never live with himself to sit idly by and do nothing when his daughter's future was at peril.

Having represented enough criminals through the court system to know better than take a threat lightly, Joshua knew the risks of what he planned. To pursue attempts against Tobias to bring him to justice would present a direct challenge. He had no doubt that Chandler would not hesitate to follow through with the threat he made if he was provoked.

Joshua knew the risks of what he was up against, but his child meant too much to him to stand by and do nothing while she made the biggest mistake of her life. If it were in his power, he would put Tobias Chandler behind bars where he belonged.

Chapter Three

Joshua hired a private investigator to tail Chandler. Then he began putting his estate in order, something he'd been meaning to do for some time. He knew better than take Chandler's threat lightly. Having dealt with criminals throughout his career, he knew how criminal minds worked. He also knew they could be deadly foes if provoked.

Joshua's vacation time arrived, and instead of taking a cruise as previously planned, he and Angela flew to Montana to the little town where his old college chum, James Matheson, resided and managed the local bank. He set up a generous savings account for Rochelle, putting cash and necessary documents in a safety deposit box.

When he and Angela returned home, Joshua put another large sum of money in Rochelle's name at his bank, and stuffed a safety deposit box with cash, the total sum enough for her to live on comfortably for years. He made Bentley Harrison, Rochelle's godfather, executor of his estate, and then informed his daughter of the plans put in place for her.

Rochelle was amused. "That why you and mom went to Montana? Dad, I'm touched that you're thinking of my welfare, but you're being ridiculous. What makes you think I'll need all this financial assistance eventually?"

"Rochelle, I've decided it's no use to try and convince you of the kind of man Tobias Chandler is. He's a dangerous man who is capable of about any crime you can imagine, and if you ever became a threat to him, he would snuff out your life in a minute. One day you'll come to know that what I'm telling you is true. Your refusal to consider our advice leaves your mother and me desperate to protect you as best we can. We've done the only thing we know to do. We've set aside enough money so you'll never want for anything when this mockery of a relationship turns sour, and I guarantee it will. The money will enable you sufficient funds to live on when the time comes."

Rochelle rolled her eyes, and made a scoffing sound. "This is demoralizing. I think you and Mom are losing your minds or becoming paranoiac. I've seen nothing in Tobias's character to earn such distrust."

More sweet delusion, Joshua thought.

"In the small town in Montana where we took you on your tenth birthday, my old friend, James Matheson, will advise you on investments when the time comes. Take these safety-deposit box keys and never, under any circumstance tell Chandler about them. Promise me, Rochelle."

Rochelle laughed, not intending any disrespect, but it reminded Joshua of how Chandler had laughed at him while serving up taunts of contempt. He could only shake his head in exasperation at his daughter's innocent trust of one of the most ruthless and malevolent men in Miami, Florida.

“Okay, Dad, I promise you I will put the keys in a safe place and never tell Tobias about them. You've presented your case against Tobias, and I find him *not guilty*, so do us both a favor and drop it.”

“All I ask is that you avoid being too overly trusting, Rochelle. It's not a good trait to have with anyone, especially with a man like Tobias Chandler. Be a little wary, sweetheart. You're still too young to understand the implications I've tried to impress upon you.”

Rochelle threw up her hands and jumped to her feet. “All right!” she screamed. “You're driving me crazy. For God's sake, Dad, what is it you want of me?”

Joshua sighed in exasperation. “I want you to be safe and happy, honey. That's all I've ever wanted.”

She scrunched up her face in puzzlement as something crossed her mind. “Has Tobias said something to upset you?”

“No,” he said, lying outright. He didn't want his daughter running interference for him. That would impose even greater danger for them.

“Rest assured, Dad, I'll do as you ask with the keys if that will make you happy.”

Joshua nodded. He had done all he knew to do. The rest was up to her. He sighed, and left her standing there while he rushed to his study to hide the pain behind his moist eyes.

JOSHUA RATHBONE BEGAN compiling what little information the private detective brought him. The stack grew thicker over time,

but when Joshua reviewed it, piece by piece, not much was usable against Tobias in a court of law. It seemed the man resided behind a protective glass wall where no one could touch him.

Finally, however, he got the big break he had been waiting for. The detective brought him pictures of Tobias having lunch with one of the local judges, and passing a thick envelope across the table to the Honorable Jackson Etheridge. Joshua felt hopeful. At least he had a name attached to the justice system that the state attorney would find worthy of investigation. Joshua made extra copies and put them in his safety deposit box. He wavered between going to the police and going directly to Tobias. He decided on the latter. His goal was to rescue his daughter before they were married. He hoped to use what he had as bargaining power.

Tobias agreed to meet with Joshua in a parking lot he suggested. Joshua went over and over his plan, but when he presented the pictures to Tobias, the man wasn't the least intimidated. Instead, he was angry as hell. He grabbed Joshua by the shirtfront and demanded he back off. He then proceeded to rip the pictures into tiny bits, watching them sail off in the wind across the parking lot.

“Rathbone, I'm not a man to waste time with fools like you. This is your only warning. Get off my fucking back!”

Then more calmly and succinctly, he stated, “I want all the negatives and all the copies you have of those photographs, along with anything else you've gathered. I also want the name of the person responsible for collecting them. If I don't get them, your beautiful daughter might step off the curb into an oncoming car, or something equally dramatic.” A contemptuous grin curved at the corners of his mouth when he saw Rathbone's expression. It reflected the bitter taste of bile and fear.

Joshua's heart stopped beating in his chest for what seemed like minutes. He never considered the possibility Rochelle might be in any immediate danger, having instead, taken Tobias's recent threat against himself as the area for concern. Now, however, the son of a bitch had struck home to the core. He had threatened Rochelle, and it was all that was necessary to defeat Joshua. This meeting became a finale to any further attempts of retribution against Chandler.

Tobias knew he had won the battle. He could smell Joshua's fear. The man was weaker than he first thought, stronger than hell as a criminal attorney, but a piece of shit when threat hung over him. "Here's what you're going to do, Rathbone," Tobias commanded. "You're going to give me all the pictures and the negatives. I also want the name of your private dick."

The next day, Joshua met Tobias in the same parking lot. He brought the pictures and negatives taken from his safe deposit box, and turned them over to Tobias, along with a manila folder of documents. Joshua refused to give him the name of the private investigator.

In the next few days that followed, Joshua sensed he was being tailed. One car in particular seemed to be close on his bumper wherever he went. Unfortunately, his discovery of the tail came after he made a trip to the investigator to cancel the investigation and warn him of possible retaliation from Tobias.

"Be careful, Simmons. I didn't give him your name, but that offers no guarantee of protection. The man is evil and dangerous. If he sees you as a threat, well..." There was no need to finish his thought.

SEVEN DAYS LATER, after Tobias discovered the name and location of the private investigator, Elton Simmons, someone found the man's body in an alley. The files in his office were dumped and

scattered all over the floor, and any information bearing Tobias's name disappeared. An autopsy on Simmons showed he died of a drug overdose.

The day after the discovery of Simmons's body, Joshua and Angela Rathbone were driving to their favorite restaurant for lunch and died in a freak car accident. A huge tractor-trailer plowed into the back of their car at a stop light literally pulverizing the car and the occupants within.

The driver fled the scene. The tractor-trailer was untraceable because the license plate was missing, there was no registered owner, and no vehicle identification number found on the rig. Accidental death was what the medical examiner wrote on Joshua and Angela's death certificates.

Their deaths would mark new directions in Rochelle's life.

ROCHELLE CAME DOWN the stairs rubbing her eyes. Her hair was tousled and disorderly. Her usual careful attendance to her personal appearance had been totally ignored after the housekeeper awakened her from a late mid-morning sleep with the announcement that the police were downstairs asking for her. Quickly pulling on a long bathrobe, she trudged tiredly downstairs trying to shake off the fatigue. She was with Tobias until after two in the morning, and could have slept until noon if left undisturbed.

"What's wrong?" she asked immediately upon seeing two policemen standing in the foyer. "Why are you here?" Then turning toward the housekeeper, she asked, "Where's Mama?"

"Why don't we go in the living room so you can sit down," one of the officers suggested, suddenly looking larger than life to Rochelle. The first tingling fear raced along her spine.

Without saying more, she turned and went to the spacious living room, and lowered herself to the chair her father usually sat in. She

did not realize it until she stuck out her hand to offer the two policemen seats that she was shaking all over. Her hand trembled badly. She pulled it back and clasped her fingers together in her lap.

The housekeeper stood inconspicuously nearby.

Both policemen sat down on the sofa across from her, staring at her much too long before they spoke. They looked terribly ill at ease. Finally, the shorter of the two leaned forward and questioned, “Miss Rathbone, are you the daughter of Joshua and Angela Rathbone?”

Rochelle sent them a sharp questioning look. Tingly fear escalated with prickly currents all through her, and she sat up a little straighter. Her attention was on alert, completely focused now. “Yes, I am their daughter. Why do you ask?” Her voice was shaky and her lips quivered. She felt all strength flow from her body. Police officers did not come knocking on one’s door unless something had happened. She grabbed the chair arms with her hands and braced herself.

“Miss Rathbone, we’re sorry to inform you, but your parents were in an accident.”

She said anything, just looked at them, waiting, thinking they might say more, might explain. Finally, the word accident began to sink in slowly. “An accident, you say?”

She pushed herself from the chair to her feet, balancing herself by easing behind the chair and grabbing onto it for support. She stared at the men. “Where are they? Are they all right? What hospital are they in? I have to get dressed and go to them.” She started toward the door, her knees precariously unstable, and both police officers came to their feet. One reached out and took her arm.

“Miss Rathbone. They are not at the hospital. It’s worse than that.”

She froze. Her face froze. Then like a piece of ice cracking from a gigantic force, her expression became a shattered reflection of pain. Her knees buckled and she collapsed.

“No...” she whispered.

One policeman shot an arm about her waist, stopping her downward plunge before she collapsed entirely upon the carpeted floor. He eased her back to the sofa where she slumped as though her bones were jelly. Her eyes pooled with moisture. Her anguish burst like a thunderstorm in loud sobs.

Grief and thoughts poured through her mind. She thought about the warnings from her father about Tobias, and the financial considerations he took on her behalf. She had laughed at him. Yet, now it occurred to her, her father had anticipated death when he made those financial provisions for her. Doubts churned involuntarily like an incomplete puzzle with missing pieces. She mentally fought against believing the nagging suspicion that her parents’ deaths might be more than a mere accident.

Was Tobias responsible for her parents’ deaths?

One of the policemen began explaining about the accident, mostly speculating. “The tractor trailer couldn’t stop in time. The brakes might have gone out. We’ll know after an inspection is made.”

The explanation should have been reassuring, even if painful, for it would seem to clear Tobias of any involvement. However, she could not let go of the remembered warnings her father gave her.

“What about the driver? Was he charged?” she muttered through her weeping.

“He left the scene of the accident and hasn’t been found yet. But don’t worry, we’ll find him.”

The policemen prepared to leave. “Miss, is there anything we can do for you?” the tallest one asked while glancing toward the doorway where the housekeeper stood.

Rochelle was too dazed to answer, and was only vaguely aware they spoke to the housekeeper before they left.

Tears boiled up and spilled down Rochelle’s face in sheets, until a kind of numbness took over. She sat staring off in space, remembering her mom and dad’s faces, recalling events in their lives as she was growing up; memories that could never take their place. They were gone, and she was alone.

The housekeeper sat with her. “Will you eat or drink something?” she asked, knowing Rochelle needed to keep up her energy for what lay ahead the next few days.

“No, I can’t eat. I don’t know what to do,” she cried. “What am I going to do?” She had not even considered calling Tobias thus far, put off by doubts resting in her mind like a bad seed.

“I need to call Uncle Bentley.” Blowing her nose, and then sniffing audibly, she dialed Bentley’s number, held the phone to her ear as more tears strained through her lashes. “Uncle Bentley,” she said and broke into sobs.

“Rochelle, is that you?”

“Uncle Bentley, it’s me. There has been an accident. Mama and Dad were in an accident.”

“Are they all right?” he asked, his voice anxious.

“They... they didn’t make it.”

“Blessed saints! Rochelle, I will be there in a little while. Just be strong, honey. I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

When she hung up the phone, it dawned upon her how much she needed someone to hold her, comfort her, and she thought of Tobias. Perhaps she should call him. On second thought, she decided it best to wait until her Godfather, Bentley Harrison, was

not with her. Some inner voice told her to keep her relationship to Bentley a secret from Tobias. She would call him later. Right now, she needed her Uncle Bentley to help her handle things and get her through the days ahead.

It would be days later, before Rochelle learned about the absence of a registration or vehicle identification number on the tractor-trailer. The implication, of course, was an untraceable owner through vehicular records. It would prompt some real soul-searching. She would mentally explore several considerations, looking for plausible excuses to confirm Tobias's innocence rather than any involvement in her parents' deaths. Still, a niggling doubt kept touching her thoughts like random little electrical currents.

MUCH LATER THAT NIGHT, Tobias called Rochelle. She was supposed to have met him at seven o'clock that evening. When the phone rang and she looked at the clock, it was nine o'clock.

"Rochelle, are you all right?" It was the first thing that came from his mouth. His question hit Rochelle like a telltale clue. How could he possibly have learned already what had happened to her parents? His question seemed terribly suspicious. She wanted to ask him why she should not be all right just to see what he would say, but she didn't. Yet, the question was not Tobias's customary greeting when she was late for an outing with him. On previous occasions when she was late, he exuded anger, often becoming verbally abusive. There was none of that anger or abuse now.

She knew she had to get hold of herself. She was reading something, the worst perhaps, into everything Tobias said or did not say. With enough to deal with already, she decided she need not borrow trouble.

Tearfully, she told Tobias about her parents' deaths.

"I'm sorry to hear that," he said in a monotone, not bothering to

offer further condolences.

Rochelle noticed he wasn't surprised. Still, the police did say it was an accident, and every nerve inside her wanted it to be so. She loved Tobias, but how could she continue loving him if she suspected him of taking part in her parents' deaths?

TOBIAS STAYED AT ROCHELLE'S SIDE through the funeral. He poured on compassion and understanding in huge doses. No one was more caring than he was, anticipating her needs and looking after her as though she were helpless. She felt nurtured beneath his supportive care, and the seeds of doubt that initially seized her soon faded. She grew completely dependent upon Tobias, who seemed pleased at her reliance upon him.

Bentley kept a low profile in the background throughout the funeral service. Joshua had made a point of informing him of the situation between Rochelle and Tobias Chandler, and for all practical purposes, even without evidence, he believed the man was probably responsible for Joshua and Angela's deaths. Since Bentley was the trustee of the Rathbone estate, he played the role of an old friend come to pay his respects. He wanted no introduction to, or any association with Tobias Chandler.

Five days after the funerals, using Rochelle's grief over her parents' deaths, Tobias talked her into an early marriage. They were married quietly in a civil ceremony that would require no waiting.

The marriage presented a dramatic turning point in Rochelle's life. With her parents gone, she told Bentley to liquidate her father's estate and invest the proceeds. Taking what personal items she wanted to keep, she moved into Tobias's mansion.

Chapter Four

Five Years Later

Rochelle and Tobias sat on opposite sides of the car seat as the limousine eased up the drive and came to a stop at the front door of his stately home. Neither had spoken a word since leaving the nightclub, and a tension filled the silence between them.

Rochelle was moody, feeling disillusioned and disgusted with the two couples Tobias wined and dined all evening. One of the men smoked big cigars whose scent clung to her clothing and nostrils; the other one cursed continuously and was unable to say a single sentence without using the four-letter word she detested. The women, while polite enough at the beginning of the evening, drank like fish and were stumbling drunk before the night ended. Without realizing it, Rochelle turned up her nose and rolled her eyes several times at such objectionable manners and crude behaviors, never considering that Tobias would find her haughty manner more inappropriate than that of his crass friends.

She should have known better. Hadn't she already suffered Tobias's cruelty and abuse in a hundred different ways? She had become nearly passive around him, not wanting to invite his disfavor. Now, unwittingly, she had done just that.

No sooner were they inside the door at home, than Tobias confronted Rochelle where they stood on the spacious marble foyer.

"Baby, do you find my friends distasteful?" Tobias asked, standing at arm's length and running his hands lightly up and down Rochelle's upper arms while he studied her with lascivious intent. His steel gray eyes raked her from head to toe and back again, possessively assessing her as one might a piece of property. His voice sounded calm, giving no apparent indication of underlying hostility. A half grin squeezed from one corner of his lips.

Rochelle should have known not to trust his offhanded manner. He had done the same thing numerous times previously, inviting her negative responses, and then abusively retaliating. His mien was all a ploy to deceive, a snake curling in readiness to strike.

The light touch of Tobias's hands on her arms held no hint of confrontation, giving her the impression she could speak freely. "I find your friends lacking in intelligence and social tact," she replied honestly, her long slender neck and raised chin displaying a haughty grace.

Tobias's forehead wrinkled and his eyes darkened. He touched Rochelle's cheek, sliding his fingers down to her silky white throat where he caressed the white skin above the little blue veins. "Lacking in intelligence..." A smile toyed with his lips, and then he threw back his head and roared with laughter. The sound made Rochelle's stomach lurch.

Rochelle looked at him sharply, never suspecting that behind his attitude lay a deadly anger he had nursed all evening against her. She was slow to learn that Tobias worked at keeping his emotions hidden, believing he mastered more control over others when he exhibited icy control of self.

"Hummm... You know, baby, you may be right," he said, still laughing. The glint in his eyes changed first, turning to cold steel as his laughter spun down to an acrid snort. "They may be sons of bitches for all I care, but when we invite anyone out for dinner, I expect you to act like the perfect hostess. You represent me, baby, not those frivolous opinions you have."

"Tobias, how can you expect me to associate with such disgusting people?" she implored.

He turned his back on her, taking a deep breath. He was seething, the great quantities of alcohol drunk during the evening fueling instant rage that echoed in the timbre of his voice. He spun

about to face her. “You associate with them because I damn well say so! Do you think you’re better than they are, you stupid little bitch?”

His crude manner was not a shock, but his blunt sarcasm stung. Lately, his attitude toward Rochelle had worsened daily until he showed pure contempt for her most of the time. Drinking merely intensified his venomous nature.

Alcohol was an addiction with Tobias; he drank Bloody Marys in the morning, beer in the afternoon, finishing the day with wine, champagne or scotch, often topping his evening with brandy. He needed only the mildest provocation from Rochelle to turn abusive with verbal put-downs complemented by violent slaps across her face. He once locked her in their room for two days without food, and the list of abuses started increasing every time Tobias found a reason, whether real or imagined. She usually stepped lightly around him to avoid another abusive attack on her, but tonight she had been so incensed she could not hold her tongue.

Tobias had never been what Rochelle called adorable, but at least he treated her respectfully in the beginning. Now, his contempt replaced any decent feelings he once had for her. She was sure his heavy drinking was due in part to problems with his organization, and he found sadistic relief through taking his frustrations out on her. He stayed angry at the world, and he used her as his scapegoat. Rochelle feared he might be losing his mind from the excess of alcohol he consumed.

“Tobias, you know I usually don’t complain, but the men’s vulgar jokes and boorish manners are not suitable for mixed company,” she said softly. “Are the women supposed to sit there pretending to enjoy the men’s crude jokes and remarks and their intimate gropes in public? If you respect me, you would caution them against their vulgarity when I’m present.”

With saliva oozing from the corners of his mouth, Tobias sneered contemptuously at Rochelle's remark. His hand touched her throat, his fingers gliding about the porcelain skin, following the stream of little blue veins that seemed to intrigue him. His hand and fingers spread out all at once around her neck, grasping it so tightly her face turned crimson and her breath grew ragged.

"How did you get so goddamned stupid? If I respected you, I might not even want you in the company of those crazy bastards. However, the truth is, darling; the only thing I respect about you is what you have between your legs. Haven't you learned yet what role you play in my life, Rochelle?" His fingers tightened on her throat.

She grabbed his hand, attempting to loosen his strangling hold. "Tobias, please stop. You're hurting my neck!" She gasped for air.

"Shut your damned mouth! I'm tired of your constant bitching, and it's getting worse every time we go out." Spittle flew from his mouth and sprayed her face.

Uncontrolled words poured from her throat despite the fact they served as an invitation to Tobias's abuse. "Then don't make me go out any more with that bunch you associate with. I'd rather stay home and read a good book than spend my time trying to be nice to a bunch of low-life scum."

He released her neck, drew back his hand, and slapped her forcefully across her cheek.

Rochelle reeled and grabbed the stair post to keep from falling. Charged with adrenaline and sudden fear, she started up the stairs. Intent upon getting away from Tobias, she feared the likelihood of a severe battering. Uppermost in her mind was also the fear that one day Tobias's drunken rages would unglue his control so badly that he would kill her.

Tobias grabbed Rochelle, knocking her off-balance. He jerked her back down the steps.

“Bitch, don’t you dare turn your back on me when I’m talking to you. I’m not through with you,” he snarled, sending another spray of spittle from twisted lips.

“Tobias, please just let me go upstairs,” she pleaded. Her lips quivered as if she might be freezing.

He grabbed the front of her beautiful white gown. Jerking her toward him, the fabric ripped, baring one of her breast. He cupped her breast with his hand and squeezed. “Nice,” he slurred through a sickening smile. “Daddy has something for you, baby.”

She cringed away from him, desperately frightened by his manner, suspecting what he planned to do to her as punishment for confronting him. It wouldn’t be the first time.

“Please, Tobias, let’s just go upstairs.”

“What’s wrong with right here?” he said, roughly massaging her breast.

“You know why—the security cameras. Please, Tobias, you know the guards are watching on the monitors. Please don’t do this.”

She reached up and pushed his hand from her bosom, embarrassed to death knowing their horrible scene and her exposed naked breast was on the monitor screens. She tried to pull the fabric up to cover her breast, turning in the same motion to go upstairs.

“I said don’t ever turn your fucking back on me again!” he ordered through gritted teeth, snatching her around to face him.

Rochelle recoiled in alarm, every nerve prickling with terror. “Please, Tobias. Please don’t do this. I beg you.”

“What’s wrong, baby, I thought you enjoyed being on center-stage,” he taunted. “A fine lady like you would look good on the monitor screen. Why don’t we give the guards a nice performance?”

His hand was hurting her wrist, and she tried to twist free, but he only squeezed tighter, his nauseous alcohol breath puffing in her face.

“No, Tobias, please. Stop it. Stop it!” she screamed, and for just a second he loosened his hold on her wrist long enough for her to twist from his grasp and shove him away from her. She turned to run, hoping to get to the bathroom and lock herself inside, as she had done on other occasions when he was drunk and abusive.

Rochelle only made it a couple of steps before he grabbed her hair and snatched her back, spinning her about to face him. It felt like her scalp was torn away bringing instant excruciating pain. He drew back his hand and slapped her. She went flying backwards against the stair steps, the sharp edges cutting into her backside.

He reached down where she lay crumpled like a rag doll and grabbed her hand, jerking her to a standing position. With a sneer on his face, he roughly found her lips, ravaging her with his teeth, tongue, and mouth until her lips were swollen and salty with the taste of blood.

She struggled, trying to get away from him, but her slender strength was no match against his hundred and seventy pounds.

When he tasted the blood from her teeth-torn lips, he turned to one side and spit, and then reached out and put his fingers in the cleavage between her breasts. Tightening his grasp on the fabric of her expensive gown, he jerked it downward, ripping the seams of the fine silk, snatching and jerking the fabric until it tore in shreds from her body.

Rochelle stood there in shock, trying desperately to cover herself with her hands and arms. Fear paralyzed her and she watched as though this horror were happening to someone else as Tobias pulled her to the hard marble floor and tore off her panties. When she was naked, her dignity destroyed, she was aware that Tobias’s mental and physical abuse had reached another level. Raping her in front of security cameras monitored by guards was the ultimate victimization. It would establish his complete control over her life.

With her expensive clothing tattered about her feet, her naked, trembling body chilled by the cold marble floor, she was at Tobias's mercy. In a punishing assault, he brutally raped her, the pain of the hard floor against her slender form. His rough treatment drew hysterical screams from her throat.

When he finished, he rose to his feet, staring down at her as if she were a piece of trash left by the vacuum cleaner. Standing over her, he reached down toward his crotch and zipped his pants. "Do let that be a lesson, darling, to never cross me again."

Knowing the guards were likely having a field day at the monitors, and her modesty compromised beyond repair, she grabbed her tattered clothing to cover herself. Struggling to a sitting position, every bone in her body screamed with pain from Tobias's abuse.

Still standing above her with a frozen sneer, he kicked her thigh with the point of his shoe for emphasis, and she cried out in pain.

Humiliation burned her face while her stomach churned sickly with nausea and resentment. She hated him. Whatever she once felt for Tobias Chandler was tainted and destroyed; her pride, dignity, and self-respect violated so ruthlessly she would never forgive him. Knowing the guards observed her nakedness and his rape of her on the monitors made her cringe and shiver with shame. Her hate of Tobias was the only strength he couldn't take from her.

"From now on, your only job in life is to make me happy," Tobias stated arrogantly. He sent her a contemptuous glance then turned and went upstairs.

Left stiff and bruised on the cold, hard marble floor, three guards hovered around the security monitors afraid to blink lest they miss even a single glimpse of the best performance ever seen on television or in the movies. They were disappointed when it was over.

Struggling to get to her feet, and covering as much of her body

as she could with her scrapped gown, Rochelle knew her life with Tobias would be nothing but hell from now on.

The next morning, as was Tobias's habit, he hugged her, kissed her, wrapped her in his arms, and apologized. He promised he would never do such a thing again. Rochelle knew it was a lie. By nightfall, after he had deluged himself with alcohol all day, he would be in the same frame of mind as last night.

Following his attack, she nursed a black eye and numerous body bruises for more than a week. The incident taught her the art of pretentiousness. She put on airs that would have made her a star in the movies, an act merely to prevent further harm from Tobias. He was pleased with her new attitude. He continued making sly little remarks to keep her aware that if she displeased him, she would pay.

If Tobias could have known how much she hated him, he would have killed her.

ONE GOOD THING OCCURRED from Tobias's sexual and physical abuse the night he assaulted her on the cold marble floor. The frequency of the dinner parties declined following that night, and if they received invitations, Tobias mostly went without her. Only occasionally did he demand that she go with him. Careful not to draw his ire, she offered no resistance to what he requested or expected of her. Survival was her only goal now, and she did anything he asked without argument.

The times she did not accompany him, she spent her evenings alone, reading or watching television, sometimes just listening to music from the huge CD selection she collected over the years. She was lonely, but she found her own company far more gratifying than she did with Tobias and his friends. Enjoying a reprieve of sorts, she basked in her newly found peace.

Then it all changed in a heartbeat.

Tobias went out one night, dressed in his suit, and a silk shirt as white as snow. When he came home, dark makeup and bright red lipstick stained his collar. His smeared lips reminded Rochelle of a baboon's ass. He took off his coat, tie and shirt, and then stepped out of his pants, letting them fall to the floor. Dropping onto the bed drunkenly, and smelling like the stale scent of cheap perfume mixed with the muskiness of recent sex, he reached to turn off the light.

Rochelle was enraged at Tobias for flaunting his infidelity so blatantly. Popping up from her pillow to a sitting position, she spoke acidly, "Tobias, if you plan to see other women, then you won't mind if I move to another bedroom."

He turned out the light and lay down. "You'll fucking well leave my bed when I say so, and not until. So, shut the hell up so I can go to sleep," he mumbled with a yawn and turned his back to her.

"Better still," Rochelle continued, "just give me a divorce and let me leave here." It was the first time she had ever mentioned the word divorce to him.

That got his attention, and he bolted up to a sitting position on the edge of the bed and flicked the light back on. Instant rage consumed him. He was quiet several seconds, and then he turned enough to reach out and grab her by her hair. He jerked her across the bed and jabbed a fist into her jaw.

"You stupid bitch, you just can't leave well enough alone, can you?" He gritted his teeth, speaking in a soft tone that hissed with venom. "Don't ever mention divorce to me again, Rochelle. If you should ever get the notion of trying to run away from me, I will kill your ass. Mark my work."

Pain shot through her head where he snatched her across the bed by her hair. A handful of unattached hair twined between his fingers, and he shook it to the floor. Despite her pain, and too incensed to let

well enough alone, Rochelle spoke her mind. “You expect me to sleep with you after you’ve just come from another woman?” she screamed. “God, I would puke if you ever touched me again.”

Tobias made a scoffing sound and leered at her. His wife wasn’t a very bright student or she would learn to keep her fucking mouth shut. Grabbing her, he crushed his red lips to hers, hard and bruising, his teeth cutting into the tender flesh and drawing blood.

“Stop it, Tobias!” she demanded, not realizing her outburst merely encouraged him. She struggled with him, crying out at his abuse. Her head now hurt dreadfully. Before he finished, atrociously abusing her physically and sexually, she was begging him to stop. What he did to her was the most sickening thing he had ever done.

Hell had just come knocking.

Befouling her skin with the touch of his flaccid organ, knowing he had just come from another woman made her want to puke. She swallowed it back to avoid harsher abuse. In the meantime, he ripped off her gown like a lunatic, tearing it to shreds. Looking at her nakedness made him passionate, and Rochelle knew something was terribly sick about that look. His verbal expression just before a climax, “Baby, baby, give it to daddy,” was a telltale clue denoting his sexual fantasy.

He touched her between her legs, discovering she was as dry as sandpaper. “You’re a cold bitch,” he told her. “About the coldest I’ve ever known. Where did I get the idea in the beginning you were warm and passionate?”

The dangerous tone of his voice deepened Rochelle’s tenseness. She knew better than test his wrath further. Tobias’s evil streak would devise whatever inhumanity he could to teach her a lesson in obedience. With her scalp swollen, and her head pounding like hammers, she tried to mollify him. “Tobias, I’m sorry. I don’t mean to displease you,” she said humbly.

It amazed her how she could sound so sweet, while rage boiled inside her like a steaming kettle. She wanted to yell that she hated him, wanted to scream every invective she could recall. She wanted to find the nerve to take his gun from the nightstand drawer and blow his brains out. God, she could just see it in her mind, him lying sprawled on the bed with his brains seeping out of the gunshot hole—and just the thought made her feel relief.

Her apology humbled him, at least temporarily. He seemed a mixture of contradictions as he expressed a contemplative mood. “Just tell me one thing—why in the hell can’t I please you, baby?”

“You do please me, Tobias. You do,” she cried, wanting to placate him to prevent further abuse.

How could the SOB expect anything less than icicle-participation when he abused her so hideously, not to mention him expecting her to reciprocate while the stink of another woman rose from his body?

“Like hell, you say. When have I ever pleased you? You don’t even know what I’m talking about, do you?” he demanded in disgust, slapping her backside with a stinging blow.

With his hands and eyes sliding over her breasts, he talked as though he spoke only to himself. “I’ve been as tender with you as a man can be, thinking you’d respond, but you’re too damned cold to even know how to enjoy sex. I have given you more foreplay than any woman who’s ever warmed my bed, and nothing excites you.”

“I don’t do it purposely, Tobias. Truly I don’t.” He was working himself up to his sick inhumanity. He wanted to hurt her, and he would. She knew what he planned, and her stomach roiled with revulsion. Bitter bile rose in her throat and she swallowed it back down, the red lipstick from his kiss leaving a sick sweet taste in her mouth along with other despicable tastes.

He forced his ultimate punishment upon her, leaving her choking and struggling to get air into her lungs. Then when she feared she might die of strangulation, he must have noticed her plight, and ceased the oral penetration.

He flung his full body weight down upon her. Pinning her down, he spread her legs and rammed his huge manhood inside her dry canal. Rochelle screamed with pain, crying and praying it would soon be over. The pain in her head seemed to worsen continuously. Like a man driven by perversity, he thrust in and out like a stevedore, and Rochelle bit her lips to hold back further screams. She felt moisture and knew his roughness had ripped delicate tissue inside her to cause bleeding. It was horrible. He was horrible, a monster who sadistically and purposely hurt her.

When he finished pounding her unmercifully, leaving her insides feeling disconnected and like raw flesh, he rolled off onto his back, his legs outspread and his limp bloody penis peeking dismally from his undershorts. He was snoring in minutes.

She went to the bathroom, threw up the contents of her stomach, and scrubbed her body and the inside of her mouth until that, too, was raw.

Chapter Five

Morning came with clouds gathering outside for a possible thunderstorm. Rochelle was thankful that Tobias was gone when she opened her eyes to excruciating pain caused by him snatching and ripping a handful of hair from her scalp. She lay upon her bed nursing her bruised body and aching head while old memories of her parents flooded her thoughts. A sickening feeling crawled through

her stomach. Few doubts remained in her mind that Tobias was responsible for their deaths. She considered the possibility that he might have some accident in mind for her when he tired of his sadistic abuse of her.

Living with him had become life threatening and hell on earth.

Mrs. Rodriguez, the housekeeper, appointed herself as Rochelle's caretaker. She checked on Rochelle that morning when she didn't come down for breakfast. The middle-aged woman harbored a certain fondness for the young Mrs. Chandler, going out of her way to befriend her bosses' wife. It was no secret to her that Rochelle was an abused wife after seeing blood on the sheets too many times not to question the impropriety of Tobias Chandler's use of his spouse. However, this was the first time he'd inflicted serious damage to her person, the knot spreading on her scalp the size of a cap. Feeling great pity for Rochelle, Mrs. Rodriguez checked on her often, brought her food, juices, coffee or tea, and hovered over her like a friendly parent.

"Not feeling any better?" she inquired sympathetically, her strong Spanish accent nearly making her English incomprehensible.

Rochelle shook her head, wincing with pain at the movement. She reached for the aspirin on her nightstand, popping the lid to pour two tablets on her palm. Tossing them into her mouth, she swallowed them with a drink of water from the partly filled glass on her nightstand. Laying her head back against the pillow, she was unable to find relief. Her head ached so fiercely it had kept her awake all night.

"You should leave him," Mrs. Rodriguez whispered, glancing furtively toward the door, seeming to understand only mildly, how dangerous it was for her to speak of any situation occurring in the Chandler home. She usually kept a tight lip, but seeing what Mr. Chandler had done to the nice, young Mrs. Chandler was

unpardonable.

Rochelle glanced at Mrs. Rodriguez, the woman's remark reflective of what Rochelle had thought of all night long. She wanted to leave Tobias, desired escape from him more than anything. His threat to kill her kept drumming in her ears, and she clearly realized that whatever she did, staying or leaving, would involve putting her life at great risk.

Tobias stopped by Rochelle's room before dinner. She was dozing when his weight sagged heavily against the mattress, the movement causing her eyes to flick open. "How are you feeling, baby?" he asked with what sounded like concern, the only reason being that he wasn't drunk yet.

"I'm not well, Tobias. The pain is unbearable. I need a doctor," she moaned, knowing he would not let her go see a doctor. It would invite too many questions.

He ran his hand across her forehead, brushed the auburn-gold hair back from her face, and watched her wince at his touch to her swollen scalp. "I'm sorry, baby. You will feel better in a couple of days. If not, I will see about getting you some pain medication. Aren't the aspirin helping at all?" he inquired, seeing the aspirin bottle on her nightstand.

"No, not much," she said raggedly.

"I'll check on you later," he said, leaving the bed.

Rochelle watched his arrogant stroll across the room. The authoritative features of his nose, chin, and forehead were in profile and his previously sleek body was beginning to show a midriff bulge. His very presence wrought hate through her system like a festering sore erupting with poison.

She turned her back on him to hide the bitterness assailing her as he went out the door. She thought about all the guns she had seen numerous times in his study, in the gun case, the one in the

nightstand on his side of the bed, and wished she had the nerve to point one at him and pull the trigger. It would be so easy and quick, she reasoned, experiencing a growing desperation to be free of the monster she married.

THE NEXT SEVERAL DAYS became stressful reminders of Tobias's threat to kill her if she tried to leave him. While it played on Rochelle's mind with an intensity that left her tired, her head ached too much to do more than lightly reflect on leaving. She prayed the swelling would soon go down on her scalp. When she could think better she would formulate plans to leave Tobias.

When Tobias caught her dressed to go out the following afternoon, he stopped her. The driver, Johnson Coleman, the chauffeur that Tobias provided for her use, was waiting out front. "She won't need you for the rest of the week, Johnson," Tobias asserted authoritatively.

Johnson nodded and drove the car back into the garage.

"I have to see a doctor," Rochelle implored, mere speech wreaking excruciating pain and sending a grimace weaving across her face. It was all she could do to stay on her feet, dizziness nearly overcoming her.

"There'll be no doctor. Go to your room and rest. You'll be okay in a few days." His look told her he would tolerate no rebuttals.

Knowing better than to argue, Rochelle turned about on unsteady feet and headed back into the house for the bedroom. Embittered by Tobias's firm control over her life, her desire to escape from him began growing into an obsession.

The week stretched endlessly before Rochelle. Every day filled with unrelenting pain from her swollen scalp. Confined to the house, and not feeling much like reading or watching television, time pressed upon her in boring pursuit. It gave her time to think, and

time to start brainstorming possible plans of escape. It had to be a good plan so carefully thought out there would be no opportunity for failure. With Tobias's threat to kill her if she tried to run away, one chance might be all she would have.

The week passed without further incident. Tobias slept nightly next to her, never touching her. During the day, he looked in on her frequently to inquire how she was doing. "I'm glad to see you feeling better, baby," he stated encouragingly each time he appeared, barely coming past the threshold. His overt concern resembled a predator's stealthy actions to entice his prey.

Rochelle knew he did not care whether she felt better or not. He was simply afraid she might die and the authorities would charge him with murder. Aggravated by his presence, she treated him with silence. She was to remember frequently how her parents had tried to open her eyes to the kind of man Tobias was. She could almost picture them saying, "we told you so."

THREE WEEKS PASSED BEFORE Rochelle's scalp healed. The swelling went down and she could brush her hair now with only slight sensitivity. Three weeks, enough time to lie in bed and make plans for the most important and daring scheme ever attempted in her life. Believing Tobias would act on his threat to kill her if he caught her running away could not deter her belief that freedom was well worth the risk.

Ultimately, however, it could very well be the last thing she ever did, she surmised.

Many times, Rochelle opened the drawer in the nightstand to look at the gun. Apprehension shivered across every nerve ending, causing her to close the drawer quickly. After repeating this action many times, she finally reached down and laid her hand on the gun. It was cold to her touch. Wrapping her fingers about the gun, she

lifted it, turning it in her hands, paralyzing fear gripping her at the very thought of what she considered. The cold metal of the gun kept reminding her how deadly it was, and her heart pounded fiercely with apprehension. Pushing both arms out in front of her, she took aim, envisioning Tobias's face before her and thinking how quick and easy it would be to do the deed.

Just a little squeeze of the trigger and it would be over. She would be free.

But would she?

The police would come and carry her away and she would still be a prisoner.

A cold sweat broke out on her forehead and her hands trembled at the thought of sending a bullet into Tobias's brain. Her knees weakened until she had to sit down, dropping on the edge of the bed. The thought of shooting Tobias frightened her considerably. With rising hysteria, she shoved the gun back into the drawer and slammed it shut.

She could not do it. She would never be able to pull that trigger. To knowingly attempt to snuff out another's life was against everything she had ever been taught. It would make her no better than Tobias.

She could not do it.

Her only choice was to leave him.

Leaving was not something she could do overnight. It would take time, planning, and strategy. Since she was not allowed to go anywhere without Johnson, who gave Tobias a report of every outing, she would have to plan carefully every move. Drawing money from the bank account her father left her would be first on her list of things to do. Then she would stash it in the safety deposit box until she was ready to make her get-away. That seemed like the

most likely plan, the best one that came to mind. She decided to act on it, and planned an outing on the following day.

“Where are we off to today, Mrs. Chandler?” Johnson asked respectfully, it the first time in more than three weeks since she had requested his service.

“To my favorite shop, The Boutique,” she replied in her quiet manner, climbing into the back of the vehicle while Johnson held the door for her. She could not help but wonder if he had been watching the monitor that night when Tobias raped her. Her face reddened at the thought and she found herself unable to meet his gaze.

Johnson sometimes talked to Rochelle on her frequent shopping trips. Today, however, he was silent, and Rochelle was glad. She needed to concentrate on what she was doing. Her palms were sweating, and she kept telling herself to stay calm despite that deep fear in the pit of her stomach at what would happen if Tobias were to learn of her plan. She was surely treading disaster, but if it all worked well, she was certain the outcome of regaining her freedom would be worth the risk.

Still, she could barely suppress the fear of thinking of Tobias’s retribution. She could imagine all sorts of things far worse than death that he might do, and had every reason to believe her husband would be merciless.

Johnson pulled into a tiny parking lot next to The Boutique, and parked the car. “Are you planning on being long, Mrs. Chandler?”

“It depends,” she said noncommittally. “You know me, Johnson. Some days nothing appeals to me, then others, well... you know how it is.” She spoke much the very same words to him on every outing, but today, they sounded insincere to her own ears. She could feel sweat popping out all over her, her fear mechanism in high gear. Thus far, she had done nothing any different from a

thousand times before, but the contrived deceit, planned out in her own mind, brought nervous guilt stimulating every nerve ending.

Despite the fear quaking through her, she managed to sound calm, and Johnson seemed satisfied with her answer. He grabbed a magazine from the seat next to him, pushed the seat as far back as it would go, then made himself comfortable for a long wait. He knew Rochelle lingered over fittings sometimes that had taken up to three hours on one occasion, so he was always prepared with something to read when he took her to that particular shop. Occasionally, he might run to a nearby gas station for a bathroom break or a soda; otherwise, he sat and waited, occasionally cranking the car to run the air conditioner.

“You take your time, Mrs. Chandler,” he said, repressing a yawn and covering his mouth with his palm.

To keep Johnson from knowing about and reporting her visits to the bank to Tobias, she devised a plan to delude him. She would enter The Boutique, go out the back door and down an alley, and then cut back out onto the sidewalk where she would hail a cab to take her to the bank.

Today, both clerks were busy and the proprietress was nowhere in sight, so Rochelle entered the store and kept walking right on out the back door. The clerks did not even see her, and Johnson had no reason to suspect this shopping trip was any different from all the others. She had no trouble flagging a cab, and she was at her destination in minutes.

In the bank, she inspected the safety deposit box her father rented in her name. Strange, she thought, that she had never bothered checking it before. She supposed there had not been a reason since Tobias was generous with his money. Now, when she opened the large safety deposit box, it was stuffed full of money, and upon first glance, looked like many thousands of dollars in

various denominations. There was also a fat envelope of documents. She turned it in her hands, deciding to investigate it another time since she felt the need to rush.

Needing more space for her other purposes, she rented another safety deposit box. After learning the balance of the savings account, she was duly shocked that the amount rivaled anything beyond her expectations. She was certain her father never would have put that much money in a low interest savings account unless he had good reason to believe something might happen to him. A sense of guilt surged swift and strong as she blamed herself for not listening to her parents. They likely would still be alive today if she had only listened to them. She shook off the bitterness and guilt for the moment, needing to concentrate on her plan.

Rochelle knew she would create attention if she tried to withdraw the entire amount at once, so she did some mental calculations, deciding to make intermittent withdrawals over several weeks. She withdrew the first advance, placing it in the new safety deposit box with the withdrawal receipt, and suddenly thought about what her father had said. “One day, you will be glad of my foresight.”

Daddy, you were right, she thought, and I wish to God that I could tell you that now.

When her business was finished, she took the cab back to the alley entrance, quickly making her way back to The Boutique on foot. She found the alley door locked, and knocked softly while she worried that no one would open the door for her. Remy, the shop owner, opened it and raised her brows when she saw Rochelle.

“Remy, please don’t mention this to anyone,” Rochelle implored quietly.

“No problem. What my customers do is their own business.”

Just to make her trip look good in Johnson's eyes, she bought a blouse, and the clerk boxed it for her. Glancing at her watch, she was satisfied she had used less time than usual when she shopped, sometimes buying nothing after lengthy browsing.

"Mrs. Chandler, you didn't buy much today," Johnson said more in conversation than in speculation after noticing her single package.

Rochelle's nerves were on edge even though she knew Johnson had no reason to suspect her of doing anything different than she had hundreds of times before. "I couldn't seem to find anything to suit me today, Johnson."

"Where to?" he asked, knowing she sometimes made the rounds to several shops.

"I think I'm ready to go home. I'm not in a shopping mood," she said with a deep sigh of resignation. Feeling terribly relieved over having successfully gone to the bank without detection, she started planning her next shopping trip when she could withdraw more money from her account.

Chapter Six

Over a period of the next several weeks, when she could get away from the estate without suspicion, Rochelle continued converting her savings to cash and transferring it to the safety deposit box until the account was empty.

With plenty of time to brainstorm, design, and refine her plan of action, she bought a long blonde wig, large dark glasses, baggy jeans and shirt, sneakers, socks, long dangling earrings, and a light jacket with long sleeves. To add to the effect, she purchased a

portable cassette player with earphones and one tape. Her costume was made up to resemble the appearance of the younger generation whose style was anything but conservative—sort of “hippy” she thought. After each purchase, made intermittently over several weeks, she smuggled them into The Boutique in a tote bag she frequently used when she shopped. In the bathroom, she packaged the items tightly together, and then taped them beneath the sink where she hoped they would remain until she was ready to retrieve them. It was a chance she had to take.

She used Remy’s phone to call the bus station, learning the bus schedule to the first largest town, where she would buy another ticket to another large town, hoping the numerous changes and stops would throw off anyone trying to trace her.

Nearly two months later, she reviewed all she had done, going back over every detail to determine if her plans seemed ironclad. Nothing appeared to be remiss. She was ready to take the big step.

Now, she only needed to wait patiently until Tobias made another trip down to Columbia. There was less chance of detection if he were not there to initiate a search for her. No one would call in the police to report her missing unless Tobias gave the order himself.

She needed to make one last purchase, a large duffel bag for the money. She had to go out the back door of The Boutique one more time and take a cab. Since the duffel bag was too large to hide, she took her other items from beneath the sink and put them in the bag. She entrusted it to Remy, making up a story about not wanting to carry it about with her and would pick it up later.

“No problem,” Remy told her, “It’ll be here whenever you ask for it.” With as much money as Rochelle spent in her shop, Remy could be very accommodating.

Another month passed before Tobias informed her he was flying down to Colombia.

“Why don’t you come with me?” he asked, and her heart jumped up in her throat.

“I don’t think so,” she replied calmly even though her pulse throbbed erratically. “I haven’t felt well lately. I’d rather not.”

Tobias eyed her suspiciously, his eyes examining her closely. Rochelle knew if he were of a mind to insist on her coming, she would have no choice in the matter. Her nerves were raw-edged as she waited breathlessly for him to ruin all her carefully laid plans.

“Suit your self,” he remarked coldly, hardly caring one way or the other. “I’ll be gone a week.”

A breath of relief escaped through her trembling lips and she fought to suppress her quickening excitement. Adrenaline tingled through her torso and limbs, but she checked it, not wanting to give Tobias reason to suspect anything. She greeted his news with apathy as she usually did, accepted his goodbye kiss early the next morning. Her heart pounded furiously with elation.

It was time.

Her moment had finally arrived to put Tobias from her life.

A certain amount of excitement suffused in her blood stream, but beneath it was another, more pronounced emotion, pure terror. She was scared to death. Even with Tobias a continent away, his presence was still as invasive as if he stood beside her. She could feel perspiration breaking out all over her even though the coolness of the air conditioning was at a comfortable setting. Butterflies nested in her stomach, fluttering violently at various moments like a thousand pulsating wings. Every tiny sound she heard startled her, sending a frightening jerk all through her body. Adding to the tumultuous anxiety invading her sanity was the imagined outcome if Tobias or the guards discovered her attempt to escape.

A million times she wished there was someone to talk to, someone to confide in. She knew people all over the city, but all were friends of Tobias. Anyway, the women Rochelle knew were probably like her, afraid to trust anyone. There was Bentley Harrison, her Godfather, who was her late father's closest friend. She trusted him beyond any other man, yet Rochelle dared not contact him by phone or in person. Such communication was traceable, which could jeopardize Bentley's safety. She had to do this alone. There was no other way, and it was absolutely the only way to retain secrecy.

Giving Tobias time to arrive at his destination, she waited until the next day to make her get-away. The night proved a sleepless one with intermittent dozing blighted by terrible dreams that left her drenched with sweat. The night stretched endlessly. Every time she glanced at the digital clock, little time had passed since the last time she looked. When daylight began peeking over the eastern horizon, she was exhausted.

Dragging herself from the bed, she went to the shower and stood an extended time beneath the soothing splintery spray. It revived her, washed away some of the lethargy, and cleared her thoughts. She knew she had to be alert, had to follow every detail to the letter, lest Johnson get wind that something was underway.

Since it was still much too early to put her plans in motion, she chose her attire carefully; a comfortable suit and blouse, and flat sandals, which she seldom wore. She knew she should wear heels as she usually did, but she needed comfortable shoes in the event she had to move quickly. Finally finishing her daily routine of showering, putting on makeup, and dressing, she inspected herself in the mirror before going downstairs for breakfast.

“Mrs. Chandler, you’re up early today,” the cook stated curiously. Then seeing how tired Rochelle looked, she continued. “Are you feeling well? You look tired.”

“I didn’t sleep well,” Rochelle replied shortly, wanting to avoid further conversation. She was certain everyone could look right into her mind and see what she planned. The feeling of transparency left her nervous and highly fidgety. She spilled her coffee and the cook wiped it up. She dropped her bread knife when she was buttering her toast, and it clanked against the plate. Her hands shook violently, and she had to hide them in her lap when the cook kept noticing them.

She was too nervous to be hungry, but she ate heartily anyway since she might not have a chance to eat for many hours to come. She also drank several cups of black coffee to stimulate her dulled senses.

Her hands became clammy and she kept wiping them on the linen napkin, wishing away the time. She would leave at exactly eleven, and once downtown, she would dismiss Johnson, who sometimes took lunch while she shopped.

As time neared for her to leave, she stood before her closet, her clothing and the toilet articles in the dressing room the only signs that she even lived there. It was like a goodbye to the only things she cared about in Tobias’s home. She would carry no apparel with her except the duffle bag and its contents at The Boutique. She touched a few items of clothing lovingly, hating to leave everything behind, but knowing it was necessary. Her clothes had been the only source of interest for the past five years, and except for shopping sprees, she would have been a prisoner for all the freedom allowed her. One’s state of mind could become a worse prison than actual bars, and from that perspective, she realized just how imprisoned Tobias had kept her.

She punched a button on the in-house phone. “Johnson, I want you to take me out today.” Nothing in her tone or manner was different from previous times. It was only in her lower stomach that the difference registered sharply. The butterflies were alive and pulsating, their wings flashing and fluttering with the force of a wind-swept storm.

“Yes, ma’am, what time.”

“I’m ready now. I’ll be out in a minute.”

Johnson noticed the flat sandals right away as he held the car door for her. “Mrs. Chandler, you don’t look so tall without your heels,” he said without intending discourtesy, his middle-aged face looking like sun-dried leather with deep wrinkles.

Rochelle’s heart gave a strong lurch. “Yes, I slightly turned my ankle. It was a bit swollen and painful, so I decided against the heels today.” Her damp hand wrapped around the shoulder strap of her purse, grasping tight enough to cut off circulation in her fingers and turn her knuckles white.

“I never could understand how women can walk around in those stilted heels anyway,” he said, smiling broadly, ever appreciating the lovely visage of his bosses’ wife.

“Wearing heels is the price we pay to look glamorous, I’m afraid,” Rochelle replied softly, smiling sweetly despite the raging tremors inside her.

“Where are we off to, Mrs. Chandler?” Johnson asked. He cranked the shiny black vehicle and steered it down the drive that swept through a lengthy expanse of lawn and on through the iron-grilled gate opening.

“Take me to my favorite spot, Johnson.”

After Johnson pulled off the street into The Boutique’s little parking lot, Rochelle gathered up her purse and waited for him to open the door. “Johnson, since it’s nearly noon, why don’t you take

lunch. I will probably be busy with fittings and the like if they got in a new shipment. Take your time. There is no need to hurry. Just give me a number where you will be and I can call you. I'll probably take lunch with Remy."

Her plans were routinely the same as many times previously, and Johnson had no reason to question them. Habitually, when she gave him leave for lunch, he went to his favorite restaurant where some of his cronies hung out, spending two or three hours, never in a hurry because he knew Mrs. Chandler would call him when she was finished. He jotted down the number, remembered by heart, and handed it to her.

ROCHELLE WASTED NO TIME. When Remy spotted her coming through the doorway, Rochelle greeted her as usual. She inquired about the duffel bag. She waited while Remy fetched it.

"Here it is," Remy said, holding it up, "just where I put it. Do you want it now?"

"Sure, I'll just hold onto it so I won't forget it." Then turning to eye the direction of the bathroom, she rushed off toward it. "Too much coffee this morning," she said, knowing Remy would understand. She had done that before, too.

Rochelle used the bathroom to relieve her bladder, and then eased out without anyone observing her. The bathroom was on a tiny hallway near the back door, so Rochelle hurried out back to the alley. She felt like running once her feet touched the pavement, but she knew better than to do anything that might attract attention. Instead of running, she walked as fast as she could. The butterflies were taking a rest now as Rochelle's mind intently strove to follow the carefully laid plans reviewed dozens of times.

When she came to the end of the alley where it opened onto the street, she cast her eyes up and down, to be sure the vehicle driven

by Johnson was nowhere in sight. For a second her heart froze in her chest as a long dark car, looking exactly like the one Johnson drove, passed right before her eyes. She was not able to see the driver because of dark-tinted windows, and whether or not he saw her, she had no idea. Quickly, she hailed a cab, which offered concealment, and Rochelle breathed more easily once inside. When they arrived at the bank, she asked the cabby to wait for her.

Glancing about the large bank lobby now, she hoped this would be her last time coming here. If things went well, she would be well away from Miami by midnight.

She went to the teller who handled the deposit boxes and waited her turn behind an old man who moved and spoke with arthritic slowness. The teller followed him into the vaulted room, turned her key in the lock, and then waited for him to turn his key before showing him to a small private room. All the while, Rochelle counted the minutes. The teller came back out and followed the same procedure with Rochelle, except in this instance, keying two safety deposit boxes.

Alone in the small room, Rochelle hastily transferred the money and documents into the duffel bag after taking the package of clothing out. It took a few minutes longer than expected to make the transfer before she put the deposit boxes back, constantly aware of the time ticking away. She had to be at the bus station before twelve-thirty, to change clothing, purchase her ticket, and be on the one o'clock bus.

Sweat broke out all over her as she hurried to the waiting taxi. Her auburn-gold hair was such an attention-getter, she hoped and prayed no one would spot her before she arrived at the bus station and changed into the clothes bundled in the package. All it would take to ruin her plans was for a single acquaintance of Tobias's to

see her in a taxi. It would be a dead giveaway since they all knew Rochelle had her own driver for wherever she wanted to go.

She gave the taxi driver a street name she knew was only two blocks from the bus station. If anyone traced her to the cab, at least no one would be perfectly sure she had gone to the bus terminal. In the cab, she pulled her hair back in a ponytail and twirled it around in a bun so it would not be quite so flashy. When the cab driver let her out, she paid him and quickly started in the direction opposite from the bus station, wanting to mislead him on the direction she took. As soon as he was out of sight, however, she turned about and seeing the time was slipping past too quickly, she hurried toward the bus terminal.

Once inside, she raced to the restroom, flung off her clothes and tore into the package containing the most disgusting clothes she would likely ever wear again. She quickly donned them, draped the blonde wig over her head, added the large sunglasses and earrings, and inspected herself in the mirror. Another look at her watch informed her she had to buy her ticket immediately, or the bus would be leaving without her.

She stuffed the clothes she had pulled off into the duffel bag, spreading them so they covered the money that would have invited all kinds of thieves from every dark corner of the planet if they guessed what she carried. One last look in the mirror brought a smile to her lips. She really did look like some young, dumb, street kid without a care in the world. She did not recognize herself, and was almost sure that if Tobias could have seen her, he would not have recognized her either. With the earphones over her ears, it added to the effect. Satisfied with her appearance, she rushed from the restroom.

The ticket woman looked at her distastefully, wondering why young people had to ruin their looks by dressing so sloppily. “Where

to?" she inquired indifferently with a bored look on her face.

"Orlando," Rochelle said, ignoring the woman's critical stare and sharp manner. She paid for her ticket and went to board the bus. A line of folk in front of her looked tired before their trip began, as if dreading the long ride ahead of them.

Rochelle found a seat at the very back of the bus, wanting to be as inconspicuous as possible. Seeing the bus wasn't filled to capacity, she claimed both seats, sitting toward the aisle and putting the duffel bag beside her.

Many miles later, after her bus left the bus station, she glanced at her watch and saw it was past three o'clock. She suspected Johnson would be wondering why she had not called. How long would he continue to wait, she wondered, before eventually realizing that something was wrong?

She tried to determine the actions of Johnson and Tobias's guards back at the estate. Would they go in search of her first or would they simply call Tobias right away to report her missing? Regardless, there would be a mad search to find her. Thank God, she thought now, that she had disguised herself.

Even in disguise, though, doubts churned restlessly. She was not altogether sure she had escaped her prison. It seemed more appropriate to say she was simply exchanging one prison for another since her fear would keep her just as shackled as Tobias had done.

She turned on the cassette player and fixed her earphones in place, listening to music that, despite its soothing tone, made no marked difference in her agitated nerves. Every cough, raised voice, or any sudden braking, caused her to twist off her earphones so she could better hear what was going on around her. Finally, she turned off the cassette, removed the earphones, and prepared to give closer attention to everything about her.

The miles slowly ticked away, the distance between her and Tobias growing wider. After she changed buses in Orlando, she felt a bit more secure, but she knew better than to get complacent. She still wasn't out of danger of Tobias's power and influence. His threat to kill her kept her extremely alert and cautious.

She still had miles to go.

Chapter Seven

In Miami, Rochelle's absence began taking its toll, and those having to answer to Tobias Chandler were in no favorable moods. By four o'clock on the day Rochelle left, Johnson was still waiting in the restaurant with one of his cronies, looking at his watch every few minutes. He checked with the manager to see if anyone called for him, getting a negative reply. His friend, Jake, was talking, but he was not hearing much of what Jake said. He was beginning to get very concerned over Mrs. Chandler not calling. She was usually through shopping before four o'clock.

"Johnson, why do you keep looking at that infernal watch?" Jake asked irritably, leaving his story unfinished since Johnson wasn't listening anyhow.

"I've got to go," he said, jumping from his chair and rushing toward the door, leaving a questioning Jake gazing after him.

At The Boutique where Johnson dropped Mrs. Chandler, he parked and went inside for the first time ever. There had never been a reason before to enter the shop. A woman met him just inside the door.

"Can I help you, sir?" she asked.

“Yes, who is Remy?” he inquired, his eyes sweeping over every visible inch of the store.

“I’m Remy. What can I do for you?”

“I’m looking for Mrs. Chandler. Is she in the dressing room?”

“Who are you?” Remy asked before answering.

“I’m her chauffeur. Is she here?”

“No, she left some time ago.” Remy knew Rochelle went out the back door as she had numerous times in the past few weeks, but she wasn’t about to give the man that information. She had to protect her clientele, else they would shop some place else.

“Where did she go?”

“I’m sure I don’t know. She never tells me where she’s going.”

“Did you see her leave?”

“No, I didn’t. I have been rather busy this afternoon. When I had a moment to look about, I realized she was gone.”

Johnson picked up her phone on the counter and dialed. “Dave, we’ve got a problem,” he said into the phone. “Mrs. Chandler has disappeared.”

Dave, the head guard in charge when Tobias was out of town, sat up straight, the chair groaning with his weight. Jumping to his feet, the chair tilted backward and crashed to the floor. “Gone? What in the hell do you mean, *gone*?”

“She told me she would call me when she finished shopping, but she never did. I got worried and came back to the shop looking for her.”

“Where in the hell were you? You were supposed to be watching her.”

“She told me to go have lunch and she would call me when she was finished shopping.”

“You stupid damn bastard, I thought you knew what your job was!”

“It was nothing new. I’ve done it many times before.”

“Then *we* damn well don’t have a problem, Johnson, but *you* sure as hell do. You get paid to watch her so nothing like this happens.”

“I was following the routine I’ve always followed. What are we going to do, Dave?”

“I don’t know what you’re going to do, but I’m calling the boss. If I were you, Johnson, I’d pack a suitcase and get the fuck out of Miami just as damn fast as you can.”

“It wasn’t my fault. Surely Mr. Chandler won’t blame me.”

“Not only will he blame you, but you’ll damn well pay if something’s happened to her. Have you forgotten those other two who created problems for Mr. Chandler, not to mention at least a dozen others? You do recall them, don’t you, Johnson? Our boss knows how to make people disappear.”

That is all Johnson needed to hear. He went to the bank, drew out his savings, and ditched the shiny limo. He went back to his tiny apartment and started packing his clothes, intending to catch the first bus out of the city. He figured if he could get to New York City and get lost among the hoards of people Tobias Chandler would never find him.

IT TOOK DAVE A COUPLE of hours before he could track Tobias down, and he dreaded like hell to be the one to tell him. It was his duty, though, since he was in charge. He just hoped Tobias would not take his hostility out on him since Johnson was probably already on his way to the other side of the United States.

“Disappeared?” Tobias screamed into the phone, following with a string of expletives. “Disappeared from where? Can’t any of you sons of bitches do anything right?”

Dave winced at the anger in Tobias's voice, and reluctantly repeated the story told by Johnson.

"What in the hell have you done about it?" he demanded, rising impatience seeming to reach through the telephone from Columbia to Miami and quickly growing into dangerous rage.

Tobias's breathing sounded hard and ragged now, and Dave knew the man was in a killing mood. "I sent some of the guys out with her picture to some of the shops where she frequently goes. I told them to hit on taxi drivers and the ticket tellers at the bus station. I also checked car rental places, and the airline, and nothing was booked under Mrs. Chandler's name."

There was a lengthy span of silence as Tobias thought it through. When he spoke again, he was calmer than at first. "What does Johnson have to say for himself?"

"About all he said was that she disappeared."

"Let me speak to him."

"I can't, Mr. Chandler. He is missing, too. The guys located the limo, but Johnson has also disappeared."

"I want that son of a bitch found, and you know what to do when you find him!"

"What about Mrs. Chandler? What do you want me to do?"

"You look for her and find her, but I'll deal with her myself. I do not want the police called in. We will have to handle the matter ourselves. Check pawnshops to see if she pawned jewelry. She had to have money to get out of town and I never leave her more than a couple hundred since I have charge accounts established at the places she frequents. She also has a couple of credit cards. Find out if she has made any recent charges."

"Yes, sir, I'll get the boys busy on it."

"Dave, you get off your ass and find her, do you understand?" His voice was suddenly calm, but underlying the calmness was a

deadly rage. “I’ll be back on the earliest plane I can get, and I’m going to kick some ass if she’s not found by the time I arrive home.”

BOZEMAN WAS THE LARGEST city located near the small bedroom community called Windy Point where Rochelle planned to settle. Exhausted from the days and nights aboard buses, where she feared even taking a nap with so much money in the duffel bag, she decided to spend a night in Bozeman before going on to her destination. After clutching the handle of the duffel bag until her hand felt locked into a curved fist, and forcing her eyes to remain open when her whole body cried out for sleep, she knew she needed a bed and rest. When she arrived at Windy Point, she wanted to be at her mental best, ready to handle the business of her money, and find a place to live.

Taking a cab, she asked the driver to take her to the best hotel in town with a good restaurant. She yearned to bathe and take off the wig that heated her head as though she was under a dryer.

She walked into the hotel lobby and requested a room, aware that she did not look exactly like the type of guest who would frequent one of the better hotels. Under normal circumstances, she would have been ashamed of her appearance. Now, however, she was thankful for her awful clothing that had served her well in her escape from Tobias.

“You might be more comfortable somewhere else,” the desk clerk told her, eying her questionably, her blond hair flowing over her shoulders like a horse’s coarse mane.

“I’m sure I will be very comfortable here,” she assured him, taking money from her purse to pay in advance. The desk clerk eyed it suspiciously.

“Ma’am, this is a respectable hotel,” he warned, assessing her distastefully.

“Sir, all I want is a room and a place to sleep. I may be dressed very foolishly, but my moral behavior is more refined than yours I dare say.” She slid a bill in his hand.

He looked startled, but instantly changing his attitude, he pushed a registration card toward her. She filled it out, her hand scratching in the information, all of which was a lie. “I’ll be here one night,” she said. “How much?”

His reply was abrupt, but he handed her a key and told her the price. She counted out the correct amount and handed him, which he also looked at questioningly. People paid with credit cards, rarely using cash for payment. He was not sure about this. He could end up losing his job, but the twenty bucks she handed him would come in handy toward the new tire he needed for his car.

“Are there any clothing shops near the hotel?” Rochelle inquired, thinking she would like to look a bit smarter tomorrow when she went to the bank. Her wrinkled suit stuffed in the duffel bag would hardly look presentable.

“There’s one a few blocks over,” he said, and gave her the address and directions.

Rochelle took a cab to the location given her. Their prices were high, but they had some lovely clothing that caught her eye immediately. She received several evil stares because of her attire, but for the most part the clerk was friendly and helpful. Not in the mood for a lot of shopping, she bought one gorgeous white suit and a pale yellow silk blouse to wear with it. She purchased hosiery; a matching set of under-things, and had to go to a couple more shops to find comfortable pumps and a matching purse, cosmetics and personal items.

As soon as she was back at the hotel in her room, she slid out of her clothing, glad to rid herself of it as she stuffed the items into the trashcan along with the blonde wig. She kept her sneakers, socks,

and sunglasses, as well as her underwear, which she washed in the sink and hung on the shower rod to dry. She checked her watch as she had done probably hundreds of times since leaving Miami, and each time she did, palpitations pumped erratically in her chest.

By now, the hue-and-cry had gone out, and a full-scale search would be underway for her. No doubt, Tobias cut his Columbia trip short and was likely in a killing mood. He probably had considered numerous ways to murder her since learning of her disappearance. The fact that she had outsmarted him, thus far anyway, would be enough to make him more dangerous than ever. Her life would not be worth a wooden nickel if he found her. The thought of his virulent rage sent a shiver along her spine.

She bathed, washed her hair and toweled it dry. She called room service and ordered a green salad and ham sandwich and some hot tea. When she finished her meal, she could not stop yawning. *God, I have never been this tired*, she thought.

Tucking the duffel bag beneath the bed covers next to her, she fell into a hard, fast sleep that lasted throughout the afternoon and night.

When she awoke the following morning, she ordered a huge breakfast and plenty of coffee through room service. She wanted to remain out of the public eye as much as possible even if she was far away from Miami. She considered changing her appearance, maybe cutting off some of her flamboyant auburn-gold hair, but had no scissors.

She dressed in her new white suit, looking like a completely new person when she made her way down to the lobby. Her long, shapely legs drew attention from the short hemline down to the black patent leather pumps she wore, but she did not notice. Still emotionally tired despite all the many hours of sleep, her brain would not let go of all the visions of what must be happening in

Miami. She was physically free from Tobias, but she would never be emotionally free. Fear of Tobias discovering her whereabouts kept her bound to him as completely as if he were by her side.

The desk clerk looked at her with appreciation, and did not recognize her, not even when she informed him she would like to pay her room service charges.

He looked puzzled, not having remembered checking her in. “What room, miss?” He asked, scratching his head. When she handed him the key, he did an about face, his eyes gleaming with surprise.

Rochelle settled her tab and asked him to order her a cab. She only had a few minutes to wait.

“To the bus station,” she told the taxi driver, hoping this would be her last bus ride. Buses made her hopelessly uncomfortable now after spending so many long endless hours on them.

As the bus carried her to Windy Point, she thought of her parents and the time the three of them visited the small town years previously. She was deep in thought when the bus stopped on the curb next to a bus stop sign across the street from the post office.

With her duffel bag handle clutched tightly in her fisted hand, she walked toward the business district, suddenly feeling more alone than she’d ever been in her life. This morning, upon waking, her body, her mind, everything felt numb. Now, her precarious situation hit her with a rush of emotion. She was on her own with no friends, no one to turn to, and feeling akin to a hunted animal. Depression weighed heavily upon her tense shoulders. She tried to concentrate on her surroundings, barely remembering anything from her visit years ago with her parents. She felt like crying, but bit back the urge.

Landmarks looked different and strange, quite unfamiliar to her wandering gaze. Recalling the town had been small, now she could

see it had not changed a great deal. It was still small with a row of stores and shops on both sides of the avenue, compacted close enough within a commercially zoned area as to put things within easy walking distance. Nearer the outskirts was a motel, also in easy walking distance. It was where she and her parents stayed when her father visited with his good friend, James Matheson, many years ago.

“James Matheson,” Rochelle whispered aloud to herself, digging the name of her father’s friend from her memory, the man she would soon be seeing.

She started down the sidewalk of the main street, feeling extremely nervous at the prospect of dealing with Mr. Matheson, even if he had been a friend of her father. She expected the bank to be a small establishment much like all the little modernized shops and stores with decorative facades. She was pleasantly surprised when she spotted the bank, and saw it was a nearly new structure.

When she went inside, its modern architecture was somehow very stabilizing and friendly, as was the modern decor. The floor contained a carpet in a conservative shade of gray with borders of dark mauve. Padded chairs, covered in mauve leather complemented the rough textured wallpaper with its abstract lines and shapes. The lobby was enormous with several tall patron desks spaced across the length of its center and containing deposit slips, credit applications, and other banking forms. Green plants, selectively placed, lent an earthy setting.

Rochelle’s heart pounded against her chest as she went to the first teller she saw. Business and banking were not exactly her areas of expertise, and she was frightened that she might somehow bungle this, considering she had so much cash on her. One phone call to Tobias for verification of who she was would surely mean ultimate

death for her. She could feel her hands grow damp and the butterflies start up again.

“I’d like to see Mr. James Matheson,” she said, and watched the woman’s face take on a frown that raised Rochelle’s uneasiness. Her hands were shaking nervously. All alone in a strange place, with no one for moral support, feelings of loneliness and fear consumed her.

If not for her father’s referral to James Matheson, she would fear having to deal with anyone else. She hadn’t the foggiest idea how far-reaching Tobias’s organization was, and giving her name to anyone could create a trail leading him to her. She dared not trust anyone.

“May I ask what the nature of your business is?” the woman asked, replacing her initial frown with her best professional look as she sized Rochelle up.

“Investments,” Rochelle told her, trying to sound confident. “I’m here to make an investment.”

“Hold on, miss. I’ll see if Mr. Matheson can see you now.” She picked up the phone, and spoke quietly. “Mr. Matheson, there’s a young woman here who is asking for James Matheson. She says she would like to make an investment. Can you see her, sir?”

A silent pause at the woman’s end preceded a nod of her head before she hung up the phone. “If you’ll go down to the end of the teller windows, you’ll see a door there on your left. Just knock on it, and go right in.”

Rochelle nodded, wondering why the woman stared at her so inquisitively. Her paranoia was in overdrive. The butterflies fluttered nervously, and her palms felt terribly clammy. She was extraordinarily afraid of questions. Any personal information given out could easily establish a paper trail making it easy for Tobias to find her. She hoped James Matheson would not make her quite so nervous.

She took a deep breath, her mind focused so intently on Tobias possibly locating her, she could barely think coherently. She found herself subconsciously glancing over her shoulder. She took another deep breath, knowing she needed to get control. Putting herself out in public among people presented the greatest concern for her.

Stopping in front of the heavy door, she read the nameplate bearing the name Michael Matheson, President.

A flicker of confusion caused her to frown. She searched her memory, thinking she might have incorrectly recalled Mr. James Matheson's first name. Perhaps Michael was his middle name, she thought.

Straightening her back and changing her facial features to the inscrutable mask she'd long worn with Tobias, she tapped lightly on the door.

Chapter Eight

Michael Matheson finished signing his name to the document on his desk, and stood up at the sound of tapping on his office door. It wasn't unusual for new investors to request a meeting with him, but he was pleasantly surprised when this particular investor opened the door and stepped into his office.

She stood there, her hand on the doorknob, staring at his face, looking considerably confused. While she attempted to sort through the sudden questions plaguing her, Michael was trying to stop staring. She was the most beautiful woman to walk through that door since he took over running the bank. Meticulously groomed, she looked like someone out of a glamour magazine. Her clothing was tasteful, expensive, and very feminine on her shapely figure.

She was beautiful—more than beautiful, he thought. She was exquisite.

“Please come in,” Michael said.

Rochelle remained where she stood, gazing questionably at him. “There’s been a mistake,” she said with a slight quiver in her voice. “I was looking for a Mr. James Matheson.”

Michael slipped from behind his desk. Seizing the doorknob from her hand, he pushed the door shut. Placing his hand lightly upon Rochelle’s back, he guided her to a chair. “James Matheson was my father,” he informed her.

His use of the word *was*, passed right by her attention. “Your father?” she questioned, taking a seat and sitting on the edge of the chair. She gazed up at his more than six foot height, tilting her head back on her shoulders to better view his face. “I thought *he* was the bank president,” she continued, watching Michael move around his desk and lower his muscular form into his leather-upholstered executive chair. She observed his darkly tanned face. She clutched the handle of the duffel bag she had set on the floor next to her chair.

Michael reached for a pen, which he toyed with distractedly, and leaned back in his high-backed office chair. “My father died nearly two years ago,” he explained.

The information jolted Rochelle, and she suddenly looked shocked and worried.

“That can’t be,” she exclaimed, clearly disturbed at the news. “What I mean is…” she paused in mid-sentence. “I’m sorry about your father’s death.”

Her voice quivered and Michael nearly reached for a tissue to hand her, thinking she was about to cry. He held back, however, watching her take a deep steadying breath.

“Why don’t you tell me who you are, and what business you required of my father,” Michael suggested.

“Your father was a friend of my father. Before dad died, he deposited some money in this bank for me, and told me to come see Mr. James Matheson when I needed to access the account.”

Michael was clearly startled. He knew immediately who she was by the amount of money her father had deposited in his bank for her. “I’m Michael Matheson, James’s youngest son. Perhaps I can help you, Mrs...”

Rochelle glanced at her lap where her left hand curled into a tight fist. The large diamond-encrusted wedding rings on her finger glittered brilliantly beneath the fluorescent lighting. Realizing all at once how careless she had been not to remove the rings, she did so now. Unobtrusively, she slid them from her finger, dropping them into a tiny zippered pocket of her purse.

“I’m Rochelle Rathbone,” she said, using her maiden name that would be on the accounts her father set up in the Matheson bank. “I suppose you don’t remember my father, Joshua Rathbone?”

Michael’s forehead creased into a thoughtful frown, as he reached across his desk and shook her hand. “As a matter of fact, the name is familiar. I believe your father visited here about five years ago. I recall that particular visit because I made a special trip here to Windy Point to participate in a birthday celebration for my dad. Your father and mother’s visit coincided with the occasion and they joined us.”

“Then you do remember him,” Rochelle stated, pleased. She shifted her weight closer to the edge of the chair and bent forward expectantly.

“Yes, as a matter of fact, I do. He spoke of you a number of times.”

Michael could not take his eyes away as her shoulders slumped with relief and she let out a long sigh. Her coral lips parted into a sad little smile. She pushed herself back in her chair, which set at one end of his desk, giving him a full, clear view of her. She crossed her knees to expose long shapely legs. Her skirt rode high up her silky thighs. He purposely moved his eyes to her right hand that continued to clutch the handle of the duffel bag.

She sighed with relief. “For a moment there I was afraid...”

She cut her sentence short, and Michael was wondering now what it was she wanted with him. He was aware of the account her father had established. Everyone at the bank was. It was one of their largest accounts. The fact that it set idle for the past years in a money market account with low interest rates had drawn the questionable curiosity of a number of his bank employees.

“Are you moving here to the area, Miss Rathbone?” he asked in his best businesslike manner.

She uncrossed her legs, and then crossed them again with the other leg. Her white skirt rode up a little higher leaving lace peeking from beneath the hem. Michael’s breath caught in his throat as he subconsciously leaned forward in his chair, his eyes lingering just long enough on her silky legs to bring a blush to her cheeks. She raised her hips and self-consciously pulled down her skirt, lowering her eyes behind long lashes as she answered him. “Yes, I do plan to move... live here,” she corrected. “I wish to establish a checking account with your bank.”

Her voice held a light quiver again, and Michael’s eyes studied her hand holding the duffel bag, wondering why it seemed so important to her. She nervously clasped and unclasped her fingers around the handle.

“Are you okay, Miss Rathbone? You seem rather apprehensive,” Michael said just before his phone rang. He lifted it,

listened, and then informed the caller he didn't want to be disturbed. He put the phone down, watching Rochelle, and quietly deciding to string this meeting out as long as possible. It wasn't every day someone so beautiful wandered into his office.

"I've been traveling, and I'm extremely tired."

"From where have you traveled?"

Her brows knitted, and she looked at him with a note of hesitancy in answering. This meeting was not going the way she hoped. The impression that she could simply walk into the bank, see Mr. James Matheson, and put everything in his capable hands had backfired. Instead, Michael Matheson seemed intent upon conducting an interview with her, which she wanted to avoid. The less information she disclosed about herself, the safer she would feel. Her aim was to bury Rochelle Chandler and become Rochelle Rathbone again.

"If you don't mind, I would like to access my accounts," she told him, instead of answering his question.

"I believe you only have one account," he replied.

"There's also money in a safety deposit box." She reached inside her purse and pulled out the safety-deposit box key, handing it across the desk to him.

"I see," he replied, leaning forward to retrieve and examine the key. "I will need identification, of course."

"Isn't the key sufficient? I wouldn't have it unless I'm who I say I am."

"Asking for identification is standard procedure, Miss Rathbone," he said with a faint shrug.

"What if I don't have identification?" she inquired, suddenly uncomfortable with this meeting, and the prospect of having to share her driver's license, which had Tobias's Miami address on it. She didn't know Michael Matheson and didn't trust him with

information that might inadvertently find its way back to Tobias.

He stood up. "I tell you what, why don't we go across the street for a cup of coffee. We can talk there."

Suddenly she was angry. "Mr. Matheson, I came here hoping to meet with a man who knew my father and whom I could trust, and who would help me handle my financial affairs. Instead, I have no choice but to deal with you, in which case, I need to establish a checking account. Will you, or will you not, let me access my savings account and the safety deposit box?" She gripped the handle of the duffel bag tighter, afraid for him to know what was inside it until she felt more trusting of Mr. Michael Matheson.

"Your father left some information concerning his estate? Do you know who the executor is?" Michael asked.

"Yes. He's my Godfather, Bentley Harrison."

"Then call him, and he can corroborate your identity."

"I don't want to call him." She jumped to her feet, entirely edgy and nervous now. She turned toward the door, prepared to leave, but as soon as she grabbed the doorknob, it dawned upon her that she would have to deal with Michael Matheson unless she planned to carry around a duffel bag filled with money. She knew how dangerous that could be, so undoubtedly, she would have to compromise by supplying information about herself.

Michael remained sitting in his chair while he watched Rochelle preparing to leave. He parked one ankle on his knee, leaned far back in his chair, and clasped his hands and fingers behind his head, knowing that whatever she did, she would have to come back eventually. "That offer of a cup of coffee is still good," he remarked unconcernedly, as she paused at the door.

"Very well, I accept," she said a bit icily, realizing that trusting Michael Matheson was her only option.

Michael rose from his chair joined her at the door. They walked past the tellers windows on their way out, and he did not miss the eager, quizzing glances that flew their way. Seeing someone new in town, especially someone as beautiful as his new client brought the gossips out of the woodwork. Everyone he knew would note any contact, business or personal, which he had with Rochelle from now on. Once her name was recognized as the one on that huge account her father set up for her, she would become a kind of celebrity and wouldn't be able to go anywhere without people staring and watching her.

Gossip was characteristic of small towns and Windy Point was notorious for it.

“MR. MATHESON, I'M AT A TERRIBLE disadvantage,” Rochelle admitted when they were outside the bank and her lungs had filled with several puffs of fresh spring air. It smelled differently here than in Miami where exhaust fumes and other thick odors punctuated the atmosphere of the entire city. Here it smelled of mountains, of hills and valleys that wore a cloak of bright green as new blades of grass greeted a breathtaking spring.

“And how is that Miss Rathbone?”

“My father obviously trusted your father a great deal, and I was prepared to extend my trust to him as well. Discovering I will be dealing with someone else, I'm having reservations about whether I can place my trust in you as I was prepared to do with your father.”

He gave her a sidewise glance, looking vaguely slighted. “I assure you, Miss Rathbone, that all bank accounts are handled with the utmost privacy and discretion. Our customer relations and confidentiality have never been questioned before.”

Rochelle tilted her head back and stared toward a beautiful blue sky, her long auburn-gold curls falling down her back nearly to her

waist. A white puffy cloud floating across the sky caught her attention a moment before she diverted her attention back to Michael and his nicely tanned profile.

“I’m not speaking of professional confidentiality. My situation is unique, and I need to know I can trust you explicitly before I start producing identification such as you requested earlier.”

“Surely you must know that I cannot run a bank efficiently or successfully if the people I do business with aren’t able to put their trust in me.”

Rochelle stopped in her tracks. “I don’t think you’re following me. Have you ever been afraid for your life, Mr. Matheson?”

“Do you fear for your life, Miss Rathbone?” He touched her back with his fingertips, and they continued strolling.

His articulate evasiveness exasperated Rochelle. “Yes, I do fear for my life,” she answered forthrightly.

He halted at the door of the restaurant. He stared into her tired eyes that resembled moist green pools reflecting deep melancholy. It reminded him of a time not so long ago when he could measure his own life by broken dreams, crushed hopes, and frustration-filled days. The ordeal after his arrest, the time he had spent in jail, and the long days of his trial had all been akin to dying by slow degrees.

“Let’s discuss it over coffee, and see if we can’t make things easier for you,” he informed her.

Chapter Nine

Looking around while Michael pulled a chair out and seated Rochelle, the sterile-clean restaurant caused memories to return from years previously when she was ten-years-old. The restaurant

had not changed much. The worn polished floor tiles gave off a waxy shine much as they had when she was last there. The winter-white walls boasted aged looking paintings of yellow and green prairies, horses, and cowboys that Rochelle remembered seeing the first time she and her parents ate there. Ancient fans overhead, which she recalled, whirred lazily, the season still too cool for air conditioning. Somehow, it felt familiar and safe here, the family atmosphere causing Rochelle to feel not quite so homeless.

Michael took a seat across from Rochelle, and the waitress rushed over with two glasses of water. She greeted Michael as Mike, and took their order for coffee, which she brought back shortly.

Without the business atmosphere of Michael's office, Rochelle was more aware of his presence; the manly quality of his voice, his erect posture, his darkly tanned face with long dark lashes and brows, his strong, capable hands with fine black hairs edging his knuckles, and the aristocratic features of his face. The soft scent of his aftershave lotion wafted to her nostrils, a spicy smell that was both pleasant and appealing. He possessed calmness, unlike Tobias's aggressive manner.

"A penny for your thoughts," Michael remarked with a hint at humor. He was watching the pulse at her throat beating rhythmically against her creamy, faintly tanned complexion.

She sent him a rueful smile. "You would be short-changed I'm afraid."

The sight of her pleased Michael, and her secrets invited his curiosity and interest. "Tell me about your father," he said, and watched her smile fade. A contemplative mood washed over her lovely face. The auburn-gold hair bounced conspicuously with each movement. She measured her words as she lifted her chin, taking in every angle, line, and the texture of his face. Then her eyes softened with gentle regret.

“Both my father and mother were killed in an automobile accident more than five years ago. It happened soon after Dad visited here,” she replied softly.

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s all right,” she said, a half-smile faint on her lips at a distant thought. “Mom and Dad were both wonderful parents and left me with many happy memories.”

And lots of money, Michael thought cynically while his eyes lit on her wide, sensuous, full ripe lips. Her smile, when exhibited in a more pleasant mood, could probably charm a lion. She was beautiful, one of those helpless women men loved assisting. He should know. He knew her for less than an hour, and was all ready obsessed with her. She probably had known her share of pampering, he thought. The diamond rings worn earlier, and the diamond encrusted watch she still wore were strong evidence of that notion.

Rochelle glanced about the restaurant, seeing a light friendliness displayed amongst the patrons. “I’ve been here before. It was a long time ago, but I recall this restaurant well.”

“It’s an old establishment and draws a good number of locals as well as travelers from the interstate. When were you here?”

“I was only ten years old. It was years ago. I met your father then, but I had totally forgotten about this place until now. In fact, my parents and I visited here with Mr. Matheson over coffee and coke for me.”

“How is it our fathers knew each other?”

“Dad mentioned that they were friends in college. Dad was a Harvard man.”

“So was my father. It is interesting they kept in touch after all those years. Anyway, what brings *you* back to Windy Point?”

“I explained that to you. Before my father died, he told me Mr. Matheson would help me if ever I needed to depend upon someone.”

“I’m afraid I don’t understand. Why would you *need* to depend upon anyone?”

She studied him critically for several seconds before answering, deciding she had no other choice but to put her trust in him.

“I’m running away from someone, Mr. Matheson. My father had the foresight to suspect something like this might happen. It is why he opened the account for me in your bank. I ran away because I fear for my life. That is why I was afraid to give you information about myself? Perhaps I’m paranoiac, but I don’t want to share information that might lead someone to me.”

“I assure you, Miss Rathbone, that you can trust me just as much as you were prepared to trust my father. Your secrets are safe with me.” Something caught in his chest as she smiled at him then, and he swore it was a million dollar smile even if it was only gratefulness—or maybe just relief. Her lips quivered, giving the impression she was near tears. Vulnerable fool that he was to a pretty woman’s smile, the strong masculine urge to comfort and protect was having a field day.

“Thank you,” she said simply, inclining her head, her long lashes, darkened with mascara, fanning her high cheeks.

“You’re welcome, but I do have a simple request,” he said, drawing her attention to his face.

“What?”

“Do you think we could drop the titles? My name is Michael.” He extended his hand across the table, and her slender fingers curved about his.

“I’m Rochelle,” she said, feeling the warm strength of his hand enclosing hers. Tiny vibrations of heat caused a slow shiver to crawl along her spine. The handclasp made her aware of him, not just as a banker, but rather, as a virile and compelling man, whose blue eyes warmed enticingly.

The handclasp continued too long, and she noticed Michael's palms were rough with calluses. She wondered how that was possible when he worked in a bank. She pulled her hand back, becoming self-conscious to discover she liked his touch, which seemed somehow gentle.

I'm literally starved for human compassion, Rochelle thought. The years of verbal, physical and sexual abuse had left her feeling like a cold, empty shell of a woman. Tobias had accused her of being an iceberg, and she had no doubt that his abuse had turned her into one. She often wondered if she would ever know real pleasure in intimacy. Was she incapable of reaching that pinnacle she had heard was one of the most satisfying pleasures between a man and a woman? Would she hate sex with any man, the way she hated it with Tobias. With a sigh, she knew it didn't matter. She certainly had no intention of finding out. That area of her life was now retired.

She lowered her head, staring into her coffee cup. She was tired and weary, unbalanced by too many problems that distance from Tobias had not resolved.

The handclasp left Michael feeling a sudden sense of kinship with Rochelle and a desire to know her better. Actually, he credited the interest to his rather strong libido—and maybe even to a need for companionship. Those same two reasons made him, like most bachelors, a sucker for a beautiful woman.

“What are your plans, Rochelle?” Michael enquired, hoping to acquire more information about her. So far, all he knew was her name, and that her father had established an account for her in his bank. Suddenly showing up on the threshold of his office clutching a duffel bag, and no indication of where she came from, she might have been from Mars for all he knew.

“My plans?” she echoed his question. “I need to find a house, buy a car, and maybe get a job later on.”

“What kind of job are you looking for?”

A confused frown crossed her brow, and she turned up her lips as if something smelled bad. “I don’t know,” she said, embarrassed. “I’ve never worked before.”

Just then, she laughed, a sparkling, tinkling sound that was extremely pleasant to Michael’s ears. “I suppose an employer wouldn’t find my résumé of much value.”

“Maybe I can help.”

“Mr. Matheson, that’s exactly what I’ve been asking for—your help. I need a checking account.”

“Michael,” he reminded her. “Please call me Michael. I believe I explained that you needed to contact Mr. Harrison.”

“Yes, you did explain that; however, I need assurance you won’t put information about me on some computer database, where someone can easily pinpoint my whereabouts. I am not very expert at any of this. I have never run away before. I have never handled money before. In fact, I have never gone anywhere alone until I traveled here. I do need to depend on someone, and since it cannot be your father, it has to be you. I simply need to keep a low profile, and while I do trust Bentley Harrison, I am afraid to call him for fear of putting him in jeopardy.

“If this all sounds dramatic, it’s because you don’t know all the details. I just know I can never go back to where I came from, and that choice might not continue to be mine if my whereabouts become known.” She looked at him in bewilderment, hoping for his understanding.

Searching his rather poker-face expression, she continued. “I have identification—a driver’s license, but it also has an address on it that I don’t want to share because if it got in the wrong hands, it could mean my life. Now, do you understand, Michael?”

“I think I’m beginning to get the picture,” he replied, her disclosure indicating how vulnerable she was. “I’m a good listener if you need someone to talk to,” he offered.

Rochelle studied him. His face had strength and character, and more than conventional good looks, but he was still a stranger, and she was reluctant to put all her trust in him. “Thanks, I’ll remember that.”

Rochelle noticed he had not shown any indication of changing his mind about her calling Bentley. Like with everything else, she seemed to have limited options when it came to banking.

The duffel bag set on a chair next to her. She reached over, and clutched the handle for several seconds, thoughtfully considering an idea. Finally, she set it on the floor beneath the table, nudging Michael’s knees with it. “I’d like for you to take this,” she directed, staring into his sky-blue eyes. When he hesitated, she said, “Please take it.”

He watched her with a puzzled frown, but he lifted it, noticing how heavy it was. Pushing his chair back a few inches, he set the duffel bag on his lap, all the while staring at Rochelle questioningly. “Well, now what?” he asked, waiting for further instructions.

“Open it,” she told him sitting forward expectantly.

Michael undid the clasp, and opened the bag. He saw clothing on top, visually examined it, and then lifted a lacy bra just high enough for Rochelle to see what he was doing. A grin curled his lips while he waited for her reaction. “This is very nice, but I don’t exactly understand why you want me to look at it.”

Rochelle’s face turned crimson. “Push the clothing aside.” she retorted, sitting on the edge of her chair and watching his face. He was a banker, so she did not expect him to be shocked at what the duffel bag contained, but he was—big time.

“Jesus H Christ!” he exclaimed loudly, drawing stares from around the room. He snapped the duffel bag shut, turning an intense speculating gaze upon her. “You’ve been walking around with this?” he remarked disbelievingly in a strong whisper that drew more stares from nearby. “Don’t you have better sense than this?” he added, appalled, and setting the bag at his feet.

Rochelle felt his gaze sweep over her like invisible hands. “Yes, I have been walking around with it, and yes, I do have good sense, but some things can’t be helped. I would like to deposit it in your bank. I have the withdrawal slips.”

“There must be a million dollars or more here,” he whispered. His blue eyes danced from her face down to her throat, her breast, then back up again. He stared at her lips.

She traced his face with her eyes, distracted by his dark sensual gaze that swept over her.

“Will you let me deposit it?” she asked timidly, feeling her heart beating much too fast as he continued staring at her.

He shook his head with disbelief. A sardonic grin slowly traced across his handsome lips, and his white teeth flashed with a pearly sparkle as he spoke. “I suppose I’ll have to if for no other reason than to keep you from being robbed, bludgeoned and killed. Rochelle, whatever possessed you to carry around cash? You could have gotten a cashier’s check, you know.” He sounded like a father speaking to his child.

Her voice raised an octave or two. “I told you I’ve never handled money before, but I do know checks can be traced. I did what I thought was best.”

He laughed softly, it more an expression of astonishment than humor. “I can see why your father would want to send you to my father.”

Outrage exploded in her brain. She might be inexperienced, but she wasn't stupid. She had lived with mockery for five years with Tobias. She was not about to idly accept it from an insolent stranger. "I thank you not to make fun of me," she said contemptuously, reaching for her purse, prepared to say to hell with Michael Matheson, at least for the time being.

His hand shot across the table and covered her hand. "I'm sorry. I was out of line. I simply couldn't believe you've been walking around with this." He held his hand on hers until her shoulders relaxed. "Exactly what kind of business was your father in?" he questioned, his eyes twinkling with a kind of idle amusement.

"I wasn't exactly walking around with it. I was riding a bus. To answer your question, my father was one of those big-shot lawyers who took all the cases no one else wanted, and he charged big bucks for getting his clients off. He was never short on capital or financial security, but he worked very hard to earn it. He was honest, too, and I don't appreciate any implication to the contrary."

"I'm sorry again. You have a right to correct me. Tell me about the accident."

"The car he and my mother were in was crushed by a tractor-trailer while stopped at a traffic light." A faraway expression flickered inaudibly while she spoke with a vulnerable quiver on her lips.

"Was the driver of the tractor-trailer charged?" Michael watched the play of emotions across her features.

"He disappeared into the crowd, and couldn't be traced. The owner of the truck could not be traced either. The vehicle identification number had been destroyed, the license plate was missing and there was no owner registration."

That sounded suspicious, Michael thought. "Do you believe it was an accident?"

Rochelle trained her eyes on his evenly, and shook her head, shrugging her shoulders. “I don’t know. I keep thinking it likely was not an accident. All I know is that I don’t want to end up the same way.” She became aware that Michael Matheson was drawing her out, getting her to say far more than she intended.

Michael understood the implication. His eyes warmed with kindness. He suddenly had the crazy desire to hold her until there was no more sadness in her emerald green eyes. Perhaps he was over-reacting, but she was the first presentable woman he had met since leaving San Francisco. Caroline, his occasional companion, in a rather bizarre, one-sided relationship, did not really count.

“If my father were here, I know he would help you in any way he could. He was the kind of man willing to do anything for his friends. I’ll help you however I can.”

Rochelle raised her chin, staring at him in quick appreciation. Her eyes turned to green pools of moisture, which she hurriedly dashed away with deft fingers. When she spoke, a noticeable quiver strained her voice.

She nodded her head. “Thanks, that’s a big weight off my shoulders. Carrying all that money around frightened me half to death. I feel as though I haven’t slept for days due to being afraid to do more than doze while riding on buses.”

Michael touched her arm briefly, his voice suddenly gentle. “Why don’t we go back to the bank and take care of business?”

He tossed a bill on the table, and standing, lifted the duffel bag, offering Rochelle his other hand. She took it. Rising from her chair, she felt warm vibrations ooze sensation from his hand to hers. He had a strong hand, callused and rough, but it felt good. She briefly clung to it, then let go.

She walked alongside Michael Matheson, slightly intoxicated by faint whiffs of his aftershave lotion or cologne. He was several

inches taller than she was, and was dressed in a gray business suit similar to ones Tobias sometimes wore. She could not help but mentally compare them. Michael was much younger than Tobias was, his body a sculpture of proud masculine muscle and brawn, while Tobias was growing a paunch and gaining weight.

Michael wore no wedding band, so Rochelle supposed he must be single. Warmth crept through her veins and stole up her cheeks as she felt his eyes watching her. However, the fleeting reminder of why she was here sent a cold shudder through her system.

“Would you like to check your safety deposit box?” he inquired when they entered the bank.

“Yes, if it’s permissible.”

He took her back to the vault himself, carrying the box to a small room for her. When he started to go, she stopped him, unconsciously needing his nearness for support. It never crossed her mind that she might be keeping him from other duties. Nevertheless, he did say he would help her. Having him close was more comforting than she wanted to admit. He made her feel a little less alone. Oddly, placing trust in someone had that effect.

“Don’t go,” she said, when he turned to leave.

“Are you sure?”

“Would you mind?”

“No, of course not.”

She opened the box, and while the contents did not surprise her, she heard Michael suck in a big breath of air. The box contained cash, old money handled and passed through numerous hands.

Rochelle glanced up at Michael, and he shook his head in amazement, suddenly wondering where so much money came from, and having some second thoughts about her depositing it in an account in his bank. It wasn’t unusual for questionable persons to stash *dirty* money from drug sales in safety deposit boxes.

Chapter Ten

A prevailing silence ensued, and finally, Michael spoke first. “Rochelle, you realize I have to contact Bentley Harrison, don’t you?”

He moved to a standing position just behind where she sat. His hand touched the back of her chair, and she turned to look up at him. His closeness, and the heat emanating from him, was somehow unsettling and comforting at once.

“If you have to contact Uncle Bentley, then I have no choice.” His fingers touched her shoulder gently for a second, and Rochelle’s nerves flooded with a warm excitement too new to define.

In the five years Rochelle was with Tobias, Remy, owner of The Boutique, was probably the closest person she knew whom she could call friend. The cook had been friendly enough, but Tobias’s abuse taught her not to trust anyone. Trust was a commodity she did not have a great deal of, or more aptly put, she did not find too many people worthy of it. Michael, on the other hand, was gaining points fast in the trust department.

Before Rochelle closed the safety deposit box, she slipped her diamond rings in it.

Michael returned the box to its place. He led Rochelle back to his office, aware of heavy stares as bank employees and customers followed their progress through the lobby. Most of them had never seen him so patronizing with a client, especially a female client. It was bound to cause a stir, but he could live with the gossip. He just wanted to keep it from touching Rochelle. From the little

information gained from her, he believed she had experienced some tough times. She needed no additional concerns now.

When Rochelle saw Michael raise his arm to look at his watch, it dawned upon her she had monopolized a good deal of his time. She reacted. “I’m terribly sorry I’ve taken so much of your time. If you have something else to do...”

“No problem,” he said quietly. “Would you have me turn away the most affluent client I have? My time is your time. Anyway, it isn’t often we have a new face in town,” he stated frankly and was rewarded with a meek smile of gratitude.

When they were in his office, Rochelle slumped into the same chair occupied earlier, her shoulders drooping tiredly.

“Are you okay, Rochelle?” Michael asked.

“I’m just tired. I do not suppose we can postpone this until tomorrow. I really need to find a place to stay.”

“I would be remiss in my duty as your banker if I didn’t advise you against postponement. You cannot keep carrying around that bag of money. It’s too dangerous.”

“Then tell me what to do.”

“Do you have any idea how much money is in that bag?”

“No, it’s only a guess. I know how much I withdrew from the bank, but there was additional money in a safety deposit box. It has to be counted.”

“Let’s take first things first. Why don’t we call Bentley Harrison?”

He made a call to a teller, requesting information. Picking up a pen, he jotted it down on a pad. Rochelle watched him, her nerves catapulting with anxiety at the thought of being in contact with Miami, even through the telephone. She hoped this would not turn into a horrible nightmare. There was always the possibility Tobias’s organization reached far beyond the Miami area. For all she knew he

could have subsidiary operations scattered about the country. For that matter, Michael Matheson could be involved with him, for all she knew. Nothing seemed impossible where Tobias was concerned. Her fear of him made her cautious, and with good reason. She did not feel entirely safe with anyone.

Still, she was doing the only thing she could do. She entrusted Michael with enough information to put Tobias in her midst within hours if he were of a mind to betray her. She watched Michael pick up the phone, push a button for an outside line and then dial. He transferred the call to his speakerphone so Rochelle could hear the conversation. The number proved to be a direct line that put him straight through to Bentley Harrison.

Michael identified himself, and said, "I'm calling in reference to an account in my bank, Mr. Bentley, of which you are the executor."

"What about it?" Bentley asked dryly, and one could almost visualize him suddenly sitting up straighter in his chair, leaning forward attentively.

"The young woman whose name is on the account is here in my office. She would like to access the account."

Bentley was quiet a moment, and Rochelle could readily infer he was digesting the information and weighing it. "Let me speak with her," he demanded, needing confirmation that the call was indeed from whom the man said he was.

"Uncle Bentley?" She could hear him let out a relieved sigh.

"Are you all right, honey?"

The sound of his voice brought a rush of melancholy and an overwhelming flood of sadness. "I'm safe, Uncle Bentley," she said shakily.

"Sweetheart, is it safe to speak openly to you there?"

Michael nodded his head at Rochelle.

“Its okay, Uncle Bentley, there’s just Mr. Matheson and me here.” She tensed, knowing some traumatic news was about to be delivered to her. She sucked in a deep breath of air.

“Sweetheart, things have reached a bad state of affairs here in Miami. Under no circumstance must you let anyone else know where you are residing. It would be highly dangerous. Your husband has half of Miami searching for you. The newspaper got wind of your disappearance and I understand Tobias has hired several private detectives to find you. The last I heard, the police may get involved. You know he has henchmen in the police department. The time may come when you might need to disappear again.”

Michael glanced at Rochelle, enlightenment dawning fully now on how desperate her situation was. It was easy enough, earlier, to think she might be over-reacting. Now, he knew better. She was running for her life. Knowing that, took on an entirely new perspective for him. She was alone and needy, and he was the only person in Windy Point who knew her situation. She needed a friend just now, and he seemed the only one available.

Rochelle tried to remain impassive, but Bentley’s news brought on a new wave of misgivings, her face contorting into an expression of raw emotion. Her eyes flooded with reflected green pools of water and her lips quivered softly as she ground her teeth together trying to control it. Taking a tissue from her purse, she wiped away the moisture before it spilled down her cheeks. “I understand, Uncle Bentley.”

“What do you need from me, honey?”

“Mr. Matheson will tell you.”

“Mr. Bentley, a large amount of money was put in safety deposit boxes both here and in Miami. I need to know the disposition of that money before I can put it in an account. I will

also need documentation from you, the executor, to enable her to access her established account.”

“The money is clean, taxes have been paid, and I have documentation to prove it. I can fax you all the information you’ll need.”

Michael gave him his fax number.

“It’ll be forthcoming,” he said, stringing out a noticeable pause. “Mr. Matheson, her father placed great stock in your friendship...”

“Sir, I am not who you think I am,” Michael interrupted. “My father, James Matheson is dead. I am his youngest son.”

“Then I implore you, sir, to take every precaution with the information you receive. If certain persons were to learn of her whereabouts, dire consequences for my goddaughter could ensue.”

“I assure you, Mr. Harrison, I shall assume the same confidentiality my father would have and give my client any help I can offer.”

“Uncle Bentley,” Rochelle said before Michael severed the connection, “please be careful. I’ve never mentioned your name, but if he found out your connection to me, he would stop at nothing to get information from you.”

“Don’t worry about me, honey. Take care of yourself. I’ll be in touch only if I think it’s necessary.” He severed the connection, and Michael hung up his phone.

Rochelle clasped her hands in her lap, her gaze aimed at one corner of Michael’s large desk, her thoughts running rampant. Half of Miami was searching for her, Bentley had said. The fear that kept her neck and shoulders tense grew stronger, and the thought that she would never be safe again left her feeling cold and numb inside. She should not be surprised that Tobias was arming an all-out search for her. She had expected it. Nonetheless, hearing it from someone she knew put it in bold perspective, leaving nothing to the imagination.

Her eyes turned to deep pools as she raised her head to stare across the desk at her benefactor. Her quivering chin magnified her strong emotions and vulnerability. She swallowed several times, trying to bite back the tears, wondering if she would ever feel safe again. For the past several days, she had been living in a vacuum, her emotions held tightly in check. Now they came flooding forth as if from a broken dam, boiling over in an outpouring of weeping. She tried choking back the sound of her sobs, even muffling them with a tissue, until the effort became too great.

Michael came out of his chair, suddenly experiencing a terrible sense of helplessness. Female tears had a way of doing that to him. He had never built a resistance against their impact. He moved around his desk next to her chair, as she fought to regain control. Gently, he placed his hand upon her shoulder and felt her tense at his touch. He kept his hand there, pressing gentle, soothing caresses across her wracked shoulders. He gave her his handkerchief, and she dabbed frantically at her damp face and moist eyes.

With Michael's hand gently caressing her shoulder, his masculine body standing next to her with the faint smell of spice teasing her nostrils brought her back to awareness. She fought to regain control. When she raised her head again, only her wet eyes and red-blotched cheeks betrayed the emotional scene just displayed. She raised her lovely chin, exposing her ivory throat while dry little sniffles caused her chest to heave.

"I'm sorry for my emotional outburst. Hearing Uncle Bentley's voice...well...things just caught up with me." Her pose was graceful, her manner gracious, her attitude regal, but an underlying sadness spread across her features. Five years of pain and mental distress was a long time to bottle up one's cares, but until she and Tobias were divorced, and their ties severed altogether, there would be no peace for her.

“I assure you, an apology isn’t necessary. I think I am beginning to understand your situation. I don’t admit to understanding how you must feel, but for what it’s worth, I want you to know I’ll help anyway I can.”

Almost immediately, he wondered at what he might be *up against*, getting involved in a domestic situation that boded threat and danger. Whoever was looking for Rochelle obviously had powerful connections to have friends, or *henchmen*, as Bentley called them, in the police department. Nevertheless, Michael was now committed, not only to helping her, but also to a growing infatuation. Like most bachelors still in their testosterone prime, he wasn’t exactly immune to the magnetism of a beautiful woman.

She sat straight in her chair, like a queen on a throne, her control soon restored. “If you don’t mind, I’m ready to continue with whatever we need to do,” she said, her voice still a bit shaky.

“Can I get you something?” Michael asked, admiring the way she forced herself to bounce back from despondency.

“No thank you. I’d really like to finish what I need to do here so I can attend to other matters.”

He went to a side door opening into an adjoining room containing a big executive table with more than a dozen chairs. He motioned Rochelle to follow him. Setting the duffel bag on the table, he pulled out a chair for her, and handed her a yellow pad with several sharpened pencils. An adding machine sat in front of her. He thrust his hands aloft in quiet supplication. “I can’t help you with this. You have to fill out the deposit slip.”

Rochelle gave a noticeable sigh, opening the duffel bag and removing her bra, panties, a wrinkled suit, and sneakers with socks stuffed in them. Embarrassed, she scrambled to unpack the money so she could stuff the clothing items back in the bag.

“Thank you for your help. I apologize for having to involve you in my affairs,” she said casting a cautious glance toward him.

“Why is that?” Michael asked. At least for the moment, he was undaunted by any risks her situation might present.

“You heard what Uncle Bentley said. There will be no end to the search for me. There could be danger involved in even knowing me, and I feel a responsibility to tell you that.”

“I don’t understand. Why is he so intent upon finding you? Do you possess information that could cause problems for him?”

“No, he has been careful not to expose me to anything that could be used against him. It isn’t that at all. It is a matter of ego and a need to control what he owns. I belong to him—or so he thinks.”

“I take it you’re speaking of your husband?”

She nodded her head in reply.

“I shall consider myself adequately warned. Now, I suggest you stop worrying,” he said gently, and left her to count her money.

Chapter Eleven

Bentley Harrison was as good as his word. He faxed the requested documents soon after Michael’s phone call. Michael perused them carefully, saw they were valid and in order, giving Miss Rochelle Rathbone access to a great deal of money. Added to what she brought with her, she was a very wealthy woman. Whatever worries she might be plagued with, she would never have to worry about financial security.

Enjoying the comfort of his chair, Michael thought about his life. Each new day became much like all the ones past, revolving around a dull routine, requiring daily phone calls, answering

questions from staff, signing documents, along with all the other professional requirements of a bank president. His daily boring lifestyle reminded him of how much he hated banking. He was born wanting to create things, always enjoying any activity involving his hands. Loving to draw when he was a kid, he finally started drawing houses and buildings and soon discovered his calling. He finished high school, went away to college and trained for a career in architecture.

With his new degree in hand, he took a few jobs with some architectural firms, finally deciding to go out on his own when his name and work became a calling card capable of drawing clients on the merits of several beautiful buildings he designed. San Francisco was the base where his success began and spiraled—and crashed. His success made him complacent, never dreaming that circumstances would throw him a left-hook and he would end up wearing an uncomfortable business suit every day to a job he despised.

Michael once heard or read somewhere the words *emotionally deprived*, and he had never thought much about the meaning until Rochelle Rathbone walked into his office. Now, glancing toward the door that separated them, he understood what the term meant. It adequately described the outcome of his life since becoming a banker. Sitting in the bank day after day, and cut off from everything that ever meant anything to him, with nothing to look forward to except more of the same, his life quickly settled into a state of anesthesia, a numbness that allowed him to interact with the demands required of him like a programmed machine.

Then Rochelle stepped across the threshold of his office door, jump-starting the adrenaline inside him, presenting a vision of stature and beauty worthy of stimulating feelings he thought were dead. With flaming gold mane framing a delicate and sensitive face,

and skin begging for the touch of a man's lips, everything about her stimulated some inherent need. She provided a wonderful diversion from the routine and boredom continuously draining away his life like a missing plug. Her sudden presence, from beyond the borders of his small, confining environment, made him realize how bottled up his life had become.

Following the deaths of his father and stepmother, when his brother got the hell away as fast as he could, the bank became Michael's responsibility whether he wanted it or not. Somebody had to do it, and since his lazy-assed brother had other plans, Michael did not have much choice. The board of directors could have appointed someone else, he supposed, but by then, his life had undergone such overwhelming trauma, he stopped caring. He watched his career and dreams fall by the wayside as he turned to banking.

Banker's hours provided him extra free time, which he found ways to use effectively. He built his own house, a major accomplishment he took tremendous pride in, since there was nothing else to inspire pride. In the empty hours of idleness, he also dated a few females, failing to develop an attachment to any of them. Sometimes he wondered what in the hell was wrong with him that he could not get excited about any of the women he met. He supposed it had something to do with the mentality of small-town girls growing up, getting married, having babies, and then raising their babies to start the process all over again. Something seemed to be missing in such a lifestyle that presented the same boring outlook that his banking position did.

Michael spent more time with Caroline than anyone else, and that was only because Caroline aggressively pursued him. Left up to him, he probably never would have gone out with her again following their first date. She was not what he wanted in a woman.

She was pretty, but her other attributes were sadly lacking. The fact that she aggressively made herself available to him in bed created a sort of open meeting ground between them. Caroline was the one who planned all their intimate get-togethers. She offered, and he took. It proved an uncomplicated arrangement until she began reaching for something more permanent.

The first time she casually mentioned marriage, he found himself reacting with shock, never suspecting she might put greater significance on the relationship than what he did. As far as he was concerned, they were simply two people passing time together. She did the pursuing, acting as though she knew nothing permanent existed between them. Her mention of marriage, however, was a cold awakening, like ice water dashed in his face.

“Caroline, I’m sorry, but you’ve misjudged things between us. Marriage is the farthest thing from my mind. I think we need to end this before anyone gets hurt.” He was gentle but blunt.

She gave no argument, letting his statement go in one ear and out the other. Things continued between them as before. She was the pursuer, he the pursued. Michael knew, however, beneath Caroline’s subtleness, she hoped to change his mind. He also knew that was not going to happen.

Michael began thinking there was something wrong with him. Out of all the women he had dated, some very worthy candidates for serious relationships, he always found something lacking in them. His detachment from any kind of emotional involvement left him with an emptiness that seemed to gnaw at him constantly. Only when he actively dealt with projects using his hands, such as building his house, did he find meaning in his life. It also kept his mind from bouncing around in his head with all his many dissatisfactions following the trauma that sent him to jail.

He glanced toward the door of the conference room where Rochelle counted her money, listening, and thinking he heard sounds from within. With that much money to count, she would probably remain on task for some time.

Leaving his chair and office, he took a leisurely stroll through the bank, greeting patrons, being available to employees who needed to ask him something, mostly just killing time. Since Rochelle Rathbone was the most dramatic interruption in his life for many months, he kept thinking of her lovely face, the bouncy auburn-gold curls, the tall, petite figure with the shapely legs, and the deep fear flickering in her green eyes.

Letting his thoughts run an unguided course, Michael's imagination took over. He could visualize Rochelle dressed in a long slinky gown, her hair piled on top of her head, diamonds at her throat and ears. Then flicking to another scene, superimposed with lascivious visions, he imagined her dressed in a black lace see-through negligee, her long hair falling about her smooth velvety shoulders like polished silk.

Michael shook his head to clear it, feeling a terrible need for a dramatic change in his lifestyle. He was living too much in his imagination instead of actively making memories he could look back on when he was too old to do little else.

He went across the street, lingered over a cup of coffee, exchanged a few words with the proprietor, and then sauntered back to his office. He continued reading the morning paper, put aside earlier upon Rochelle's arrival. The afternoon moved on, the clock on his wall pushing toward late afternoon.

Finally, putting the paper aside, which he could not concentrate on anyhow, he tapped lightly on the door to the adjoining room. He pushed the door open and peeked through the opening.

The money lay in stacks, and Rochelle's head rested in her arms upon the table.

He walked quietly over to her and touched her shoulder. Her head snapped up with a jerk, and for a moment, she glanced about wildly with red, sleepy eyes.

"Oh!" she exclaimed when she saw him, recalling where she was, looking drugged from sleep.

"I'm sorry. I did not mean to startle you. Are you finished?"

She took a minute to get her bearings, looking about tiredly. "I think I am. I counted it twice and ended up with the same figure both times. The stacks are recorded here," she said handing him the yellow pad. Thereupon, she indicated where her head was resting when he came in. "I'm sorry, I was so tired..."

"No problem. You'll need to fill out these," he said, handing her an application for a checking account and savings account, and a deposit slip taken from a small table against the wall.

Reaching inside the thick manila envelope, she took out the withdrawal slips she had saved. Handing them to him, she said, "I forgot to give you these."

She filled out the deposit slip, wrote in a seven figure amount that would have had anyone else bouncing off the walls with excitement. With her, it seemed a matter of routine as she finished the deposit slip and handed it to Michael. If she experienced awe of anything, it certainly was not money. Obviously used to having whatever amount she needed at her fingertips, she took it for granted. Michael did not. This amount of money deposited in his bank was a boon for his establishment. Small town banks were not usually so lucky to have such wealthy clients.

On the small table against the wall was a phone. Michael picked it up and asked someone to step into the boardroom. He expected the head teller's surprise when she walked into the room.

Upon seeing the money on the table in front of the young woman closeted in the bank president's office all afternoon, the woman's mouth fell open and she gasped aloud. "Did someone rob a bank?" she blurted out, looking from Michael to the attractive woman sitting at the table. When her boss cleared his throat, she began apologizing profusely for her blunder. "I'm sorry, sir, I didn't mean that."

"Nell, take care of this for me. Here's the deposit slip and the information to open a checking and savings account."

Nell looked at the deposit slip, her eyes growing extremely large. Then she looked at Michael as though he had lost his mind. "A checking and savings account?" No one in his or her right mind would put such an amount in a mere savings account. She kept casting furtive glances toward the young woman who looked more tired than rich.

"This is temporary just to safeguard the cash until she can make other investments. Right now she simply wants it in a safe place."

"Very well," Nell said with raised brows, taking charge of what had to be done.

Pulling Nell aside he told her, "This transaction is to be treated by all bank employees as completely confidential. Miss Rathbone's name is not to touch anyone's lips outside this bank or outside business. Anyone choosing to break that confidence will deal with me. Pass that on for me."

"Yes, sir," she replied, picking up the phone to call someone to help her.

"Are we finished?" Rochelle rose from her chair, stretching her shoulders and back.

Michael escorted her back to his office and closed the door on Nell's inquisitive gaze. "We'll wait for your receipt and temporary checks, and then I'll take you to the motel just up the street."

He thought rather indelicately of inviting her home with him as his guest, but he knew that was stretching his business clientele relationship too far. He was just as aware that his interest was not due simply to being a Good Samaritan. His male urges had been in overdrive since the moment he had seen her.

“I need to do a bit of shopping first,” Rochelle said, brushing the wrinkles from her skirt, a tired, dejected dullness in her green eyes. She was recalling her beautiful clothes hanging in her closet in Miami, the expensive lingerie filling the drawers in her dressing room. Now the only thing she owned were the clothes she wore, and the items in the duffel bag.

“What sort of things? You will not find a large selection in the shops here. Perhaps you’d prefer to go into Bozeman.” He was well aware he was offering to take her. She knew it, too.

“I just need some jeans and shirts.”

“I know just the place. I can take you there while we wait.”

“I’ve already taken so much of your time. Why don’t you just point the way to me?”

Michael sensed a dismissive tone in her voice, and was not ready for her dismissal. “My time is your time. I will be glad to walk with you and introduce you to the proprietress. It’s the least I can do since you’ll need to come back here for your receipts and checks.”

Rochelle gave him a tired smile and nodded.

Michael touched the tip of his fingers to her back and guided her from the bank while dozens of pairs of eyes watched their progress. The old gossiping grape vine was coming alive, as it had not done for some time.

Outside, a playful spring breeze lifted Rochelle’s hair. A bank of fluffy white clouds floating by allowed the sun to shine brightly through the expanding opening. Michael offered Rochelle the crook of his elbow and she tucked her fingers in it unabashedly. The

physical contact was oddly pleasant. She was aware the gesture was personal, sensing Michael's interest in her in the way he looked at her.

"A friend of mine has a shop where I think you'll find what you need," he told her, covering her fingers in the crook of his elbow with a dark hand that seemed weathered compared to the rest of him.

Walking, they came to a small women's shop down the street from the bank, diagonally across from the restaurant. Michael opened the door and they stepped inside where he introduced Rochelle to his old friend.

"Hi, Mabel, I've brought you a customer," he said, his manner friendly and personable.

Mabel raised thick brows over slightly sagging lids. "It's nice of you to bring me a customer, Mikey. Who do we have here?" She looked at Rochelle the way one might inspect a horse. She even turned Rochelle around in a circle to complete her inspection, forcing Michael to step to one side.

"Rochelle, meet Mabel," he said casually, smiling tolerantly at Mabel's familiarity. With introductions out of the way, he took a chair in front of the store and browsed through a magazine found on a table.

"It's nice to meet you, Mabel," Rochelle said, extending her small hand.

Mabel's eyebrows went up an inch as she touched a slightly damp palm. This one had manners. She wondered where Michael found her. "It's nice to meet you, too, Sweetpea. What can I do for you?"

Mabel was slightly overweight, had graying black hair, and wore no makeup. Her face was extremely pretty. Her colorful clothing fit nicely and complemented her pretty face.

"I'd like some jeans, a shirt, and lingerie."

Mabel showed Rochelle the racks of clothing containing her size, and Rochelle wasted no time gathering up the items she needed. When she piled them all on the counter, Mabel turned a quizzical eye upon her.

“Wouldn’t you like to try them on, Sweetie? They may not fit, you know.”

“I’m sure they’ll do nicely,” Rochelle said, taking money from her purse to pay for the items. She was glad she remembered to keep a generous amount before depositing the rest. She would not need to start using checks until she got into much larger purchases. She put three single Hundred Dollar bills on the counter.

Mabel looked at the bills, then at Rochelle. She raised her brows again. “Sweetpea, you’re not in New York City now. Less than half of that will more than pay for what you’re buying.”

Michael looked up from his magazine, listening.

Rochelle looked startled by the remark and pulled back one of the bills.

Mabel rang up the purchases and counted out the change. “A word of warning, Sweetpea, you shouldn’t go flashing those hundreds around so freely. People around here aren’t used to seeing that much money.” She looked at Michael. “If she’s banking with you, Michael, you should advise her more carefully,” she cautioned.

“Your advice is well taken, Mabel,” Michael said shortly, as Mabel gave him a quizzical stare and mentally tried to figure out what was going on with this gorgeous redhead and Michael.

“Thank you,” Rochelle said, dropping the bills and coins in her purse. She took the bag of apparel and headed toward the door with Michael falling in beside her. Her world seemed so haphazard in this strange little town. She was out of her element, a lonely, lost creature without a foundation beneath her. Depression hit her like a door slamming in her face.

“Is there anything else you need?” Michael asked before turning the way they came.

“No, thank you. This should do nicely until I have more time to shop. Tomorrow I will need to purchase a car and go house hunting. Are there any properties you know of that are for sale?” she inquired, walking along beside him while he carried her packages.

“What exactly are you looking for?”

“Oh, I don’t know; maybe something roomy, with a bit of land around it, in a good location, and preferably close to the interstate.”

Her meaning was clear. She did not want to be in confined spaces preventing escape if the need arose. “I’m sure our local realtor can help you. I don’t suppose you’d be interested in renting instead of buying?”

“No, I don’t think I’d like dealing with landlords. I have heard stories about how the plumbing can go bad, or roofs spring leaks, and a number of other inconveniences that can take days to repair. I’d rather be in charge of my own repairs.”

“Then I’ll be glad to introduce you tomorrow to Mr. Shipley, the realtor. Insofar as a car is concerned, I believe you will want to go into Bozeman. Our local car dealer only sells used models. What kind of car interests you?”

“I thought I’d like to look around a bit,” she replied.

“Good idea,” Michael told her. “I’ll be glad to take you.”

She showed surprise. “You’ve been more than kind as it is,” she said earnestly, thinking she needed to get her feet wet on her own. This was the first time she was in a position of having to look after herself. While it was preferable having Michael, or anyone at all, accompany her, it would be too easy to fall into the habit of depending upon him. As frightening as this new life was to her, she needed to learn how to manage on her own.

They went back to the bank, retrieved the paperwork and temporary checks from Nell, and then Michael marched Rochelle back out to his car.

“Mr. Matheson...”

“Michael,” he reminded her.

“Michael, you’re really very kind, but I should probably get used to doing things for myself.”

He backed out of the parking space and drove away before answering. “And you shall, but it’s only good business sense to treat a valued client with utmost courtesy,” he said, lightly disposing of the idea of a more personal reason.

“But I mustn’t take you from your work. The motel isn’t so far away I can’t walk, and I can take a cab to the city for a car.”

“Rochelle, have you ever bought a car before?” he asked with questionable doubt.

“No, as a matter of fact I am quickly realizing there are many things I’ve never done,” she replied in bewilderment.

Dejection hung heavy in her voice, and Michael had the urge to wrap his arm about her shoulders and hold her until some of his strength flowed into her fragile limbs. He was attracted to her and had no qualms about getting in deeper. “If you go alone to buy a car, you will most likely pay several thousand dollars more than the overall value. Those car salesmen love to see a woman coming. If I’m with you, you’ll get a better deal.”

“Then I suppose I should accept your generosity. However, please don’t let me become a burden. Since I’m going to be on my own, I’d best learn how to manage.”

“You’ll be fine, Rochelle,” he soothed in a kind voice, pulling up in front of the motel office. “Consider yourself among friends. These people here are close, friendly, and willing to help each other. You will have many friends in no time I am sure. Just do not expect

too much of yourself too soon. It can't be easy starting over in a new place.”

“That’s probably good advice,” she said as he climbed from the car and came around to open her car door.

He took her inside and spoke to the desk clerk. “George, this is a friend of mine. She needs one of your cleanest and best rooms.”

“All our rooms are clean and best, Michael. But I’ll see the little lady is comfortable.” He whipped out a register slip. “Just sign your name,” he said, pushing the piece of paper toward her.

Rochelle quickly glanced toward Michael, wishing she did not have to put her name to any paper. He seemed to understand her reluctance, and took the pen and signed his own name. George handed him the key.

“I’ll see her to her room, but keep an eye out for her, will you? She’s not used to being alone.”

“We’ll take good care of her, Michael.” George told him nicely, letting his eyes wander appreciatively over a slender, shapely figure.

Back in the car, Michael drove through the lot and parked in front of the unit that matched the number on the key. With Rochelle’s bag of purchases and the nearly empty duffel bag clutched to his chest, he unlocked the motel door with his other hand, and handed Rochelle the key. The room smelled airy and clean, the bedding freshly laundered, and he mentally applauded George for airing the units out every day when they weren’t in use. Touching Rochelle’s shoulder, he nudged her across the threshold and followed, placing her things on the bed.

“Will you be okay here?”

“I’m sure I’ll be just fine. The bed looks comfortable. Sleep is what I need just now.”

“Let me get you some ice,” Michael said quickly, picking up the plastic ice bucket and heading toward the ice machine. She was

probably used to room service, and she would not find it too accommodating here where they had no such thing.

When he entered the room, the water in the shower was running. She had kicked off her shoes, and was putting her purchases on hangers. He put the ice bucket back in its place. Then he wrote his home and office number down for her. “If you need anything at all,” he said, handing her the piece of paper, “just call me.”

Her look at him was very intense, but kind. Then she said softly, “I will. Thank you so much.” She dredged up a friendly smile despite the overwhelming feeling of mounting depression at seeing the departing back of the only person she knew.

“Would you consider having a late supper with me, say about eight? That will give you some time to sleep.” He was patronizing her, but she was the first interesting female he had encountered since leaving San Francisco and he was enjoying every minute of it.

“I’m really not sure I’ll be up to going out,” she stated apologetically.

“Why don’t I call you about seven thirty, and if you’re up to it, I’ll stop by for you. We can go for fast food, or I can take you to a little steak house I go to frequently not far from here.”

“I really don’t have the appropriate clothing for a dinner engagement.”

“Jeans and shirt are fine in most places around here. Most people wear about anything they’re comfortable in.”

“Except bankers,” she teased lightly, gently raking her eyes up and down his gray suit. He was a fine looking man, she thought. His dark mane of black-brown hair, his chiseled features, his proud chin, and a smooth brow that hinted at faint worry lines, all seemed to reflect a responsible maturity. His lips drew her attention, and she wondered how many women those lips had kissed, wondered if he

had been married, engaged, or simply unattached by choice.

“This is my banking uniform,” he answered, smiling at the timid grin on her lips. “I’ll call you, say around seven-thirty.” He left quickly before she could counter his statement.

Rochelle locked the door and put on the night chain, leaning against it for several seconds, rethinking her activities since stepping off the bus in Windy Point. Wherever her thoughts wandered to, they always came back to and centered on Michael. He was interested in her and made no bones about his intention to be with her.

It was strange, she thought now, how just a few hours earlier she was certain she would never desire another man’s company. Now, here she was thinking how fortunate she was to have Michael in her corner. She knew she needed someone, a friend, and Michael was the only person she knew.

She turned on the television, stripped off all her clothing and climbed into the shower. Her thoughts flitted to Miami, to Tobias, and to the brief conversation with Bentley Harrison. Desolation seemed to wash over her in the warm spray of water flowing upon her. Thinking of yesterday was too painful; thinking of the moment seemed futile, and tomorrow seemed only a void. She had nothing to live for and nothing to look forward to in her future.

An explosion of tears burst forth and she slid down the shower wall on her haunches, the water pouring over her head and washing the salty tears down the drain.

With her thoughts trailing back to Miami, she could imagine the anger and furiousness felt by Tobias. He would be in a killing mood, and she believed that if he ever got his hands on her he would follow through on his threat to kill her.

“Oh, God, help me,” she cried in despair.

Chapter Twelve

Michael decided against going back to the bank. Zimmerman would close up for him, and probably wonder what was going on. He had spent most of the day with a beautiful woman who knew nothing of the amount of interest she had stirred up in the little town of Windy Point. By morning every man, woman and child for miles around would know there was a new face in town, and that he had patronized her like a bull in heat. While small towns had their good points, they, nevertheless, could make or break anyone with gossip.

Nothing happened in Windy Point that didn't receive its share of speculation, which would then be analyzed time and again, passed on to anyone willing to listen, discussed extensively, and followed by every conceivable opinion, until the first story told had digressed to an entirely different story. Everyone minded everyone else's business, and he would have to be careful not to let it touch Rochelle in view of her need for privacy.

He was purposely overzealous, he supposed, so tired of his stick-in-the-mud life that Rochelle was the best diversion since he left San Francisco. Flashes of a dangerous man pursuing Rochelle caused him to curse his lack of good sense for becoming involved with someone who was trouble waiting to happen. She could not run forever. The time would come when her past would catch up with her.

What then?

If Michael was smart, he thought, he would simply welcome her as a banking client, show her courtesy when their paths crossed, and go about his own affairs. The problem was his affairs were so run-of-the-mill he might die of boredom if he didn't take advantage of

nearly any diversion that presented itself. Rochelle was the only positive distraction to hit Windy Point in years.

She was glamorous, beautiful, and carried herself like a gracious lady. When he looked at the soft creamy texture of her skin, he could not help but wonder at the joy in touching his lips to her flesh, warming her blood with his kisses, tasting her lips, tantalizing the woman in her until her response to him became instantaneous and complete. His manhood gave bold reply to his erotic ruminations reminding him he had not had a surge of passion such as this in so long he was beginning to doubt his own libido.

After he parked his car on his driveway, and went inside his house, he glanced about, wondering what he could occupy his time with until seven-thirty. He put on an old pair of jeans and a polo shirt, turning on the television, and spreading out comfortably upon the sofa. Just starting to relax and doze, his phone began ringing, startling him awake. Turning down the volume on the television, he picked up the phone. "Hello," he said, hoping it was not Caroline.

"Michael, what happened to you?" Caroline's voice came through loud and clear, and Michael gave a silent groan.

"What do you mean?" he asked evasively, knowing ahead of time what she would say.

"I mean you left the bank and didn't come back to lock up. Zimmerman had to do it. I waited for you, thinking you would come back. Where did you go?"

"I had other business to attend to," he lied, wanting to end the call quickly. "Caroline, you caught me right in the middle of something. I have to go."

"Michael! Did you forget what day this is? This is our evening to have dinner together. What time will you pick me up?"

“Oh, I forgot,” he said, and really did forget with everything else happening. “I’m sorry, Caroline, but I won’t be able to make it tonight.”

“This doesn’t have something to do with that red headed woman who was in your bank today, does it?” She didn’t just ask, she demanded to know.

Damn it, he thought, word had gotten around all ready. Caroline would pitch one of her temperamental fits if she learned he was taking Rochelle out to dinner. Still, maybe that was just the thing to get her angry enough to quit calling him, he thought. Nothing but good manners, thus far, had kept him from outright telling her to take a hike.

Michael answered Caroline’s question, and he could hear the steam sizzling from her nostrils while she listened. “The lady you mentioned is a bank client. I showed her the same courtesy I might show to anyone else.”

It was a lie. While he might buy a client a cup of coffee, he never once tried to make himself indispensable the way he had with Rochelle.

“Does that courtesy include taking her for coffee, taking her to Mabel’s shop, waiting while she made purchases, and then taking her to the local motel?” Her voice was as crisp as a raw cucumber, and obviously, she was boiling with anger and jealousy.

“Caroline, I’m not going to discuss this with you. All you want is to fight about it, and frankly, I am not in the mood. I also need to remind you that I am not answerable to you. I do what I choose.”

“Damn you, Michael! I have not given you all these months of my life just to have you turn to some other woman. You owe me more than that. Did you think my going to bed with you was a freebie? Did you think I enjoyed you pawing me all over? I was doing it to make you happy, and now what do I get in return?”

“Caroline...” he started to say, but she cut him off.

“I’m not going to stand by while you court your little red headed bitch. I’ll scratch her damn eyes out if I have to!” She slammed down the receiver.

Michael put the phone down and propped his head in his hands. What in the hell had he ever seen in Caroline? She was bitchy, temperamental and demanding. Now, she had just thrown the ultimate criticism in his face, their sex life. She spoke of it as though he forced her, even though she initiated every sexual encounter—even if he was receptive. Her statement, accusing him of pawing her, suddenly left him feeling cold and disgusted. He should have broken it off with her long ago. It was something that needed doing.

TURNING THE TELEVISION SOUND up again, Michael lay there watching the flickering scenes without registering any of it. Caroline’s phone call left his mind lying in a deep quagmire of dissatisfaction. Before his father’s death, he knew where he wanted to go, what he wanted to do, what he wanted to be. All that changed when he inherited the job of overseeing his father’s bank. His brother wisely reached out for what he wanted. He invested his inheritance from his father in real estate, finally becoming a realtor. He also opened a traveling agency, run by his wife. The last Michael heard of him, he was still looking into other investments.

Why hadn’t he taken the same initiative?

Someone else could have managed the bank. He could have gone in pursuit of his dream in the field of architecture and construction. The six years he had actually spent gainfully employed in his occupation marked the best time of his life. Visualizing a building growing beneath his fingertips as he labored with intricate detail over the drawings gave him purpose. He made lots of money in those six years, and became earmarked to make lots more from

the builders who favored his work over other architects. Being in demand for what he loved best fired his ambition like nothing else could.

Then his father and stepmother died—were murdered—and the ensuing circumstances uprooted his whole life, literally displacing him from everything once important to him. Going into his father's bank marked the ultimate betrayal to his dreams. He was certain it must be his sense of responsibility to family, which the old man drummed and instilled into his head causing him to forsake his architectural career. Of course, there was the fact that while he rotted in jail, selling out was his only option. Stuck in jail without bond, his losses rose daily, until selling was the only worthwhile alternative.

After his trial, it was too late to pick up the pieces of his life. His last hope evolved from the only option available to him, to start at the bottom and work his way up again. His father's bank provided the means. He took it over on a temporary basis at the time, thinking to hire a replacement in the near future. With everything that happened thereafter, however, his dream of going back to his architectural pursuits faded into the background. Hopes and dreams merged into a kind of passive neglect.

He assuredly dug the grave and buried his life when he sold the beautiful office building in San Francisco, designed and built by him, it standing as a reflection of his dedication and ability. He sunk his life into that building, encompassing debt up to his ears. Then the jobs started pouring in, along with the money. All of his hard work and effort went down the tube after his arrest for the murder of his father and stepmother.

What money he had left was now in investments earning interest or shares. He was not broke by a long shot, but he might as well be, considering the absence of enjoyment in his life. He would

gladly sink everything he owned into another career in architecture if he could tear himself from the bank.

Only one single thing held him back, the truth surrounding the deaths of his father and stepmother. Although a jury found him not guilty, his exoneration would never be complete until he knew who killed them.

MICHAEL MUST HAVE DOZED. When he opened his eyes, distracted by some loud noise on television, the clock blinked seven-fifteen, almost time to call Rochelle. He crawled off the sofa, heading for the bathroom where he showered, shaved, brushed his teeth, and combed his hair. He went to his room, pulled on Levi's, a shirt, and boots. He lifted the phone and called her.

Her voice, sounding drugged by recent sleep, was barely audible when she answered.

"Rochelle?" he said softly and waited for an answer.

"Yes?" she murmured through what sounded like a yawn.

"This is Michael. Shall I pick you up for dinner?" As sleepy as she sounded, he was sure she would say no.

"Yes, I'm famished."

"Then I'll see you in a little while," he said, and hung up the phone, a rare electrical charge of pleasure cascading through his torso and limbs, growing into honest excitement. He hadn't felt such a rush of anticipation since before his incarceration.

Taking only a few minutes to drive there, Michael rapped softly on the door, and then waited. Silence greeted him. He rapped again, this time louder, impatience growing. Finally, the door opened just a crack. The night chain was still in place.

"Michael, is that you?" she inquired, peeking through the opening, her voice still groggy with the last dregs of sleep.

"Yes, it's me, Rochelle." The sound of her voice made him

eager, anxious to see her.

She pushed the door closed and unhooked the chain. After opening the door, she lifted her fist to her eyes, rubbing them generously. She wore a long white satiny nightgown, purchased from Mabel's shop, and a loose robe. She presented an exact image of Michael's visually concocted perceptions of her in a long negligee.

Michael's gaze drank in a gorgeous figure, it barely concealed by the gown that flaunted warm dips and curves, while the robe gaped open. A low neckline exposed the upper mounds of swollen breasts with a noticeable cleavage between them, the skin creamy and soft. The light behind her put her in pale silhouette, and her full head of hair, edged with auburn highlights, was slightly ruffled and mussed to exhibit a tousled appearance that was both alluring and seductive. She exuded a kind of magnetism Michael found fatally irresistible.

"I fell back to sleep after you called," she murmured, turning her back and going to sit on the edge of the bed, obviously struggling to come awake from emotional tiredness rather than sleepiness. The robe fell open on both sides, and the satiny smoothness of the gown shimmered against her tempting contours.

Michael closed the door. A nearly overpowering urge shook his usual reserve while his arms ached to hold her. Her warmth and softness beckoned him with alarming appeal, forcing him to muster control over his recalcitrant longings. He stood watching her, his eyes roving freely while hers blinked awake slowly. Leaning forward with her arms pressed across her knees, her breast were visible and ripe buds protruded like tasty fruits as her gown fell open. Michael kept silent, lest he disturb that heady pose that catapulted all his senses and sent his hormones expanding like heat molecules.

“I don’t think I’ve ever been so tired and sleepy,” she declared, sitting up straight again, sobering Michael’s rising pulses.

“Rochelle, perhaps you should splash a bit of water on your face,” he suggested, nursing a tinge of dread that she might change her mind and send him away. Those peaked breasts with tender pink rosebuds had assaulted his senses, and while he knew he could not exercise the hormonal urge building by quick degrees, he, nevertheless, wanted to be with her to relish his sudden new feeling of maleness.

They were not on the same wavelengths.

“I don’t know why I feel so tired,” she said, raising her head to meet his blue eyes, allowing her gaze to pass down the length of him. She paused briefly at his pointed-toe boots, then her gaze climbed back up to his face again, a warm impersonal appreciation lighting her eyes.

“You look different.”

“Is that good or bad?” he asked in a friendly tone that struck a note of familiarity and humor.

“Neither,” she replied honestly. “It’s just an observation.”

Michael twisted his head about, sending her an oblique glance. “Well, like I said, people around here wear about anything that is comfortable.”

She expelled a breathy sigh, and yawned.

“You’re probably tired from being in a strange environment and being separated from what is familiar. I suppose you can compare it to jet lag. You’ll feel better in a day or two.”

“I hope so,” she said, rubbing her eyes again.

“I’ll wet a washcloth for you,” Michael offered, moving toward the bathroom. What he really needed was cold water splashed on his own face, after observing a seductive angel with shimmering white satin cascading down her shapely figure.

When he returned with the wet cloth in his hand, Rochelle pushed herself to a standing position, looking like a lovely Goddess in the long gown and robe. He stopped short of her lovely visage and stood staring at her. She took a step toward him, reaching for the washcloth he held out to her. Her foot struck something on the carpet, her shoe, and she went flying toward him, head and shoulders first.

The washcloth fell from his hand. His arms flew out, encircling her after she collided with his chest. He held her comfortingly, pulling her against him, a sudden sensation of warmth filling his head and chest. Her body felt good, fit his arms perfectly. She was soft everywhere he touched, everywhere her body pressed against him. Sensuous warmth seemed to flow from her, invading all of him. Her scent was fresh and clean like fragrant soap, and he found his nose nestled in her hair, his lips touching the delicate skin of her throat. Her thighs pressed against his while her breast crushed softly against his chest. He felt his manhood responding to her closeness, and nothing in his mind could cause him to break the embrace, or control his over-active body responses.

Rochelle mentally assessed the powerful muscles of his chest and shoulders. His arms seemed to absorb her like a sponge. Her brain felt tingly and warm, similar to when she had drunk too much wine. She lay her head against his shoulder, it hard and firm against her cheek. His masculinity provided a compelling and powerful additive that catered to some unfulfilled need inside her.

For a couple of minutes, they remained locked in each other's embrace. Rochelle's arms encircled him, her palms and flayed fingers pressing against the reflexive muscles of his back. When she raised her head from his shoulder and looked at him, words seemed empty, even useless now. He pushed strands of hair from her cheek, returning her unswerving gaze. She felt the heated hardness of his

manhood pressed against her, it jolting some deep, inner need that had never been satisfied, while at the same time drawing upon the reluctance previously inspired by Tobias's brutality.

The thought of Tobias jolted her and she stepped away from Michael, his hand still clinging to her arms with a seemingly disinclination to let go.

She looked at him beseechingly, a deep sadness underlying what she said next. "I'm not me right now, Michael," she said softly, tilting her head forward bashfully. "I can't tell you how long it has been since someone held me in comforting arms. Please don't misunderstand my response."

"Rochelle..." Michael said, moving toward her.

She lifted her hand, the palm touching his chest. "No, I'll just be a moment," she said, stepping past him to take her jeans, shirt, and under-things from a hanger before going into the bathroom.

A small table with two chairs stood at the front of the room beneath a draped window. Michael took a chair, his body echoing deep, pleasant feelings and longings. His infatuation was strong and potent. This beautiful girl, who stepped into his life at just the time when he didn't think he could handle the day-to-day routine any longer, was tempting some powerful emotions in his boring life.

Chapter Thirteen

When the bathroom door opened, Michael looked up, smiling faintly at Rochelle's appearance. She looked like a teenager in jeans with the baggy T-shirt hanging loosely over her shoulders and breasts. She returned his smile, her sparkling white teeth glistening behind full rosy lips. She took her sneakers from the duffel bag and

slid them on without socks. Rising, she took a hairbrush from the mirrored vanity and ran it through her hair. All the time Michael watched her, observing her indulgently while the pulse throbbed at the base of his neck and temple.

“Your hair is gorgeous, Rochelle. I’ve never seen a color quite like yours?” The compliment exposed his personal thoughts, and aired a kind of unspoken understanding that any further interaction between them from here on would be personal.

She blushed, and then smiled, handling his compliment with humor. “You should have seen me as a blonde,” she teased, putting down the hairbrush and coming to stand beside him, her hand resting on the chair-back. “I stuffed it in a trash can when I stayed overnight in Bozeman.”

Michael stood up. “Good choice. Blonde hair can’t compare to that gorgeous gold color you have. Are you ready?”

Rochelle smiled shyly and nodded. Their conversation had turned personal, and suddenly she felt like she was out on a limb. After five years of socializing with a bunch of foul-mouthed drunken men and petty women who were also drunks, while sitting back listening and observing rather than talking, what did one say to a normal person on a social outing?

“Do you have your key?” he remembered to ask before closing the door behind them. She darted back inside, found the key and put it in her purse. Rejoining him by his car where he held the door open, she slid inside and made herself comfortable.

“George would have let you in, but the only thing that upsets him is being awakened after he turns in for the night.” He cranked the car and pulled out onto the street.

“Is he upset at the late guests who stop for the night?” Rochelle asked.

“Yes, even late guests. He thinks everyone should keep daytime hours.”

“You can tell he’s lived here all his life,” Rochelle suggested, thinking of the people she and Tobias knew who kept late hours at night and slept in during the morning. “City life would definitely upset him with its busy round the clock pace.”

A lazy dazzling smile swept across Michael’s tanned face. “City life wouldn’t agree with him at all. He keeps the same hours as most other working people here in Windy Point. Here we have an early-to-bed, early-to-rise community.”

“Are you part of the status quo?” Rochelle asked. “Somehow you don’t seem to fit the mold of a small town banker who goes to bed at dusk and wakes up with the sun.”

“Bad habits are acquired easily, good ones with more effort,” he laughed. “I have my share of both as it suits my purpose. I’m capable of adapting to whatever my environment requires.”

“Have you always lived here?”

“I was born here, and after high school there was college. I spent a few years in San Francisco, and then came back here to run my father’s bank after his death.”

“I wonder why we didn’t meet that time when my folks brought me here.”

“If it was in the summertime, my brother and I were likely away at summer camp.”

“If I recall, I believe it was in the summertime. Is banking what you wanted to do?” she asked, watching the sensual mold of his firm mouth, the arrogant cut of his chin and jaw, and his compelling good looks. She knew it would be all too easy to become attracted to him, if for no other reason than the need for human companionship.

A flicker of seriousness crossed his features and disappeared just as quickly. “I had other plans until my father died, but

somebody had to run the bank. There was no one but me. What about you? Did you ever wish you could go back and change things, live your life differently?”

She glanced out of the car window, seeing the small town sliding past them as they neared the outskirts of another small town. “You are kidding, of course.”

“Kidding? Why do you think I’m kidding?”

“The very fact that I’m here talking to you right this minute is indicative of my desire to totally erase my life for the past five years. Yes, to answer your question, I’d like to change it, but sadly, we don’t have the choice of rectifying the past through hindsight.”

“No, we don’t, but I’ve known people who dwell on past mistakes as if they might reshape them somehow.”

“Do you do that Michael; try to reshape your past mistakes, I mean?”

“Aren’t we all a little guilty of doing that? I suppose I have often wondered on the phrase, *what if*. What if I had done this, or what if I had done that? Perhaps it’s a method we use to learn how to prevent making the same mistakes twice.”

“Well, I suppose from that perspective, there might be some value in supposition. None of us wants to suffer repeated tragedies.”

“What tragedies have you suffered, Rochelle—or is that question too personal?”

She took a deep breath and exhaled. “It’s personal, Michael. I don’t know you well enough to share such confidences.”

“If you knew me better, would you share them?”

“Is that one of those *what if* questions?”

He chuckled. “Okay, you caught me. I am prying, so I will change the subject. I hope you like steak. A friend of mine has a steak house with the finest steaks found anywhere. If you don’t like steaks, he also serves seafood.”

“Steak sounds great. I feel like I could eat about anything right now.”

A few minutes later, Michael pulled into a jammed parking lot below a steak house sign, and turned off the engine.

He reached across the seat and briefly squeezed Rochelle’s hand. “I’m glad you decided to have dinner with me,” he said before getting out of the car.

His touch seemed entirely personal now, Rochelle thought; the serious banker image now shed, or exchanged for a more lighthearted persona.

He opened Rochelle’s car door and took her hand, gently pulling her from the seat and up against him. He needed no encouragement as he slid both arms around her waist, savoring her closeness as long as he dared before moving back from the car to close the door. There had been many women in his life, at college, in San Francisco, in Bozeman, and locally; yet, he could not recall any of them fitting quite as perfectly in his arms as Rochelle did.

His arm encircled her waist possessively and they went inside.

“Hey there, Michael, we’ve missed you. I haven’t seen you in a while,” the cashier, owner, manager said. The man’s close examination left nothing to the imagination as he scrutinized Rochelle carefully.

“I’ve been busy. How’s it going, Ken?” Michael asked, reaching out his hand in greeting.

“Got a full house tonight, so I can’t complain,” Ken replied, shaking Michael’s hand, while he stared at Rochelle. “Who’s your friend?”

“This is Chelle,” Michael said, his left hand giving a tiny squeeze to Rochelle’s waist.

“Nice to meet you, Chelle,” Ken said, glancing from Rochelle to Michael, tempted to ask where he found such a delectable doll.

He held his tongue, however, knowing that gossip would soon provide him the information sought. He, among others, had advised Michael many times to ditch Caroline. She was not right for him, never had been, and never would be.

His bear-like paw squeezed Rochelle's hand lightly and released it. Rochelle gave him a warm smile, aware that Michael's arm felt wonderfully protective about her.

She liked the feel of his arms, the touch of his hands, them warm and reassuring. She breathed deeply of Michael's spicy scent, laying her palm over his hand at her waist. The strong muscular arms bulging against the fabric of his shirtsleeves sparked an intimate thrill that raced along Rochelle's spine. *It's just relief at having a friend in a strange place*, she assured herself. To dare imagine her feelings might be more enterprising would be preposterous after the hell she had suffered with Tobias.

"Do you have an empty table for us, Ken?" Michael asked, glancing over the crowded room of diners, seeing people he knew. It dawned on him that Caroline and everyone in town would know about his dinner companion by tomorrow. The grapevine of gossipers never rested.

"I believe one table is vacant. Give them a minute to clear it and you can seat yourself. It's over there in that dark little corner." He gave Michael a sly grin and winked.

Rochelle pretended not to notice.

When the waiter finished clearing the table, Michael escorted Rochelle across the noisy, crowded room. He nodded his head, returning greetings to several people who called out to him while eyeing Rochelle with interest.

Everyone knew Michael, and he seemed to know everybody, Rochelle thought. While she wasn't aware of anyone noticing her in particular, everyone was. She could not have known, but in a small

town such as this one, she was big news. Any new person to the area became worthy of a great deal of speculation, sometimes good, sometimes bad. The fact that Michael, the most eligible bachelor for miles around was her escort, they would draw a wave of wagging tongues. It was not until she and Michael sat down at the small square table that she noticed sly glances darting toward them.

“Why are those people looking at us, Michael?” she whispered, always a little paranoiac because of her fear of Tobias finding her.

“They’re curious. You’re a new face around these parts, and everyone is wondering who the beautiful lady is that’s spending the evening with me,” he laughed softly.

“Michael, there’s a question I need to ask you. You’re not married or...”

“Or taken?” he filled in for her, smiling. “No, neither. I’m unattached.”

That knowledge made her feel better. “Good, I would hate to think they’re staring because I’m out with a married man.”

The casual atmosphere was so pleasing she could nearly forget that she was running away from a monster and that her life remained in jeopardy if he should find her. When she turned her brightest smile upon Michael, he looked longingly at her lips. She could not begin to imagine the strength of his urge to kiss her, it growing stronger by the minute.

The waiter gave them menus and took Michael’s wine order.

“Why have you never married?” Rochelle asked when the waiter walked away.

“I suppose I’ve been busy doing other things.”

“Most men are busy, but they find time for home and family.”

He looked away, either thoughtful about his answer or trying to find a way to evade the question.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to pry.” Rochelle stated after his lengthy pause.

“Would you believe I’ve just never met the woman I want to spend my life with?” he asked good-naturedly, grinning.

She sent him a sidewise glance. “Is that because you’re hard to please, or just not interested in marriage?”

“Well, I suppose you can say I’m selective instead of hard to please, and I do plan to marry someday. It just has to be with the right woman.” He appeared amused and his attitude was playfully humorous.

“You’re never very serious when you’re away from the bank, are you?”

“One must wear many hats,” he grinned with a sparkle in his blue eyes.

She searched his face, thinking a hat was the only thing missing from his attire that would have given him the appearance of a real Montana cowboy. “Yes, I suppose one does,” she agreed with a sardonic grin.

Their eyes met and held for an instant, something clicked between them, just a subtle flash of deep feeling, and then it was gone. Rochelle lowered her eyes, and was thankful for the waiter’s timely interruption as he poured glasses of wine and took their food order.

“You’ll find that here most people refuse to be rushed. The food is worth the wait though,” said Michael, when the waiter went away.

“I don’t mind waiting. This is a pleasant change for me,” she said, thinking of Tobias and his drunken friends whom she had despised. Michael helped her forget, in lapses, the hell of what she had left behind and the fear of her past catching up with her.

“A pleasant change from the motel room, or am I to understand that you’re referring to your life in Miami?”

She searched his face a moment, and then smiled. “Michael, you’re a sly one, you are. You don’t miss an opportunity to learn more about me.”

He reached across the table and took her hand, smiling. “Well, what’s wrong with that? I want to know more about you.”

“What’s wrong with that is that you don’t disclose anything about yourself. Have you heard of the sharing game—I tell you something, and then you tell me something?”

His eyes were laughing at her. “You’d be bored to death,” he grinned.

“I think I’d be the best judge of that,” she smiled. His lightness of manner had relaxed her enough she could almost forget her fears associated with Tobias—almost.

The time quickly moved past nine, and toward the front of the large dining room was a platform where a group of musicians started setting up their instruments. A small dance floor was next to the platform.

“You didn’t tell me they had a band. I thought it was just a restaurant.”

“There’s not a great deal of entertainment around our small town, so proprietors take advantage of what people like and turn it into money-making enterprises. After the dinner crowd leaves, you’ll see an entirely new group fill the tables. They’re more like party animals than the ones you see now. Do you dance?” he asked as an afterthought.

“I have been known to,” she said, remembering it as about the only thing she and Tobias did well together. He actually taught her to dance. Her high school dances proved less than instructive. “I assume the after nine group you speak of are the exception to the early to bed, early to rise crowd.”

“They are the nonconformists,” he chuckled.

They sat silent as they watched the band set up and test their instruments in a cacophony of sounds contrasting against each other.

The waiter brought their food, and Michael was right. The steaks were delicious, juicy and tender. The earlier diners were beginning to clear out, and Rochelle did not feel the unbidden stare of curious eyes. She found it easier to relax and enjoy her meal, and shortly after they began eating, the band struck up a soft arrangement of dinner music for the last diners of the evening.

“Michael, this one’s for you and your lovely lady,” one of the band members said over the mike, quickly drawing Rochelle’s attention. Michael nodded his head in acknowledgment, turning his eyes and attention back to his *lovely lady*.

“Do you know everybody?” Rochelle asked with amusement

“Everybody knows everybody else in a small community.”

“And is everyone as well liked as you?”

“They treat me well because I handle their money,” he teased.

“What an original idea,” she said raising her brows cynically in jest. When she looked at him, he was smiling mischievously. His humor was fetching and she chuckled happily. Michael Matheson was good for her. He brought out the best in her.

Chapter Fourteen

By the time Rochelle and Michael finished eating, most of the other diners had left. The busboy cleared tables of all signs of the dinner crowd. New patrons quickly began filing in, taking tables and ordering drinks while the band increased the tempo of their music, changing intermittently between soft slow-dance music and rock and roll. When they played a slow number, Michael asked Rochelle to

dance. She looked at him skeptically at first, and then reaching out for his hand, she rose and let him lead her to the dance floor.

Michael swept Rochelle into his arms, and with his hand on her back steering her to his steps, they danced in perfect unison to the music. He was an excellent dancer and Rochelle swayed in his arms weightlessly. She basked in a glow of warmth encompassing a sense of well being that lured long denied yearnings to the surface. The relaxed atmosphere and his pleasant company delighted her.

The music spoke the language of love like the throbbing heartbeats of lovers. The mood was romantic and sensuous, and when Rochelle raised her head to meet Michael's eyes, she suddenly felt shy and overheated beneath the warmth of his gaze. He kissed her cheek, then her ear, trailing a path of kisses to her neck and throat. The kisses, tickled. They titillated. She wanted to lose herself in the sweetness of the music, the protective warmth of Michael's arms, and the lighthearted gaiety of an unusually pleasant evening.

While she would gladly forget Tobias in exchange for the kind of normalcy she and Michael were enjoying, she could not. He was at the core of all her thoughts, haunting the long denied moments of enjoyment.

"Shall we dance again?" Michael asked when the song ended and another began.

"I think not," she said, and felt his arm encircling her waist, making her feel so at one with him. Before he would permit her to take a seat, he pulled the table away from the wall, and put their chairs side by side so they would be facing the band. When they both sat down, his arm eased across her shoulders, and he pulled her against him, no concern at all for the constant looks darting their way.

"Comfortable?" he asked, kissing her ear.

“Michael, please don’t do that,” she said breathlessly. No one had ever kissed her before except Tobias, whose kisses disgusted her. Michael’s kisses, however, kindled a warm glow that spread across her like the effects of a fine vintage wine.

“Why not?” he whispered in her ear. “Don’t you like it?” His voice held a tone of teasing

“Yes... no... I mean... oh, just please don’t do it.”

“It’s going to be kind of hard to stop,” he said, his face buried in her hair, “unless I push the table back against the wall, and put you across from me again.” He did not intend on doing that.

“Then maybe we should push the table back,” she suggested seriously, as though in deep conference over resolving a problem.

A smile touched Michael’s lips, and he breathed a deep sigh, forcing himself not to kiss her. He kept his arm across her shoulder, his hand toying with her arm, his fingers gliding up and down, or making tiny circles beneath the sleeve of her shirt. Once or twice she reached up and covered his hand with hers, halting his caresses. As soon as she moved her hand away, they started again.

Michael would like nothing better than for the night not to end. He could not recall any other woman whom he had been so attracted to in every possible way, as he was Rochelle. She was adorable, passionate, soft, tender, and so very lovable. His mind flitted to a vision of what joy it would be to have just one night with her enfolded in his arms with the texture of her creamy body glued to his, while he buried his need deep inside her.

“Would you like to dance again?” he whispered close to her ear, his face buried in her clean scented hair, wanting to dance so he would have an excuse to hold her.

“I don’t know. Perhaps we should leave. It’s getting late, and I do have much to do tomorrow.”

“Just one more dance, and I promise I’ll escort you tomorrow wherever you need to go.”

“What about your bank? Don’t you have to work?”

His breath was against her cheek, his arm steadfast about her shoulders, his fingers brushing caresses on her arm. His closeness was intoxicating, causing her heart to beat faster. His touch and closeness stimulated every nerve in her body. An aura of expectancy, so unlike anything known with Tobias, surrounded her. Michael, unknowingly, touched a deep need inside her that was both exhilarating and frightening. She wanted to slow things down, keep Michael friendly but personally distant, but she knew the evening had gently pushed them beyond that point.

“That’s the nice part about being one’s own boss. I can take off when I want.” He kissed her ear, the gesture seeming as natural as breathing, her closeness a heady tonic. Her loveliness created a need that, once fulfilled, he believed, could provide the missing link to his less than happy existence.

“Let’s dance,” he said, touching his tongue to her ear with arousing pleasure.

“Michael, you really mustn’t,” she whispered meekly, her every resolve wrung from her by the mere touch of his lips on her flesh.

Michael’s warm hand closed around hers, and Rochelle rose with unimpaired grace while holding his hand and letting him lead her to the dance floor, all the while feeling very special by his absorbed attention. Deprived of affection for such a long time, any hint of it was worthy of raising her spirits.

Michael stopped by the band and whispered something to one of the musicians. Then wrapping his arms about Rochelle, he danced her onto the floor, absorbing her body against his to the soft composition of a melody she did not recognize. When the tune ended and Michael kept dancing, the bandleader smiled toward them

and said, "One more time for Michael and his lady." They played the same song again, and Michael and Rochelle kept dancing, the music a romantic rendition with dreamy words of love.

Rochelle lifted her face to his. "Are each of your dates referred to as your lady?"

Michael touched his lips to hers, just a feather kiss, but oh, so provocative. Their eyes caught and held as the band moved into another number without a break between the two pieces. "You're the only lady I've ever brought here," he smiled.

"Why do I feel you've just danced around my question?"

For an answer, he kissed her ear and nuzzled his face in her long hair, and asked, "Is it really important?"

"Probably not," she replied teasingly. She sent him a badly contrived smile, wondering how many other *ladies* he'd held on this dance floor. Probably many, she thought. It occurred to her that Michael really enjoyed a good time with laughter and carefree living. Still, there was that element of seriousness about him, too, in well-balanced proportions.

One of the fellows groaned out the words to a love song, and all the eyes in the house trained a straight gaze toward Michael and Rochelle. Sly remarks were made, bets placed, and opinions aired. Three women sitting at a table together shot Rochelle with imaginary arrows of envy and discussed how numerous women had tried to ensnare Michael, the most eligible bachelor in the county. If Michael knew he and Rochelle were drawing a great deal of attention, he seemed not to notice. His interest focused entirely upon her as he drew her soft body against his.

Rochelle was not immune to his sexual proclivity. When he buried his face in her hair, and his breath touched her ear like a fanning butterfly wing, it aroused longings all new and wonderful. The surge of warmth in her blood left an exquisite ache at the core

of her womanhood. If he was trying to seduce her, he was doing a much better job than Tobias had ever done.

Surrendering to the pleasure of the moment, the sudden thought of Tobias invaded her pleasant mood, bringing back an outpouring of memories so horrible they soured everything for her. She had run away from him, but she could not get away from him even with miles separating them. He was like a parasite feasting on her mind, spoiling any chance of peace or pleasure.

“Michael, I’d like to sit down,” she said, suddenly feeling ill.

He did not argue, and escorted her off the floor, sensing her changed mood.

After they sat down, she turned to him, her eyes no longer bright with humor and delight. Her face was flushed and her expression clouded with doubt, uncertainty, and confusion. “If you don’t mind, I really would like to leave now,” she said, hiding the soft quiver of her chin in her cupped hand.

“Okay,” he said, gently touching his lips to her cheek, and motioning for the waiter to bring the tab. He slipped a bill to the waiter, said good night, and guided Rochelle toward the door.

“Mike, don’t stay away so long next time,” Ken told him when they passed the front counter, “and bring back your lovely young lady.”

“You can count on it. Night, Ken,” Michael said, and escorted Rochelle out the door.

When he looked at his watch, it was nearly midnight. Still not wanting the night to end, he drove as slowly as he dared on the way to the motel.

Rochelle sat on the far side of the seat. When Michael touched her hand, giving a little tug to get her to slide closer to him, she shook her head, refusing. For a little while, she had allowed herself to forget everything, forget why she ran away, why she was in

Montana, why she was alone. Unconsciously, she had reached out to the first person whom she met to fill up that awful void. In a matter of a few hours, she was all ready leaning upon Michael's strength. How easy, she thought, to fall prey to someone who could make things seem so pleasant and carefree. It was not what she wanted. She did not want to fall into another trap such as Tobias had devised for her.

"Are you okay, Rochelle?" Michael asked, a feeling of tenderness making his voice unusually gentle.

"Yes," she answered, knowing it was a lie. Her emotions were in turmoil. She could not make sense out of her feelings. It was not normal to feel attached to Michael after one evening with him. In fact, she knew how dangerous it was. Hadn't she done the same with Tobias, and regretted ever having met him?

Tobias swept her off her feet the first time they met. He took her to the disco club as if luring her into his den. Needing his help to prevent her mother finding out about her reckless driving, she had been one-hundred percent compliant to his attentions. He made her feel beautiful and important, and in the following days, his words, his kisses, and his touches had all been her undoing.

If not for that wreck, she would not be in this predicament now. Further, if she had been more mature, she might have made better choices rather than becoming involved with a man old enough to be her father. Oh, it had been wonderful with Tobias in the very beginning, but all things have their season, and her and Tobias's season had come and gone all too quickly.

Her mind tripped back to the time when her parents were in her life, offering love and safety, which she shunned in exchange for Tobias Chandler. *Oh, mama and dad, I need you so much*, an inner voice cried.

“Rochelle, you’re very quiet,” Michael said, reaching across the seat to take her hand.

His fingers warmed the chill of her hand, but nothing could warm the chill of her soul. Tobias had defiled her, leaving her haunted by guilt, fear, and revulsion. “I’m sorry. I am not exactly the best company right now. I have a great deal on my mind.”

“You’ve been wonderful company,” he said softly, squeezing her hand. “Thank you for an excellent evening.” He was pulling up in front of her motel door. He turned off the engine, and sat for a moment, looking at her before he climbed from the car and walked around to open her door.

Rochelle dug in her purse for her key and had it ready when he reached in to help her from the car. She slid her small hand in his larger one, rising from the seat of the car and stepping aside so Michael could close the door. Briefly, he pulled her against him before they walked to her room. Her hands shook noticeably, her fingers still feeling cold even though the night was warm.

Michael took the key from her and unlocked the door. He turned the doorknob and pushed the door open.

“Your hands are like ice,” he said, warming them with his, keeping her standing outside the door.

She pulled her hands away and gazed into the room. “Did I leave the light on before I left?” Her voice took on an edge of apprehension.

“I believe you did,” he said, and knew she feared someone might be inside the room. He went in before her, looked about the room then went to the bathroom and peeked in. Only then did she step across the threshold, looking mildly relieved.

“Will you be all right?” The two of them stopped at the foot of the bed. Wrapping his arms about her, he felt her lean heavily against his chest, their thighs brushing with heated friction.

“Yes, I’ll be all right,” she said, sounding as though she did not believe it. What she really wanted to say was, stay with me. Don’t go. Please do not leave me. However, she knew better than give in to the temptation. She was too vulnerable, and his nearness was prompting too many contradictions, some extremely pleasant, others frightening and troublesome.

He lifted one arm from about her and touched his hand to her cheek. “Do you still have my telephone number?”

“Yes, it’s in my purse.” She was clinging to Michael without even realizing it.

“You know you can call me, no matter what time it is, if you need me.” His finger traced a path down her cheek and across her lips. Then when she opened her mouth to answer, he planted his mouth on hers, his tongue gently testing her resistance by thrusting lightly into the cavern of satin smoothness. She held back at first, and then came a slow, unfurling response. Her tongue met his in a warring dance of advance and retreat until their passions turned to sultry heat infusing and consuming them.

It was too good to last. Like a strike of lightning, she pulled away, sucking in a big breath of air, her face flushed.

“No, we mustn’t.” Her voice was soft, but shook with emotion, her body trembling in waves, a mixture of passion and fear totally unbalancing her.

“It’s okay,” he said, still holding her. “Get a good night’s sleep and I’ll pick you up at seven-thirty. We’ll have breakfast, and then I’ll take you to Bozeman for a car.”

“I don’t know,” she whispered doubtfully. “You’ve been so kind all ready. I don’t feel right taking up so much of your time.”

“That’s absurd. Don’t you know how much I’ve enjoyed being with you?” He touched her cheek, his thumb nuzzling her cheekbone softly.

Then she said it, turning away as she did. “That’s what I’m afraid of.”

“There’s nothing to be afraid of, Rochelle. Nothing is going to happen that you don’t want to happen.”

“There’s so much you don’t know, can’t possibly understand,” she blurted out, turning to face him.

“And you’ll tell me when the time is right.”

Her chin and lips quivered, and he put his arms around her again. Her head lay comfortably against his shoulder, her hands reaching up to lie flat on his chest. She nestled against him affectionately, prolonging the comfort his arms offered, fending away the fear that would enshroud her the minute he walked out the door.

Michael pulled away first, holding her at arms length. “I’ll go now, and I’ll see you in the morning,” he whispered softly, touching her lips gently with his before backing away. The frightened look on her face touched a stream of humanity in him.

When he was out the door, she closed it behind him. She put the night chain on and threw the deadbolt in place. She leaned back heavily against the painted wood door, breathing deeply, willing her trembling body to relax. She should have told him not to come back. It was not far to the small restaurant. She could walk. She could also take a bus or a cab into Bozeman where she could buy a car and do some shopping. She had been dependent upon someone all her life. Growing dependent upon Michael could become an addiction she dared not allow. Maybe he would call first in the morning to wake her, and then she would tell him she could manage without him.

With that thought in mind, she took off her clothes, took another shower, and dressed for bed.

Nighttime was more frightening than any other time, the darkness holding all sorts of imagined threats. She left the bathroom

light burning, it spilling a stream of soft light across the room. She crawled into bed, staring a long time at the ceiling while thoughts pounded her weary brain. Tobias still refused to allow her to ignore him, as he claimed priority attention in her ruminations.

MICHAEL DROVE HOME with thoughts so intense his shoulders grew stiff and rigid. He understood Rochelle's fear; at least, he thought he did. However, he could not understand his own feelings. His emotions were having a field day, responding too quickly to sensations aroused by a desirable woman. He was treading ground where he had never been before since he had never been emotionally attached to any other woman. Love, or being in love, was an elusive perception for him. Not ever experiencing it, outside his family, he could not identify with those who had. Now, however, a deep consciousness awakened in him, and he debated on where he might be heading.

Rochelle's life was highly unstable, as were her emotions. She might be here today, gone tomorrow. Bentley Harrison had intimated she might have to flee again. If she did run away, how would that affect his life? Any relationship with her, no matter how mild, or serious, would be at risk from now on until the threat of her husband finding her was past. Would it ever be past, or would she be running the rest of her life? She was married, and her situation prohibited her from obtaining a divorce. Was he prepared to involve himself in a difficult situation that could never contain the certainty of firm commitments?

"Damn, I've known her one day and already I'm like a lovesick teenager. What in the hell is wrong with me?" he said aloud to himself, feeling almost as confused as she probably was.

Despite his unrest with being a banker, Michael could not imagine what it might be like, not having a firm foundation or

footing beneath him. He was born into a family whose stability provided an ingrained steadfastness to his life, his livelihood, and his existence. To be without that firm solidness and balance would acutely disrupt his serenity. Thus, the thought of where his present emotions might lead him was a disturbing notion. He could walk away right now and his life would go on as usual with a boring daily routine holding no surprises; or, he could continue seeing Rochelle, letting things move of their own accord, leaving everything to chance.

Hell, he thought all of a sudden, he should not even be debating such issues. Had his ordeal with the death of his parents robbed him of his risk-taking tendency? There was a time when he dared try anything that appealed to him, never thinking for one second about possible consequences. Now, it seemed he could not take a single step without looking to see where his foot would fall.

After he arrived home, he brushed his teeth, and lowered himself to the firm springs of the mattress, soon tossing and turning. He could not get his mind off her. He had met and known her for one single day, and his emotions were racing like a disturbed bed of ants. He kept seeing her in that long white satiny gown, it hugging her slender but shapely curves. He imagined she would probably sleep on her side, have her knees pulled up. Her thick long hair would spill about her head upon the pillow, framing the soft texture of the velvety smoothness of her face.

“Damn!” he swore, flinging himself off the bed, and going into the kitchen where he poured a hearty portion of bourbon in a glass. He downed it in one swallow, chasing its burning path with water. He went back to his bed, tossed and turned some more, but the strength of the alcohol had a settling effect upon his nerves, and soon he drifted off to sleep after remembering to set his alarm clock.

Chapter Fifteen

Michael knocked on Rochelle's door, and stood waiting, realizing she probably was still sleeping, since she did not have a clock.

"Yes," her sleepy voice echoed softly through the door.

"Rochelle, it's me, Michael." He waited through what seemed several minutes before he heard the sound of the night chain rattling and the lock turning just before the door opened. She stood before him in her long nightgown, her arms wrapped across her chest, her eyes looking clouded, not with sleep, but from lack of it.

"I couldn't find my robe," she muttered uneasily, a bit of paranoia gaining strength as she struggled up through the layers of tiredness to awareness. Turning her back, she looked about the room, went and checked the bathroom, then came back to find Michael holding her robe.

He was smiling gingerly as he offered it to her, his eyes taking advantage of the opportunity to study the lovely sight claiming his gaze. Her breasts pushed at the loose fabric of her gown, the nipples plump and ripe and creating tiny peaks behind the shimmering, satiny material. Her hipbones protruded slightly and the gown fell against a flat stomach. When she turned to one side to slide the robe over her shoulders and on her arms, he saw her shapely derriere, and was quickly reminded that the ironclad control of his sexual urges had lost its mastery. An abrupt hunger weighed heavily in his loins.

"Where did you find it?" she asked, and sighed with relief when he indicated a place beneath the coverlet on the bed. With her arms in the sleeves, she left the belt hanging loose, and the deep cleavage between her breasts awed him. The power of his awakening passion erupted like a sudden storm. He wanted her. He wanted her badly.

Going up to her, Michael took her robe belt in both his hands and pulled her up against him.

“Good morning,” he said, leaning closer to her face until his lips grazed hers. Then he covered her mouth with his when she started to reply. He had hoped last night’s strong feelings were no more than an illusion that would have disappeared with today’s early morning light. When he touched his lips to hers, however, measuring her slow, uncoiling response, he knew this was no illusion. A shared fire had kindled between them. Their infatuation, attraction, or whatever the definition, was firmly in place.

Michael felt a sudden charge of adrenaline, his hormones kicking in, and his manhood growing rigid against her. If she noticed, she wasn’t fighting it, and he found himself backing her toward the bed until her legs touched the mattress. He lowered her, his breathing short and ragged. His hands were already sliding off her robe, pushing the straps of her gown over her shoulders until delicate pink rosebuds sharpened his gaze as he watched them hardening before his eyes. He lowered his mouth to one, his hand cupping the other, as he tasted that sweet bud. With senses charged by unabated yearning, his need drove him like a runaway vehicle.

His kisses deepened, his hand moving to secret places that prompted a need to know every infinite detail of Rochelle’s body. Her response jarred his senses, leading him down a road that beckoned with heated longing. Her gown slid easily over her hips, down her legs until the only thing between them was his cumbersome clothing. He began loosening his belt and the front of his pants, his hands moving with lightening speed.

Then she began to tremble. It started in her shoulders, flowing like ripples down her entire body. At first, Michael wanted to believe it was passion. He continued touching her everywhere, kissing her, working into a heated frenzy of longing.

Then he saw her face.

Her eyes stretched wide like a frightened little kid's, tears running from the corners. Although she made no move to stop what he was doing, he knew she was no longer enjoying it. Some dark shadow had formed a cloud over her desire. His need shut down as quickly as a key turning off his car engine, and he rolled to her side, propping himself on an elbow to look at her.

"It's okay," he whispered, brushing her damp tear-stained hair from her cheeks. She turned her head away so he could not see the expression on her face anymore, but he had seen it already and knew something had disrupted the flow of white-hot passion witnessed in those first fiery embraces and smoldering caresses.

"I'm sorry, Michael," she said several minutes later, staring up at the ceiling with the sheet covering her. "It has nothing to do with you. It is about me. I couldn't. I just couldn't." After experiencing so much sexual abuse, it was hard to let go to new desires.

"Do you want to talk about it?" he asked gently, his fingers cupping the nape of her neck, his thumb nuzzling the soft creamy smoothness of her throat.

"No," she said shaking her head, unable to tell him that all the horrible ordeals with Tobias had flooded her brain at the instant she would have given herself to him.

"Then I tell you what, why don't you put on your jeans, and we'll go have breakfast. After that, we'll go to Bozeman and see about a car for you."

He raised her up to a sitting position, and she wiped her eyes with her fingers. While she was grabbing for her robe to cover herself, Michael gained a delectable eyeful that warmed him instantly to pure sensuous delight. He gorged his eyes with the most superb round breasts ever, the pink rosebud nipples as enticing as

any he had seen. The fair skin like cream begged for the taste of his tongue and lips. He shuddered with longing.

Rochelle crawled off the bed, quickly donning her robe, but not before Michael's eyes mentally photographed every inch of her. She possessed a glorious figure, and the curves, dips and peaks were wonderfully tempting. With his eyes still mesmerized by her graceful figure and movements, he watched her walk to where her clothes hung on a hanger. She took the hanger, clothes and all, and went into the bathroom.

While she dressed, Michael picked up the phone and called Ronald Zimmerman. "Hey, Ron, I'm going to be busy most of the day. How about opening the bank for me and keep an eye on things?"

"Sure thing, there isn't a problem, is there?" he queried.

"No, just some personal business I need to attend to," Michael told him, and hung up.

He sat pondering over what had just happened between Rochelle and him. She had been so passionate and responsive, and then, in the flick of a moment, she shut down. He shook his head, crediting her reaction to the fact they barely knew each other. He knew how some women clung to their morals, disavowing any desire for casual sex. Still, that had not seemed to be Rochelle's problem. She was passionate one moment, icy the next. As she expressed last night, there was much he did not know or understand about her.

When Rochelle stepped from the bathroom, she was in control again. She sent Michael a timid smile. The tight little jeans outlined her lithe figure like a glove, and although dressed casual, she was breathtakingly beautiful. Michael's heart did a flip-flop in his chest as he recalled how he had kissed her, and touched every inch of her.

The feeling of familiarity had him pulling her against him. “I do like holding you,” he admitted.

“I like it too,” she whispered, draping her arms around his neck, and leaning her cheek against his hard, broad shoulder.

“Are you afraid of me, Rochelle?” he asked suddenly.

She winced noticeably, and stiffened in his arms. “No, I feel very safe with you. I’m just afraid of an involvement,” she whispered softly, and although he was not ready to let it drop, he knew he would get nothing more from her on the subject. He also doubted her reason.

“Shall we go to breakfast?” he asked, unable to put aside the images of delectable pink nipples ripening like plump, tender rosebuds before his eyes.

Michael caught a glimpse of doubt in her eyes as her hands slid from around his neck and down his chest. She backed away, her features taking on an expression of silent pondering.

“Breakfast? I don’t know. Michael, I don’t think I can...” She paused, and was thoughtful a moment. “Just what is it you expect of me?”

“Doubts so soon? I am not going to ask you to do anything you are not comfortable doing. Does that answer your question?”

She regarded him through deep introspection, finally saying, “Intimacy frightens me for a number of reasons. But more importantly, I think I need to learn how to stand on my own two feet.”

“I didn’t know the two were related,” he teased, his fingers touching the silky texture of her neck and throat.

She inclined her head. “What I mean is... I just don’t want to become reliant upon you.”

“And you won’t. Now stop worrying and let’s go have breakfast.” He reached out his hand to her, and marveled at the

delicate soft fingers that intertwined with his. Smiling a bit tensely up at him, her mood changed by degrees, and Michael recalled a science reel with the time-release action of a flower's petals unfurling.

Caroline invaded his pleasant images all of a sudden when he saw her car parked along the street when he neared the restaurant. He hoped her phone call last evening would end their relationship. He did not want to hurt her, but nothing between them was worth continuing. With her hot temper, she could cause unsettling problems.

MICHAEL WAS SADLY MISTAKEN if he thought things would end easily between him and Caroline. He and Rochelle had barely sat down and given their order, when Caroline came hurtling through the door. She was dressed in a two-piece suit for her switchboard job at the police station, looking extremely smart in her heels, her hair twirled into a neat twist on the back of her head. The speed, however, with which she moved, destroyed the effect of her nicely clad figure. She looked more like a mad dog ready to attack.

Caroline obviously saw Michael's car outside, not to mention the fact she probably got wind of his and Rochelle's outing at the steak house last night. He saw her coming, as did everyone else. He abruptly came to his feet, wanting to head her off before she got to his and Rochelle's table.

"Excuse me, Rochelle," he said quickly, his face losing its composure while he hurried toward a charging Caroline who was hot for a confrontation.

With no time to answer, Rochelle shot him a surprised glance, and watched him hurry past her.

"Damn you!"

Rochelle heard a woman's voice at her back, and she turned just

in time to see Michael grab the woman's arm and usher her out the door. After the shock passed, Rochelle's face must have turned a dozen different shades of red while people watched her reaction. Temporarily glued to her seat, she attempted to make sense from what just occurred. An old flame, she decided, since he told her last night he was not married or attached—unless it was a lie. She sat there stiffly, undetermined as to what to do. From where she sat, she could see Michael and the woman standing by his car, and although their words were not audible, it was blatantly apparent the woman was yelling at Michael, shaking her fist at him, even trying to strike his face at one point until he grabbed her wrist.

With a little cowardly glance at some of the diners, Rochelle saw them smiling, and knew they were either enjoying her discomfort, or the spectacle the woman was causing outside. She heard low voices, soft whispers, and knew she was part of their discussion. She could not stand the scrutiny any longer. She stood up and grabbed her purse just as the waitress hurried over to her.

“Don't go,” the waitress said quietly. “He'll be back in a minute. That woman means nothing to him. She just wishes she did.”

Rochelle acknowledged the waitress with a glance, a heated flush of red warming her face. Embarrassment and tears did battle with her self-control, and were quickly winning against her attempts to appear unaffected by the ordeal.

“No,” she said, pushing past the waitress. “Thank you, but I really do have to leave.” Her voice broke on the last couple of words, and she hurried out the door, blindly racing across the street to Mabel's shop, hoping all the while that Michael and the irate woman would not notice her.

Michael had his back to the restaurant door and did not see Rochelle, but Caroline did. Rochelle was no sooner inside Mabel's

shop, leaning breathlessly against the door, her eyes pooling with moisture, than the girl came after her. Michael, on the other hand, thinking Rochelle still waited for him in the restaurant, went back inside.

“What’s the matter, Sweetpea?” Mabel asked, noting a distraught young woman standing with her back to the door.

Suddenly the door burst open with heavy enough force to send Rochelle flying forward. She grabbed for the rack of clothing to keep from falling on her face. Mabel knew immediately what was wrong. She had heard, as had everyone else, about Michael’s night out on the town last night. She quickly put herself between Caroline and Rochelle.

“You filthy bitch!” Caroline screeched at Rochelle, her arms and fists flailing as she tried to move past Mabel. “Why don’t you go find your own man and leave mine alone?” Her fist shook violently at Rochelle, and she reached around Mabel trying to get in a punch.

Mabel kept the bulk of her body as a shield between them and warded off Caroline’s attack. “That’s enough, Caroline! Get out of here,” Mabel shouted, backing her toward the door.

Michael came rushing in, his face terribly pale and chiseled like a solid granite mask of anger.

“Its okay, Michael, Caroline was just leaving.” Mabel’s eyes shot daggers through her, and Caroline knew she could not bully Mabel. She backed off in retreat, but she was not finished with Rochelle.

She raised both fists and shook them at Rochelle. “You little red-headed whore, when I get the chance I’ll tear your eyes out!” she threatened. Turning, she purposely rammed her shoulder into Michael, nearly unbalancing him before going out the door.

The only person who was not upset was Mabel. “Come here, Sweetpea,” she said, going to Rochelle and wrapping her large arms about her. Her buxom chest offered a soft and comforting cushion for a tearful young woman’s head.

Michael held a rigid pose, feeling completely helpless and looking the part. Caroline warned him yesterday evening. He should have known this would happen, and should have seen it coming. God, he was stupid to have continued with Caroline so long. He should have broken it off completely a long time ago. He could not ignore Caroline’s threat to Rochelle. Her temper was ripe enough to provoke her to just about anything.

What a circus, he thought, realizing how the grapevine was probably dancing to the tune of the gossipers. If that was not bad enough, there was Caroline and her jealous ravings, targeting an innocent girl as her victim.

Mabel gently moved Rochelle away from her comforting bosom and turned her toward the back of her store to the bathroom. “Go in there, Sweetpea, and wash that pretty face of yours. It’ll make you feel better.”

Rochelle nodded her head, obeying like an obedient child, her shoulders drooping dejectedly. She felt terribly defeated, as if her life was without foundation or purpose. All she wanted to do was be alone where she could cry until no more tears were inside her.

Chapter Sixteen

Mabel went back up front where Michael stood like an erect statue. She clapped him on his back with the palm of her hand. “Michael, you’re not using very good judgment, are you?” she suggested, and

she was probably the only person Michael knew who could talk down to him like that.

“Damn it, Mabel, I knew Caroline would be trouble, but what was I supposed to do?” He ran his fingers across his chin and shook his head glumly, a frown winding tightly on his face. “I swear I’ve never led her on about how things stand between us.”

“You don’t have to convince me of that, but you might need a little help convincing Sweetpea,” Mabel said, glancing behind them to be sure they were still alone. “Everybody in town has been telling you to drop Caroline. She is just not for you, Mikey. She has no class, no style, and when her parents were passing out graciousness and good manners, they skipped Caroline altogether. That one back there, though, little Sweetpea, she is a real lady. She is also a fragile little thing who needs lots of protecting. You sure you’re cut out for her kind, Mikey?”

“Damn, Mabel, you’re as bad as everybody else in this gossiping town. The girl’s been in town one night and everybody has me married to her all ready.”

“Well, I wasn’t the one who took her out to the Steak House last night and flaunted my attentions on her like she was the only little filly in the whole world,” Mabel said disdainfully with a smirking grin.

“So, that’s the word that’s out, huh. I bet all the telephone lines were busy last night. It was probably the latest anyone in this town has stayed up for months. Does everybody think I’ve been stricken?”

“Well, aren’t you?” Mabel retorted with raised brows. “How many other banking customers do you wine and dine and dance until the morning hour?”

“Mabel, can’t you help squelch the gossip just a little? The situation is a bit more complicated than what meets the eye.”

Mabel's brows shot up again. "Oh, does that mean she's married?" she implied, quick to jump to the correct conclusion, as was her nature.

"I didn't say that, Mabel, and for God's sake, don't get that one started. If Caroline has her way, my character will be so besmirched I'll never live it down."

"Forget about Caroline. No one pays her any attention. I think everybody who knows you probably wonder why you have kept things hanging so long between you and Caroline. They all know she is not right for you. That might have something to do with the fact that no one likes her, but everybody loves you, Mikey. You should know that, considering how the whole town stuck behind you when things got out of hand with the deaths of your father and stepmother."

Michael shook his head and sighed. "Please, Mabel, don't bring that up. That is another story I do not want rehearsed again. Day before yesterday that grapevine was dead from lack of nourishment. Yesterday and today grapes have been shooting around like bullets. They're all aimed at me and that innocent girl back there."

"You're trying to hide too many skeletons in your closet, Mikey. Let them out, and live a bit more freely."

"Some things are best left to rest," he said, and raised his head toward the bathroom door as it opened.

Rochelle's good cry helped a little, although her depression and malaise was not due entirely to Caroline's confrontation. Overdue tears, bottled up and restrained for years, sought release much too easily now that she was no longer under Tobias's emotional suppression. She had learned at a tender age that life was hard, that dreams did not come true just because one wanted them to. Right now, she had no illusions about anything. Her only goal was to stay hidden from Tobias. One day at a time was all she had, and she

decided she did not need additional complications in her life. She needed to make a clean break.

Michael walked past Mabel and went to meet Rochelle. He saw signs of crying, and it made him feel lousy. “I’m terribly sorry, Rochelle. I should have explained about Caroline, but considering the brief time we have known each other, I did not think it necessary. What I told you was the truth. I am not attached to her or anyone else.”

Mabel patted Rochelle’s shoulder, and went behind her counter. “Sweetpea, some women are just jealous, other’s crazy. Caroline fits the crazy group. Just don’t pay her any attention. No one else does. She’s just battling a lost cause.” Without even trying, Mabel had just won a friend.

Warming to Mabel, Rochelle nodded her acknowledgement, unable to conceal the long-suffering look that spelled far greater concerns than Caroline did. Reverting to the poker face she had used with Tobias for years, she forced herself to face the two of them. Her emotions were so raw lately that it was hard to maintain her expression of indifference. Every minute reminded her that her life was shattered and no firm foundation existed to stabilize it. She was hurting, a different kind of hurt than she had known with Tobias, but emotionally tormenting just the same.

“Were you two having breakfast?” Mabel asked looking at them, taking it upon herself to right a hairy situation. “I saw you pull up and go in. You’d better get back over there or your food will be turned to hog slops.”

Michael gave her a revolting glance from the corner of his eye. “Thanks, Mabel, I’m sure that bit of knowledge will make breakfast very palatable.”

“You know me, Mikey. I say it like it is.” She chuckled and her large bosom bounced gleefully.

“Mikey?” Rochelle questioned, hoping she did not sound as terrible as she felt.

“Mabel has a pet name for everybody. I guess you noticed yours is Sweetpea?”

“I thought that might be Mabel’s pet name for all females.” She was trying hard to be cheerful, even shaping her lips into a partial smile, but the angry girl’s face kept flashing before her eyes. The confrontation was embarrassing. There had to be more than Michael was telling her about his relationship with the girl; yet, it really wasn’t her business. The two of them were strangers and he was only being nice to her, which was reason enough to keep things light between them.

“You’re the only Sweetpea I’ve run across,” Mabel replied “Now run along both of you. I have work to do. I cannot stand around here galley-gawking all morning. I don’t have the good fortune of being a millionaire or owning my own bank.” She gave Michael a severe glance and a smile, which told him right away that absolutely nothing in this town was sacred or immune to gossip. His threat to deal with anyone who voiced Rochelle’s name outside the bank was wasted words.

Michael shot Mabel another revolting look, and guided Rochelle out the door. He was about to lead her across the street to the restaurant when Rochelle touched her hand to his sleeve and stopped.

“Michael, I don’t want you to help me anymore.”

Michael glanced sharply at her, expelling a quick breath of air. “Rochelle, don’t make more out of Caroline’s behavior than it is. You and I have made plans and we’re going to keep them.”

“I don’t want to cause problems for anyone. You say you’re not attached, yet, that woman’s attitude clearly states otherwise.”

“You’re making too much of Caroline’s poor manners, Rochelle, and I won’t let her foolish scene ruin our day. We’re going back over there and have our breakfast like nothing at all has happened, then we’re going to go car shopping in Bozeman.”

“Michael, I’m embarrassed to go back. Everyone was staring at me. Just let me go. I can walk back to the motel.”

He put his arm about her waist and gave a little squeeze. “Honey, they were staring at you, but they were frowning at Caroline. No one thinks badly of you for what she did, and you mustn’t let another thought of it worry you.”

Rochelle noticed he called her honey, an endearment on the second day of their having met. It touched a need, gave it sustenance, and she became lost to yet another form of domination. Taking a deep breath, she squared her shoulders like a warrior ready for battle, and that brought a tender smile to Michael’s lips, prompting another squeeze of his hand on her waist. She contained a storehouse of pride, backed only by a gentle spirit, giving her poise and graciousness many women lacked.

All the patrons were kind to Rochelle when she and Michael went back into the restaurant. Folks averted their eyes. The waitress came to meet them, ushering Rochelle forward toward the table they previously occupied. “Come on, Sweetie, I’ll show you to your table.” Like Mabel, just a few minutes previously, the waitress made a new friend.

“Rochelle, this is Sally,” Michael said. Both women greeted each other cordially before Sally turned away. She came back shortly with steaming cups of coffee.

“Here you are,” Sally said, setting their coffee on the table. “Since I sold your first breakfast to someone else, your order will be here shortly.”

“Thanks, Sal,” Michael told her before she rushed off to take someone else’s order. Then looking at Rochelle, he said, “Are you okay?” He reached his hand across the table and placed it on hers.

She nodded, looking imploringly at him. “Michael, I don’t want to be the cause of anyone’s unhappiness.”

“And you won’t be. Whatever was between Caroline and me is over. Please do not make it your concern. You have enough problems without taking on more.”

“I’m just no longer sure that being with you is a good idea,” she said, recalling how unstable her entire existence was just now. She had no clothing, had no place to stay, except a small motel room, had no transportation, and she lived from day to day with the fear of Tobias discovering her whereabouts. If he ever found her, he would kill her. She thoroughly believed that. Her life was precarious and her future a big question mark. All she could hope for was living one day at a time. Anything beyond that would be an unexpected bonus, just as Michael’s presence in her life had been thus far. It was not fair to either of them, however, to nurture an attraction that was destined toward a dead end.

Sally brought their breakfast, and they started eating. Rochelle could not stop thinking about the girl called Caroline. The vehemence of her jealousy was disturbing. Maybe Michael did not think there was anything between them, but the girl was of another mind. Her brash behavior proved that idea, unless, as Mabel said, the girl was a bit crazy.

“How long have you dated Caroline?” she asked without considering it a personal subject. She and Michael had come a long way from yesterday, surpassing the boundaries of unfamiliarity rapidly. She watched Michael butter his toast, his jaw tensing while a little pulse throbbed furiously at his throat.

“Do we really have to discuss this, Rochelle?” he asked. A

glacial reserve filtered across his gaze.

“Since the girl’s anger is directed at me, I think I would like to know the circumstances surrounding her attack on me,” Rochelle replied in defense.

“There’s really nothing to know.”

How could he explain that he took her out to dinner at least once a week, took her to bed more often than that, but had no attachments to her. It sounded too weak even for his ears. Even though he could care less if he never saw Caroline again, he nevertheless, did have an attachment to her by the fact that they copulated as much as two or three times some weeks. Feeling as indifferent as he did toward Caroline, he cursed himself for not breaking it off long ago. Since he had not, he supposed, out of decency, he owed her some sort of explanation.

He also owed one to Rochelle.

Rochelle saw he was evading her question. She remembered how he kissed her only a couple of hours ago; how he touched every part of her body and turned on feelings she thought she was incapable of experiencing. Maybe she should not press him, but somehow she felt their intimacy gave her a right to know what he was reluctant to tell her.

“I’m sorry, Michael. Perhaps I don’t have any right to ask you, but more importantly, maybe I don’t have the right to be with you either.” Her voice was soft but decisive as if she had just made an important decision.

A heavy sigh escaped his lips, and the blazing anger in his profile as he glanced out the plate glass window caused Rochelle to recoil in alarm. Reaching across the table, he grasped her hand and sent her a speculative gaze that was utterly unnerving.

“Rochelle, I’m going to answer your question, and then I don’t want to discuss Caroline anymore. She and I have seen each other

off and on for the past year, and she initiated every date we have ever had. I have never called her, not even once. I do not even know her phone number. I haven't made any pledges or commitments to Caroline, and never intended making any."

Rochelle became reflective. He might just as easily have said something like, "she baked me a cake, I ate it, and I don't owe her anything." God, if he could be that cold hearted with Caroline, what was to keep him from acting similarly toward her when it suited him. He was no different from Tobias or any other man. Sex without responsibility seemed to be a macho motto. How belittling, she thought, unconsciously turning up her nose with disdain.

"Do I sense a mood?" he asked, with a slight note of exasperation in his tone.

"You indicated you didn't want to discuss it," she reported condescendingly.

With a sigh, he said, "What can I say to convince you there is nothing between me and Caroline?"

She was angry now. What kind of fool did he take her to be? "There's nothing you can say to convince me, Michael. If you've dated the girl for a year, I would say that definitely indicates some sort of attachment."

He let out a heavy sigh. "So what exactly do you think I should do about it?"

"I'm merely a bank client, a stranger. It's hardly up to me to advise you about your personal exploits."

He let out another sigh, seeming at a loss to say more. "Rochelle..." he began in an imploring tone that eroded into a deep study before he continued. "I will talk to her—tomorrow—when I have more time. Is that what you want to hear?"

"Please don't think you have to do anything on my behalf. It's your affair, not mine." She kept a placid expression on her face.

He sent her a sharp look. “Okay, so maybe it was an affair, of sorts, but it was all one sided. I do not care for Caroline, never have. I have indicated that thought to her numerous times. I did not pursue her, Rochelle. She continued to pursue me regardless of all the times I tried to let her down gently. If that makes me a heel, then so be it. I said I would talk to her. What more can I say?” he asked with a questioning sweep of his arm.

“More aptly put, *what* do you plan to say to Caroline?” she mumbled beneath her breath.

Michael did not hear her statement. “If you’re finished with breakfast, I think we should go find a car for you.” It was a safe change of subject, and one that relieved the tense atmosphere.

Rochelle knew that she really had no right to offer input into Michael’s affair with Caroline, and never would have if the girl had not nearly attacked her. In less than two days, she and Michael were discussing his personal affairs like two disgruntled lovers.

Cars were a much safer subject.

Chapter Seventeen

The trip to Bozeman took less than an hour. Michael was in no rush, driving at a pace slower than other cars. This was the first entire day taken off from work in... he could not recall the last time he’d taken off. Maybe he had not taken a day. His life had been so routine since the trial, he could just about chart his activities for any particular time of day since he started running the bank. The only variation to his routine was the time spent building his house, which he subcontracted out and oversaw the construction. Then there were

the occasions when he and Caroline went out to eat, or came by and spent the night with him.

Everything that once comprised his existence since the death of his father and stepmother suddenly seemed unimportant. His interest lay in the beautiful auburn-gold haired woman sitting on the seat beside him. He was quite amazed at how easily she filled his head, his mind, and his senses. He speculated that perhaps the monotony of his dissatisfying lifestyle was at the root of his deep attraction for Rochelle. Whatever, he was hooked.

“Michael, do you think they’ll deliver the car? I’m not a competent enough driver to drive back on this busy highway, especially in a car I’ve never driven.”

He laughed at her. “Rochelle, what good is a car if you can’t drive it? You might just as well forget the car. I’ll be happy to chauffeur you,” he teased.

Her expression soured, and Michael realized immediately he had stepped on his tongue.

“Thank you, but I only thought it would be better if I learned to drive on a less busy thoroughfare,” she snapped indignantly. “I haven’t been behind the wheel of a car for more than five years. Surely, you’ll agree a little practice driving might be in order before I venture into busy traffic.”

“I’m sorry, baby. I am certain they will deliver the car. Do you mind telling me how you got around without driving?”

“Please do not call me *baby*. I loathe the word as an endearment,” she ordered sharply. “I got around with a chauffer driving me.”

“I see. Now, I don’t suppose you want to tell me why you don’t want to be called baby?” Michael asked reservedly, glancing toward her from the corner of his eyes.

“No, I do not,” she snapped in a piqued tone.

His quick glance held frosty amusement. “Then I apologize for calling you baby. If my endearments offend you, then perhaps it would be well for you to sit down and make out a list of everything I am not supposed to say that might be offensive to you. And if you think for a minute that I have purposely said anything that might imply mockery, then perhaps you could add that to your list, too.” He was grinning wryly and glancing cockily at Rochelle from the corner of his eye. When Rochelle looked at him, she knew he was teasing.

She raised her brows, looking at him dryly, a stingy grin softening her features. “Okay, I get the picture. I’m being a pain, and I know you don’t deserve it.” She faced him, a placating expression on her face. “I’m sorry. I suppose I was taking my frustrations out on you and I’m glad you didn’t let me get away with it.”

“Does that mean I can call you baby? I really did mean it in the nicest sort of way.”

“I don’t like being called baby. The word has negative connotations which I don’t plan to discuss with you.”

“Why are you so secretive?”

“I’m secretive for the same reason you don’t tell me all there is about your life. You’ve never told me much of anything, Michael, but you know a great deal about me.”

“Perhaps that’s because there’s not much to tell.” The truth was that he simply did not like discussing his past. Like everyone else, there were skeletons in his closet best left undisturbed. How could he tell her his father and stepmother were murdered and the police charged him with the murder? *Rejected by Stepmother* was the headline blasted across the front page of the newspaper. The assumption was that he and Tina were having an affair and she dumped him. Nothing could have been farther from the truth! That

period of his life was so terrible that he hoped to God, he never faced anything as humiliating again.

“Perhaps...” she said, letting the word trail off her lips in an unfinished thought.

“I tell you what, let’s sign a truce and move on to something we can discuss,” he said, taking her wrist and tugging her gently toward him.

“Such as?”

“Such as it gets lonely over here when you’re way over there,” he said teasingly.

“I’d like to sit over here.”

“Just come a little closer,” he cajoled, gently tugging at her arm. “Do you know you can hardly buy a car anymore with this kind of seat? Everything has bucket seats now. I have to take advantage of a good thing while I can.”

With a shrug, she moved closer, regarding him with a questioning look, and asking herself if she had forgotten so soon her silent advice about keeping a safe emotional distance from Michael.

“That’s much better,” he said, pecking her on the cheek and putting his arm about her shoulders. A vision of beautiful bare breasts flashed across his memory and the remembered touch of his hands and lips upon silky soft skin. His thermometer must have soared by twenty degrees. It became an intimate moment as he caught her looking up at him with a gentle expression of warmth. He wanted to question her about that morning, her reaction to his attempt to make love to her. The timing was all wrong, however, and the questions would have to wait.

Sitting so close to Michael, with his arm across her shoulders, the faint smell of his aftershave teasing her nostrils, she remembered him trying to make love to her that past morning. She had wanted it to happen, needing to know if she were capable of experiencing

sexual pleasure with a man. She hated Tobias for what he did to her, hated him for taking away the joy she might have experienced through complete sexual surrender and fulfillment. Would it ever come? Would she know the spiraling spring of passion, and the convulsive completion such as she had read about in books? Did that really happen to women?

They were entering the city limits of Bozeman and traffic had quickly become heavier. The weather was superb, slightly cool, and breezy enough to sway treetops and send foliage dancing gaily. “Have you thought about the kind of car you would like to have?” Michael asked, trying to determine the best dealership to start with.

“I have no idea.”

At their first stop, Rochelle liked the first car that the salesman showed her; a blue sedan. Even when she looked at other cars, she kept coming back to the first one she saw. Michael suggested they go to other dealerships, but she had made up her mind. She wanted the blue sedan. In less than an hour, they took care of the transaction and arranged for the delivery of the car.

They went on a shopping trip that lasted long past noon, and Rochelle finally stopped buying when she decided there was no more room in Michael’s car for further purchases.

With all her bags and packages loaded in the trunk and back seat of the car, having personal things again boosted her morale. She felt lighthearted. Not since high school, when she and her friends found gaiety in many simple pleasures, had she enjoyed herself quite as much as she had thus far with Michael. He was jovial, cheerful, and had an easy temperament making him a comfortable companion.

“I’ve really had a nice day thus far,” she told him. “I know we’ve only known each other a couple of days, but it seems like forever.”

“Well, if I haven’t known you forever, I certainly want to,” he said less teasingly than usual.

IT WAS LATE AFTERNOON WHEN Michael turned off the road toward Windy Point.

“I’m tired,” Rochelle said, while Michael helped carry her parcels into her motel room. “I think I’d like to hang up my purchases, put things away, and take a long nap.”

“Aren’t you going to model the negligee for me?” he asked with a mischievous grin on his face. “After all, I did choose it for you.” Ever since their outing last night, he had one thing on his mind.

“Michael, you’re a skillful manipulator, you are,” she said, laughing, and falling down on the bed with her arms stretched high above her head. “Oh, this feels good.”

Michael sucked in a deep breath of air. She could not possibly realize how seductive she was lying in such a reclining position. God, he wanted to make love to her.

When she gave a long, relaxing stretch, the temptation was too much for Michael. He lay down on the bed next to her. He bent across her torso, his fingers touching her cheek. “That red hair is gorgeous,” he said, running his fingers through its silky tresses.

Rochelle was about to say something, when he quickly lowered his mouth to hers. His hand ran down her side, cupping her hip, her buttock, running over her thigh, tracing his fingers along the inside toward the triangle between her legs. Her jeans were an impediment to his touch. The kiss continued, until a soft moan oozed from Rochelle’s lips.

“I want you, Rochelle,” Michael said, his breath coming in short spurts.

She recalled her reaction that morning when her fear strangled their passions. “We can’t, Michael. We can’t,” she said, pushing him away.

“Give me one good reason,” he said, his lips moving toward hers again.

She turned her face aside. “I just can’t. We barely know each other. Can’t we just be friends?”

He rolled over on his back, breathing in a big gulp of air. “Can’t I even kiss you?” he asked, sidestepping her question.

She did not answer.

He bent over toward her again, touched his mouth to her lips.

She pushed him away. “I’m afraid to get intimately close to you. Involving you in my life could become too complicated.”

“And what if I say I’m already involved?” he asked, nuzzling her cheek.

“Then you’re contradicting yourself. You said this afternoon that...”

“That was then. This is now,” he whispered hoarsely. When she would have answered, he stopped her words with his lips, holding her in his embrace until her arms snaked reluctantly around his neck.

The kiss deepened and he felt her response, timid and slow at first. Then she became like raging heat beneath him, her kiss as hungry as his own. The very sight of her lying beneath him kindled a fire in his blood that flamed and raged. His hand moved up her side again, and he gave another groan as he cupped her breast, his thumb nudging fire into the taut pink orb beneath her shirt. His lips left a chain of kisses across her cheek, down her neck and beneath her throat, traveling even lower, as he pulled her shirt up above her breast, and reached behind her to undo her bra.

“No, Michael,” she pleaded as he lowered his mouth to her breast, his tongue sending shivers along her spine with electrical

currents shooting to her lower abdomen. Her breath was as ragged as his was, and she could feel his hardness pressing against her hip.

“Just let me touch you, kiss you. Let me show you what we can be like together?” His hand was relentless, as his lips and mouth tested her last restraints. His foreplay evoked tiny sounds deep in her throat and she pushed her breast at him, now encouraging him.

Suddenly, he had an attack of conscience. She had said no, and meant it, even as he continued to seduce her. He could feel his thermostat temperature falling as his mouth became still at her breast. His caressing hand that had sneaked into her jeans slowly ceased plundering. With a groan of pure torture, he rolled onto his back again, pulling her over on his chest. “Are you sure you want me to stop?” he asked, hoping she might say no.

“Yes, I want you to stop.” It was hard to say, but she managed to get it out. Her skin felt flushed and looked rosy, and she could feel a need so strong that what she really wanted to do was encourage him not to stop. Instead, she took a deep breath and tried to divert her attention from something too special to describe.

He lay on the bed holding her a long time, waiting for his thermostat to cool, daring not look at her lest he do the deed and reap the guilt later. He could feel her eyes upon him, and if she knew how much they served as an invitation, she would turn the other way. Instead, she rose up on the bed and touched his shoulder.

“I’m sorry, Michael.”

She crawled off the bed. Taking one of the shopping bags, she dumped it on the bed next to him, and proceeded to find a place for everything, passing by the foot of the bed to go put things on hangers. Her round little butt in the tight fitting jeans brought another groan from Michael’s throat as he watched her.

Eventually, Michael went into the bathroom, splashed water on his face and dried it with a towel, then came out. He knew he had to get out of there or he would end up in bed with her again.

“I’ll see you at seven,” he told her without asking if it was okay. “We’ll dress up so you can wear one of your new dresses.”

She nodded at him, watching him go out the door and pull it shut behind him. She heard the sound of his car engine, then the tires making noise on the pavement as he backed out and pulled away. She sat thinking a long time before she remembered the unlocked door and went to hook the chain and fasten the lock.

Her thoughts grew tormented, but this time it had nothing to do with Tobias or the reason she ran away. It had to do with Michael, and with the hunger and raging flames racing through her in quivering fury when he had kissed and caressed her. It had to do with a need lying dormant all the years that she was with Tobias, a need born by Michael’s touch and kisses.

She wanted him to make love to her.

Chapter Eighteen

Rochelle called the desk and asked George to ring her at six, which was only a couple of hours away. Then she lay down after hanging up her new clothes. Exhausted from a sleepless night and the shopping activity, she fell fast asleep within minutes.

The dreams came pouring through her sub-conscious as they always did, and she came awake to the muffled screams that struggled from her throat. It was five by then, but she closed her eyes, trying to force the memory of the dream from her mind. It was always the same, a bronze casket setting against the wall across

from the foot of her bed. She suspected someone was inside the casket, and tried to call out to someone, anyone, to come investigate. However, no sound came from her mouth. She lay frozen in a catatonic state, paralyzed with fear, unable to breathe. She was suffocating, close to death. Dying...dying...

Awakening from the dream, gasping for air, she sat up in bed, struggling to suck air into her lungs.

Her body underwent sheer trauma for long minutes afterwards when she would open her eyes expecting to see the casket there. It might just as well have been a brush with death as her lungs floundered from lack of oxygen.

Discouraged with trying to finish her nap, she climbed from the bed, turned on the television, and went to the shower. She loved soap the way some people liked perfume, and she took the wrapper from a fresh bar and smelled it. It had a marvelous scent of sweet almond. Soaping lavishly, the soft fragrance scented her skin with a pleasing perfumed aroma. The strong spray of water refreshed and vitalized her. She thought of Michael, feeling eager to see him, despite having been with him a short while ago.

George called from the desk at six, and Rochelle thanked him. She touched her face very lightly with foundation, traced her pale eyebrows with an auburn mascara pencil, lavished brown mascara on her long lashes, and rouged her cheeks ever so slightly against the milky paleness of her skin. She put on a soft pink lipstick and followed that with just a touch of the new perfume behind her ears, in the bend of her elbows, and behind her knees. The only jewelry she wore was her watch and a delicate silver chain which she was wearing when she left Miami.

Having bought some hairpins and a little silver comb for her hair, she decided to wear it up as she often did when she dressed up. With plenty of time to spare, she parted the front severely and

brushed it tightly against her scalp. Then she swept the long strands up in a tight chignon, pulling little short sprigs out around her ears and forehead to frame her face. The effect was as perfect as it was when done by the hairdresser. It literally transformed her from the clean, scrubbed look of a young girl into a glamorous woman.

Putting on a matching set of underwear, a lace-trimmed white half-slip and panty hose with high-heeled slippers, she chose the dress she wanted to wear. Trimmed with tiny straps that tied in bows on the shoulders, it was pale beige and came with a long brown stole. When she put it on, she stood back to inspect herself, pleased with her appearance.

At six-thirty, she finished dressing and sat watching the television. At six forty-five, a soft tap sounded on the door.

Rochelle rushed over in front of the mirror and glanced quickly at herself. She touched a couple of curls on her forehead, and then taking a deep breath, went to the door. As she turned the doorknob, the thought flickered through her mind that it might be Tobias. She opened it a crack and peeked outside before undoing the chain. Pulling the door open wide, she stepped aside to let Michael in.

Michael gawked in astonishment.

Instead of coming in, he took a step backward. “My God!” he exclaimed, awed by her glamour. There was no resemblance to the Rochelle of earlier, even though absolutely nothing was wrong with that youthful impression of her then.

“Are you coming in, Michael?” Rochelle prompted, pulling the door open wider, a lovely smile dimpling her cheeks.

“I don’t think I’d better come in,” he said with a catch in his breath, Fire smoldered in his blue eyes. “You look absolutely beautiful and delicious.”

“Thank you,” she replied, pleased by his compliment. Looking beautiful was not exactly something new to Rochelle. Being

beautiful for Tobias had served as an occupation for her. His expectations were for her to look like a model out of a glamour magazine from the time she awoke in the morning until she went to bed at night, and except for shopping, glamorizing herself had comprised her daily activity.

“If you’re ready, we’ll go,” he said, sucking in a breath of air and letting it out. She grabbed her lovely new purse, transferred her things from her old purse, and then draped the stole over her shoulders.

When she moved toward the door, ready to go, Michael reached out and stopped her. Taking her into his arms, he crushed her against him, his hands spreading over her buttocks to draw her close to him. He looked at her shiny, lush lips, wanting to kiss her. With a shuddering shake of his head, he withdrew, willing himself not to muss her makeup.

The gentle little girl that Michael had escorted earlier wore many faces. She was witty, funny, sensual, gentle, and could be spirited, as demonstrated when they shopped for her clothing, both of them laughing and enjoying themselves like a couple of kids. He had also seen touches of defiance, as well as sensitivity, and the traces of deep pain. She was a storm of conflicts, a mixture of contrasts, and more than anything else, she was breathtaking. Her auburn-gold hair, with every strand in place, was like a regal crown upon her head.

“Can we go back to the Steak House so we can dance?” she asked as he escorted her to the door. She noticed how elegant he looked in his casual blue sports coat, a polo shirt, and tanned trousers.

“That sounds good to me.” Michael’s intention was to take her somewhere other than the Steak House, somewhere less patronized

by people he knew. He realized Rochelle would cause a gigantic stir dressed as she was now and looking so gorgeous.

By tomorrow, not a man, woman, or child would have escaped the rumors from the grapevine. People would have the two of them paired as inseparable. Actually, he did not mind that so much, would have been honored by it, except her situation was precarious, to say the least. Circumstances could force Rochelle to take flight at any time. That was ever in Michael's thoughts, and he realized it had become a threat to his peace of mind.

The scent she wore was heady and intoxicating, leaving his senses reeling as he tucked his arm about her to escort her inside the Steak House. They were inside the door no more than a couple of minutes before a hush fell across the restaurant, and heads began turning for a better look, people scraping their chairs on the floor to twist about to gain a good viewing position. If Rochelle noticed, she pretended not to as she smiled up at Michael's face.

"This lovely creature can't be the same young lady who was here last night?" Ken questioned, not bothering to hide his lazy eye-sweeping appreciation.

Rochelle smiled.

"Is our same table from last night vacant, Ken?" Michael asked, looking across the room.

"It will be in a minute if you'll give me a few seconds," he said, and spoke to a waiter.

The waiter went across the room with an empty tray, explained to the two young people who sat there that they had been mistakenly seated at a reserved table, and then he moved their food and drinks to another table. When the table was emptied, wiped, and a clean tablecloth put on it, Michael escorted Rochelle across the room, a buzz of whispering following in their wake.

The whole town had joked and made bets in the past on how soon it might be before the love bug caught Michael and changed his bachelorhood status. People were certain now that it had finally happened. No one recalled seeing Michael with anyone quite as charming as the young woman he presently escorted. If they were impressed last evening when she was in her jeans, they were doubly impressed tonight. She floated on Michael's arm as if she belonged there, and Michael's obvious pride reflected boldly in the way he looked at her.

Soon after they sat down, the waiter brought menus, and shortly thereafter, a bottle of champagne Michael ordered. The waiter poured it in flutes and Rochelle lifted hers to her pink lips, sipping daintily. Michael, on the other hand, became introspective, his attention thoughtful.

“You're very quiet, Michael.”

“I was thinking about you,” he said, gazing into her eyes. “Chelle, I want to know you better.”

“Isn't that why we're having dinner together?”

He reached over and covered her hand with his. “I want to know why you were so afraid when I tried to make love to you this morning.”

She pulled her hand away, a sudden rush of memories flooding through her brain. She did not want to think about the kind of things Michael wanted to hear. Even thinking about the horrible things Tobias had done to her made her feel somehow tainted. Her sexual life with Tobias was a subject she chose to avoid. “I had a long sleepless night and was tired this morning,” she said evasively, looking away to avoid eye contact.

“Okay, I get the picture. You choose not to talk about it, but I know tiredness was not the problem. You were completely

responsive one minute, and then shaking like a jack hammer the next.”

She pursed her lips and took a deep breath through her nostrils. “Michael, if this discussion continues, then I think I’d rather leave now.”

“Chelle, you’ve got too many secrets.”

“That may be, but they are *my* secrets, and they’ll stay that way until I decide otherwise.”

Michael backed off, knowing he would ruin their evening if he continued in that vein. He poured more champagne in their flutes, and watched her down her glassful in one drink. He poured it full again. The bottle was empty when the waiter brought their dinner.

The waiter served the green salad along with everything else, setting down plates of thinly sliced roast beef served in its own gravy, mounds of mashed potatoes, steaming green beans, and hot buttered rolls. Michael ordered a bottle of wine.

Rochelle drank the wine as thirstily as she had the champagne, seeming introspective now after Michael mentioned her nervousness of the past morning.

By the time they finished eating the band had arrived. The musicians circulated a few minutes, greeting customers before setting up their instruments. A couple of the musicians stopped by Michael and Rochelle’s table, spoke briefly to Michael and was introduced to Rochelle.

“What songs do you like, Chelle?” asked one of the guys.

“I especially liked the one you played for us last night, but we enjoyed all your music.” She gave them an appreciative smile.

“You’re new around here, aren’t you?” asked Oliver

“You might say that. I was here once before, a long time ago.”

“Where do you come from?”

“The east,” she lied, and felt Michael’s eyes staring at her.

Glancing behind him, John, the drummer, could see the room filling as the later crowd started coming in. “Well, I suppose it’s time to go to work,” he said, and reached out his hand to Rochelle. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“If you have a request, just give a holler,” Oliver said as they walked away.

Michael stood up, pulled the table away from the wall, and put their chairs side by side. “Any objections?” he asked after they sat back down and he put his arm about Rochelle.

“Only one,” she said glancing up at the air vent just above them. “I’m cold.”

Michael smiled. “I think I can take care of that.” He wrapped his arm more snugly around her.

They danced frequently after the music began in earnest. The evening passed all too quickly. When it came time to leave, the warm embraces on the dance floor contributed to a mounting anticipation growing between Michael and Rochelle.

While Michael’s warm, hard body contact started breaking down Rochelle’s resistance long before they got back to her motel, she found herself gearing up expectantly to the culmination of the evening. She wanted to know what her body’s response would be, how it would react to gentleness instead of the torturous pain and repulsive acts Tobias forced upon her. She wanted to know if something was wrong with her that kept her from reaching sexual gratification; or was her problem caused merely by Tobias’s sexual abuse?

For the time being, with Michael’s arms constantly around her, she knew desire like a sweet warm ache. She also knew she wanted Michael to make love to her.

Chapter Nineteen

A beautiful bright moon shone from a blanket of glimmering stars. A night wind blew up causing the green shrubbery in front of the motel to dance gracefully. It was a night made for lovers, Michael thought. He glanced at the door of the motel room, thought about that bed just inside, and knew if he ever went past the threshold, he would never leave until he had made love to Rochelle. Recalling her previous resistance, he thought it best to avoid temptation.

“I don’t think I’d better come in,” he said when he walked Rochelle to her motel door. He cupped her face in his hands and gently touched her cheek with his lips.

Rochelle gazed at him, hiding her disappointment. His announcement was not what she expected. Riding home, snuggled up close against Michael, she was certain he would attempt intimacy with her. Too needy now to appreciate his wanting to protect her from his strong sexuality, she merely nodded. Turning to unlock the door, she stepped inside.

Michael turned and went toward his car.

Rochelle locked the door behind her, realizing he had not kissed her goodnight. Neither did he mention seeing her the coming day, even though he told her earlier he would take her to see the realtor tomorrow. Leaning against the door, regretting his leaving, a sense of loneliness overcame her.

Michael went to his car and shoved the key in the ignition. He turned it and the car started up immediately, but for the life of him, he could not put the gear in reverse to back out of the parking space. Every bit of his common sense told him to back the car out and leave, but he continued sitting there, the minutes ticking away.

Finally, he turned the ignition off, nurturing a need as old as humanity.

Rochelle stripped off her clothing, hanging everything on hangers. She kicked off her slippers and peeled off her panty hose and slip. She was down to her lace bikinis, and quickly donned her robe when the knock sounded on her door.

Tensing, she let out a startled gasp, frightened over who it might be. The fear of Tobias finding her continually played on her mind. With Michael leaving only minutes earlier, she reasoned that it couldn't be him. She edged toward the door, listening for several seconds before she whispered, "Yes?"

"It's me, Rochelle. Michael. I forgot something."

She let out a breath of relief and happiness suddenly flowed through her like a heady brew. With fingers flying, she took the chain off and opened the door just a crack. He was leaning up against the doorjamb, more casual looking than he actually felt.

"Michael?" she said breathlessly. "You frightened me. What did you forget?"

He pushed the door back and stepped inside, closing and locking it behind him.

"This," he said throatily, taking her in his arms and kissing her lips. "I forgot to kiss you good night." He planted several little kisses upon her soft face and pink lips. Then his lips consumed her mouth, sending fire to his groin. He pushed the robe off her shoulders so it slid down to the floor. Then trailing a chain of kisses down her breasts and stomach, he pushed the panties down to her feet.

Rochelle went into his arms, her head thrown back, while she delighted to the warm sensations brought on by Michael's kisses and intimate caresses. Thoughts ceased to exist, replaced with the heightening sensibilities and sensations washing over her. Her

breath became ragged as he moved back so he could see her, consuming all of her with his eyes. Her soft warmth fired his blood with white-hot streaks of lightning. Time seemed of essence as he threw off his clothes and lowered her to the bed. His warm fingers stirred her to shimmering ecstasy until she was purring in his ear like a warm kitten, her sounds muffled only by his wet kisses as his tongue thrust into the moist cavern of her mouth.

Each movement was new, innocent and fresh in a glorious voyage of discovery for the two of them. Michael's hands, lips, and kisses trailed over every inch of Rochelle's body sending liquid fire spiraling downward into her loins. Willingly she sank below the waves of rapture, and yearned for the completion she was certain he could give her. When his hands and mouth left her feeling like a spring winding tighter and tighter, she murmured his name repetitiously as rising sensations promised to be a miracle never before experienced.

Responding, he moved on top of her, his knee pressing between her thighs until she opened to him. He entered her slowly, feeling the moist tightness surround him and contract to milk him further inside her. He knew he had died and gone to heaven, for nothing in his memory ever felt so wonderful. Not wanting to rush this bit of paradise he luxuriated in, he lay perfectly still inside her, his mouth seeking a taut pink nipple, his hand cupping the other breast while his thumb evoked erotic tingles in her blood, her body stirring and moving like a serpent beneath his.

Then unable to retain his own pleasure any longer, he thrust in and out of her with a rhythm that sent friction tingling through the nerves of each of their bodies. Her hips rose and fell in unison with his, meeting his thrusts then ascending with passionate response. When he felt her contractions grow strong about his manhood, he knew she was reaching her peak, and he thrust harder, ready to

surrender to that spiraling blast of intense heat similar to an erupting volcano. They both clung to each other, a bundle of convulsive and shuddering spirals unwinding together in a blending of heated and relaxing fulfillment that was unequaled by anything else.

Michael put off disengaging himself from her. He wanted to keep her there pressed tightly against him, now, forever. He had tasted paradise.

He lay a long time propped upon his elbows above her, his lips pressed against her neck. When he turned on his side next to her, holding her as close as he could in his arms, and kissing her lips, face and cheeks, she stared through eyes that sparkled with a kind of awe when she looked at him.

“Are you okay?” he whispered softly, holding her with a gentleness he had not known he possessed.

She pulled his head against her bosom and bent to kiss his forehead. Moisture filled her eyes, the moment as poignant as any ever spent. “That’s never happened to me before,” she whispered. “It was the only part of me he couldn’t control, and he hated me for it. I was afraid it might never happen.”

He raised his head, seeing such purity on her face, her confession raising his pride in his performance to unspeakable heights. She lay as humble and docile next to him now as the kitten she reminded him of when she was purring passionate little moans in his ear. “Never?” he echoed, brushing his fingers along her cheek.

“Never,” she replied through a warm intimate smile.

“Now, that you’ve told me that, I don’t think I want to go sleep in my bed all alone,” he said, holding her against him.

“I never realized it could be like this.” There was no shame in her, no shyness as she looked at him, brushing her fingers against his hair, smoothing it back from his forehead, pasting kisses upon his cheek and lips.

“Rochelle love...” he groaned, holding her tightly.

She finally pulled away from him, crawling off the bed to head for the bathroom. She used a bottle of douche liquid, which she had foreseen the need to purchase earlier that day, and washed herself, as was her habit with Tobias.

When she came from the bathroom, she wrapped her robe about her, and went to stand before Michael where he sat on the edge of the bed. He had pulled on his briefs, looking most thoughtful when she first glimpsed him. When he looked up, he smiled. He buried his face against her abdomen, wrapping his arms about her hips and buttocks as she stood between his legs. He smelled the clean smell of her fragrant soap, and he parted her robe and kissed her on her navel, his lips traveling lower until a soft sound escaped her throat, and she lifted his head with her hand beneath his chin.

“Don’t you have to go to work tomorrow?” she asked as his tongue did things to her navel, sparking fresh new flames inside her.

“Only if you’ll agree to be my personal secretary and sit across from my desk from me,” he teased, nuzzling his face against her flat abdomen.

She lifted his chin again, until their eyes met, and she smiled at him, her teeth sparkling. She took his hands and he came to his feet, his arms quickly gathering her against his strong hard chest matted with dark hair.

As if he were not already holding her tight enough, he squeezed her in his arms, desire draining all reason. He pulled her back down on the bed on top of him, holding her there until his body ached all over with need. Rolling her on her back, he covered her face with kisses, spreading her robe open on either side of her.

Rochelle felt his gaze sweep over her, leaving a shy, confined heat in its wake.

There was no rush this time, the two of them moving with a rhythm that spread fire through both their loins leaving a flame of sensuous thrills. Such tenderness as Michael demonstrated was completely new to Rochelle, and she basked in the sweet joy of learning about and enjoying normal sex. Reaching that wonderful peak again, and the ensuing sense of completion, she dared to believe her life might eventually reach a point of normalcy.

He rolled off her and pulled her next to him. "If it weren't for the gossips, I'd take you home with me."

Rochelle smiled, but said nothing. That possibility was definitely out. Tobias would be a dangerous enemy to any man involved with her, and she did not want Michael's home to become an arena.

Michael found his briefs and trousers and pulled them on, then his shirt. He had left his jacket in the car, so he sat down and put on his shoes and socks. Standing, he pulled her into his arms. "I'd stay the night with you if it wouldn't jeopardize your reputation. However, the longer my car sets outside, the more chance of gossip. Will you have breakfast with me at seven?" He reached to open the door.

This had been one of the most important nights of Rochelle's life. Learning that she was sexually inadequate was exciting knowledge. She had her arms about Michael's neck, wishing he could stay the night.

He brushed her hair behind her ear and kissed her throat.

"I should have bought an alarm clock. It's too late to ask George for a wake up call."

"You don't need one. I can call you. Schell..." he started to say something, but changed his mind. Instead, he said, "Sleep tight and I'll see you in the morning." With that, he gave her a good night kiss and backed out the door until he was at the hood of his car. With a

sigh, he turned, went around to the driver's side and opened the car door.

Rochelle closed and locked her door.

She put on her gown and lay upon the bed, noticing Michael's manly scent upon the pillow. She hugged it in her arms, it touching her cheek so the pale scent of spicy aftershave filled her nostrils. Grasping the pillow tighter, she closed her eyes dreamily, recalling the wonder of her captivating experience and basking in the glory of it. Eventually, she slept.

Chapter Twenty

Michael drove from the motel to his house by rote since his mental faculties were concentrated on Rochelle. He had not wanted to leave her, desiring her company so enthusiastically he might have stayed the night except for the gossip mongers who would have had a field day at seeing his car parked at the motel all night.

He was pulling into the driveway at his home when something caught his attention just before he turned the headlights out. When he trained his sight more fully, he saw someone sitting on the front door stoop. He glanced around for a car and saw it nearly hidden behind trees toward one end of the house. He looked at his watch. It was nearly two o'clock in the morning, and he swore beneath his breath. There was only one person he knew who would be waiting for him.

Caroline!

He cursed.

Reluctant to encounter her, he dreaded a confrontation he could just as well do without tonight. He slowly got out of his car and

walked toward her. Pausing in front a few feet from her, she came to her feet and faced him in the dim outside lighting. Michael was unable to keep the annoyance from his expression as he observed her arms folded across her chest. The outside light next to the front door cast eerie shadows on Caroline's features, and Michael could tell she had come for battle.

"Well, it's about time you came home. I've been waiting for hours, Michael," she thundered tersely, her voice accusing and angry.

One of Michael's dark brows lifted. "Why were you waiting, Caroline? I thought you said all there was to say in town this morning." He walked past her and put the key in the lock. He turned the knob, pushed the door open, and walked inside after he flipped the light switch on.

Caroline followed. She could smell the bitch's perfume on him. "I came to apologize. I'm sorry I acted the way I did."

Michael tossed his head so he could see her over his shoulder. He snorted, and the sound erupted into a cynical chuckle. "Caroline, you've never been sorry a day in your life for anything you did."

"Michael, I've come all this way to offer you a sincere apology, and all you do is mock me." She was so angry she wanted to scratch his eyes out, but it would not gain her what she wanted. Her intention was to hold onto him, if possible.

Michael picked up a stack of mail tossed on the table earlier. "Your apology isn't necessary, Caroline. Just go home. It's late." He sorted through the mail, not really seeing it, but using it as a diversion.

Caroline inched closer to Michael, her eyes imploring him to hear what she had to say. When she was within reach, she laid a hand upon his arm. When he made no effort to withdraw, she threw her arms up around his neck. "I love you, Michael. I was wrong to

act the way I did. I know you have the right to see anyone you want.”

Michael took a deep breath. He felt completely indifferent to Caroline. He stood with his hands loosely hanging by his side, his face etched in mockery of what Caroline was saying. His whole attitude yearned to push her away, to rid himself of her arms clinging around his neck. Feeling, however, that perhaps he did owe her some measure of courtesy, he simply tried to reason with her.

“Caroline, I never intended to hurt you, but you knew from the beginning there were no strong ties between us.”

“That’s not so, Michael,” she cried out, nuzzling her face against his cheek. “We’ve been seeing each other for a year now. I love you. What exactly did you expect to happen in that length of time?”

He raised his arms and grasped her shoulders, gently pushing her away from him. “It’s no good, Caroline. Whatever was between us is over. You have to let it go and move on.”

“You wouldn’t say that if you hadn’t just come from *her*,” she shouted, anger rising in her voice even as she tried to hide it from him.

“Where I’ve been is none of your business, Caroline!” he replied calmly, putting a chair between them, his hands pressed tightly against the back. “Just go home. I have to get some sleep.”

“Can’t we just talk, Michael?” Her voice was high-pitched and harsh.

Michael shook his head. “There’s absolutely nothing for us to talk about. Look, we have enjoyed some times together, but I have never deceived you. I’ve made you no promises, no commitments, and now it’s finished.”

Her facial features contorted into a snarl. “Finished like hell, you son of a bitch! You have been with her all evening, haven’t

you? Did you sleep with her? No,” she said raising her hand, “don’t tell me. I know you damn well did. Her perfume and scent is clinging to you.” She broke into a torrent of tears, and crumpled to her knees, hoping to draw some sympathy from him.

Michael looked at her dejectedly. Walking over to her, he lifted her by her arms to a standing position. She fell against him, throwing her arms about his neck again. “Michael, I know you care about me. You have made love to me, and touched and held me. How can you do that without having some feelings for me?”

“Caroline after what you told me on the phone yesterday, I don’t see how you can feel anything for me except revulsion. What was the term you used, my *hand pawing at you*? How in the hell do you think that makes a man feel? Do you think I’d ever want to touch you again?”

“I didn’t mean it. You know how I am when I am upset. I always say things I don’t mean. But I love you, and I know you still care for me.”

“I care for you, Caroline, but it’s not the kind of caring you want from me, and I just can’t give you anything else. It is just not there. It never was.”

A cold sneer rose from her lips to her eyes. “Was she better than me, Michael? I have heard men say they all feel alike once you’re inside. Was hers any better than mine?”

“Get out, Caroline,” he ordered, taking her arm and moving her toward the door. “Your words repulse me,” he added venomously.

She swirled about and began pounding his chest. “I want let you get away with this you son of a bitch. You’ve used me, and I’ll find some way to make you pay.”

He grabbed her wrists, holding them to stop her attack.

“I hate you, Michael Matheson, for using me like you did. I hate you, you son of a bitch!”

In a calm voice, he tried to reason with her. “Caroline, if you will recall, it was you who always came over here and offered yourself to me. I never, not even once, attempted to take you to bed except when you initiated it. You need to ask yourself who used who. I thought we were mutually agreeable on the sex part, so how was I to know you didn’t enjoy it. Do you think I would ever touch you again, knowing how you really feel?”

“I never said I didn’t want any part of it.”

“Isn’t that what you’re saying now? How could I possibly have used you, if it’s what you wanted?”

“Well, you know what I mean.”

“No, I don’t know what you mean. I do not think I ever really have. Your feelings change as swiftly as your temper, and frankly, I have felt its brunt once too often. Go home, Caroline. There’s nothing else I can say to you.”

“You’ll pay for this, Michael. I swear you’ll pay,” she threatened, and stomped out the door, slamming it behind her as hard as she could.

Michael locked the door, and let out a long breathy sigh. He truly hoped tonight would finish it. He just was not up to any further battles with Caroline.

Going to his kitchen, he took the bottle of bourbon from the cabinet and poured a couple of fingers into the glass. He turned it up and downed it all at once, following it with some water. The mood from earlier disintegrated with Caroline’s untimely visit. The stupidity of it all, he thought now, it wasn’t the first time he and Caroline had done battle. She had attacked him with verbal accusations and abuses frequently without provocation. Why he had put up with it as long as he had, he did not know. Every one of his friends encouraged him to end it, and fool that he was he simply let things go on as they were.

His thoughts flitted back to the motel room, to Rochelle, to her draped figure on the bed in one of her long gowns, her auburn-gold hair cascading about her head on the pillow, the vision easing the unrest that had raised his blood pressure.

He took a hot shower, brushed his teeth and went to bed; the tumbling thoughts in his head slow to bow to sleep. Just before he fell sleep, the clock registered less than three hours before the alarm would go off. He would feel like hell, knowing he had a busy day ahead of him.

MICHAEL STRUGGLED OUT of peaceful slumber at the sound of his alarm. With great effort, he climbed out of bed, and splashed cold water on his face, slowly coming awake.

At six-thirty, he called Rochelle.

Since she was a slow riser, she was barely out of the shower when Michael knocked on her door. With a towel wrapped about her torso, she called through the door. “Michael?”

“Yes, it’s me, Chelle.”

She opened the door and let him in. “I’m sorry I’m not ready.”

His answer was to take her in his arms. “Have I told you how wonderful you were last night?” he asked, gazing deeply into her eyes.

“No, but I think I like hearing it,” she said, smiling up at him. “Did I tell you how wonderful you were?”

“Did you ever! You made my whole world light up.”

She smiled up at him, pleased with his reply.

“Go get dressed, or I might forget there’s a good reason why we need to get out of here shortly.”

“I wanted to be ready when you got here, but I’ve always been one of those people who try to grab another five minutes of sleep,

then another, and another, until I simply forget to get up. If you are in a hurry, you can go without me. I can walk and catch up later.”

“Take your time. I’ll wait, but I do have to go to the bank this morning when we finish breakfast. I also plan to take you to the realtor’s office to see if Ruth or John Shipley can show you around. When you finish, stop by the bank. Your car should be delivered by then.”

She chose a pair of dark slacks and a sleeveless blouse with delicate buttons. She left the top button undone so the opening gave the barest hint of cleavage. She brushed her hair until it was shiny and fluffy, put on a touch of foundation, mascara and lipstick, and was ready to go after sliding her feet into a pair of sandals.

“That only took you fifteen minutes,” Michael said, looking at his watch.

“But I rushed, and I feel as though I’m forgetting something.”

“You can come back if you need to,” he said, touching the point of his finger into the cleavage where the unbuttoned blouse gaped open. “Nice blouse.” He smiled, as his eyes sluiced from her head to her toe, appreciating how well she looked no matter what she wore.

Rochelle looked at him. He was dressed in a charcoal suit, his tall muscular form seeming to have an air of authority this morning. He was incredibly handsome dressed as he was, but remembering him naked, she decided there was no comparison. Last night he had belonged to her. Today his dark suit reminded her that he did have other obligations of which she had no part.

Michael ushered Rochelle toward the door after she grabbed her purse. “Are you hungry?”

“Famished, but my habit is to breakfast at lunch time.”

“A late sleeper, huh?”

“Fashioned from a lifestyle of late nights that was a habit of my husband and his friends.”

Michael felt a stab of jealousy. The very thought of her husband holding her like he had done last night brought bitter bile to his throat. Jealousy had never been part of his nature, and for the first time, he had just seen the green-eyed monster. He opened the car door, smelling her perfume as she lowered herself to the seat.

“Did you sleep well last night?” he inquired when he slid under the steering wheel.

Glancing toward him, she sent him a shy, captivating smile. “Like a baby.”

An impudent grin curved the corners of his lips.

“Don’t say it!” she interrupted his thoughts before he could say whatever was lurking there.

“I was just going to say I’m glad you had a good night,” he grinned.

“Did you sleep well?”

Caroline’s face jumped to his mind. If he looked as haggard as he felt, she would know he was lying if he said yes. “Wonderful,” he said.

“Good! I didn’t even have my usual nightmare last night.”

His impudent grin was in place again. “We’ll just have to keep administering the same dosage of sleeping potion as last night.”

She cuffed him on the sleeve with the palm of her hand. “You never take me seriously,” she chided with a chuckle.

He crushed her against him. “Oh, but you’re wrong. I take you very seriously.”

Chapter Twenty-One

The restaurant was only a coin's throw from the motel, and Michael pulled into a parking space in front. With his usual good manners, he went around to open the car door for Rochelle. At the same time, an unshaved fellow with a two-day growth of beard, who was about Michael's age, was heading toward the restaurant door. He was dressed causally in a pair of jeans and T-shirt that hung loose outside his pants, which appeared soiled with aged dirt and grime. When he saw Michael, he paused and stood staring at him with a not too friendly expression on his face.

"Matheson, I can't believe you're still around these parts." The man spoke in a rather taunting voice. "I thought you would still be locked up," he remarked, a cigarette dangling from his thin lips.

"Wayne, we said all we needed saying a long time ago. Why don't you just go crawl back in the hole where you have been hiding. No one wants you around here."

"What's wrong, Matheson, you afraid I might end up finding where you hid the gun?"

"No, Wayne. I'm afraid I might end up breaking your skull and having to go to jail for it. Now if you'll excuse me, I have much better things to do than pass time the time of day with you."

Rochelle felt very uncomfortable with the conversation going on between Michael and the man as she climbed from the car, waiting while Michael pushed the door shut behind her. With his arm protectively encircling her, they headed toward the restaurant door. The man named Wayne pulled the door open for them.

"Nice piece you got there, Matheson. Is she as good as your step mom?"

With the speed of lightning, Michael grabbed Wayne's shirtfront, drew back his fist, and sent it crashing into the man's face. Wayne went rollicking backwards where he lost his balance

and fell flat on his butt. He wiped his hand across his bloodied lip and nose, and struggled to get back up.

“I’m warning you, Wayne, just keep the hell away from me!” Michael cursed.

The ruckus brought several people hurrying from inside the restaurant. The proprietor was first on the scene. “Wayne, if you were planning on coming in my restaurant, you can just forget it. Your kind is not welcome here. Just go on about your business now, or I’ll call Sheriff Rollins to put you on your way.”

“Like hell! You need to call him to come lock Matheson’s ass up. The man just assaulted me.” He had finally made it to his feet, and he edged toward Michael, his fists balled so tightly the knuckles were white.

Two big burly men, looking like they might be truckers who lifted weights on the side, stepped forward. Their heights even dwarfed Michael who stood slightly above six feet, and their muscular proportions were awesome, especially when viewed standing together. Moving in, with one on either side of the man called Wayne, each grabbed an arm and lifted him two feet off the ground so his sneaker-clad feet dangled in the air. “Now, Wayne, me and Joe here don’t think you want to start trouble this morning. Tell us where your car is and we’ll help you to it, because if you don’t get the hell out of here, you ain’t going to be able to.”

Either Wayne knew the men, or he knew they were serious. He pointed his bleeding nose in the direction of a dirty pickup truck, and the two burly men carried him to it, dumping him unceremoniously beneath the wheel. They stood there until he started the engine, backed out on the street, and headed away from town.

Michael took a handkerchief from his pocket, and wiped the blood from his bloody fist. He glanced toward Rochelle who stood

next to the car, hugging her arms about her chest. With a faint shrug, he walked to where she stood and touched her upper arm with his hand.

“You okay?” he asked, his grim expression softening.

Rochelle nodded, and then reached for his hand. “I’m okay, but are you?” She inspected his hand.

“It’s okay,” he replied, tugging his fingers from her grasp.

He escorted Rochelle inside the restaurant where the smell of fried eggs and bacon clung to the air. The pulse at Michael’s throat throbbed rapidly, and his jaws clenched so tightly his face appeared carved in hard marble.

Sally was waiting with two cups of steaming coffee when they came in, and she followed them to a table. “Michael, are you all right?” she asked, setting the coffee down and handing them menus.

“Yeah, sure,” he grumbled, wanting to forget the fracas. He could only imagine what kind of impression all these confrontations were having on Rochelle. Yesterday it was Caroline, and today it was Wayne. Every day presented a new encounter, or so it must seem to her.

The two big musclemen came in and stopped at Michael and Rochelle’s table. “Mike, you okay?” asked the one with the receding hairline.

“Yeah, I’m fine, Curly,” he said, examining his fist where the skin was slightly torn on the knuckles. “Thanks, fellows,” he said with a little chuckle that belied the anger tightening his brows.

“You gave him a good one, Mike,” the one called Joe said and laughed. “I just wish you would have hit him more squarely in the nose and took off an inch or two. You’d better soak that hand in something or it’ll get mighty sore,” he added as though he knew exactly what he was talking about from experience. Then, glancing at Rochelle and giving a polite nod, he added, “Ma’am, sorry for the

inconvenience.” The two men went on past to their table where their cold, half-finished breakfast awaited them.

Sally came hurrying over with a warm towel for Michael to use for his scraped fists. Michael thanked her and proceeded to clean away the blood.

Throughout the entire incident, Rochelle had been an observer, albeit, a tense one. It was not hard to discern that some sort of difficulty had occurred between Michael and Wayne. She also gathered Michael’s animosity was more intense than Wayne’s was. She watched Michael surreptitiously, trying not to stare, and wondered what his story was. He had completely evaded sharing any personal information with her, and she knew little more about his life now than she had the first time she walked into his bank; notwithstanding his affair with Caroline.

Sally took their orders, touching Rochelle comfortingly on her shoulder. “Don’t be upset,” she said, seeing the worried look in Rochelle’s eyes. “Wayne has always been a trouble maker.”

One thing was certain in this little town, Rochelle decided; everyone was on Michael’s side. Yesterday, the confrontation with Caroline and friends had come to his defense. Today, it was with Wayne, and no one faulted Michael even though he had belted the guy. Wayne’s remark *was* risqué, however. It caused Rochelle to wonder if Michael was offended on her behalf, or his stepmother’s. If it was the stepmother, what dark secrets were capable of bringing on such a violent response as Michael demonstrated?

When Sally went away, Michael lowered his chin, his mood very solemn as he stared into his coffee, keeping his jaws clamped tight. Rochelle gazed at him fondly, but an uncomfortable silence filled the space between them. The noise about them resumed, but Michael seemed absorbed by more than his and Wayne’s

confrontation. Rochelle wanted the atmosphere normal again, and chose to try to break the dark mood.

“Michael, I’m not going to ask what that was all about because I know you won’t tell me unless you want to. If you don’t mind, however, I would like to know how your hand is and if you need to have a doctor look at it,” she said solemnly.

He reached across the table and took her hand in his bruised one. “I’m fine. The doctor can’t do anything except recommend an ice pack.”

“I bet that guy you belted will need a doctor. His bloody nose and busted lip looked bad.”

He looked a little embarrassed. “Rochelle, I swear to you I don’t go around punching people in the face.”

“For someone who doesn’t go around punching people in the face, you sure did a number on that guy. I’d hate to have his nose when he wakes up in the morning.”

“I’d hate for you to have his nose, too,” Michael chuckled. “Now watch your manners and eat your breakfast,” he said, seeing Sally heading toward them with plates of steaming ham and eggs.

The breakfast was delicious despite all the commotion preceding it. They did not linger over breakfast, however, because Michael planned to open the bank at eight for the employees.

SEVERAL BANK EMPLOYEES STOOD waiting at the door to get in, when Michael pulled into his parking space. Michael seemed not to notice when the people turned to gaze at them. Rochelle did, though. She could feel busy eyes studying her, and it made her uncomfortable, knowing they were speculating on whom she was, where she was from, and what her affiliation to Michael was. She wished she could just stay in the car, had even suggested it, but Michael insisted otherwise. She pasted a feigned smile upon her

face, and with shoulders squared, she followed alongside Michael, shy beneath the blanket of gazes.

At least a half dozen people waited and most called good morning in chorus. Michael returned the greeting and unlocked the bank door. He took Rochelle inside with him while he shut off the alarm. Then he went back and let the employees in. Finally, he took her to his office.

“There are some magazines on the table over there. I may be a little while, so just relax. The restroom is across the hall if you need it.” He automatically reverted from his personal charisma to his business persona as he considered his responsibilities.

Rochelle nodded, and sat down, watching his tall, lithe figure in his fine tailor-made suit, as he left his office. He closed the door behind him, and Rochelle suddenly experienced the *déjà vu* of being ensconced in Tobias’s mansion with no place to go and nothing to do, while she drowned in boredom. Just as she had done then, for lack of anything better to do, she allowed her mind to wander.

She was a young girl again, in a state of shock after crashing into a car, and then encountering a man with snake eyes that later slithered all over her when she and he whiled away the afternoon in a disco club. In the following days, he swept her off her feet, became her prince in shining armor, and offered her a world of bright lights and big spending that turned her young girlish head far afield. In those early days, Tobias seemed to adore her, finding her enchanting, even making her feel she truly was in a fairyland life where everything was fresh, new, and exciting. Then they both started changing. Tobias’s drinking habit worsened until his temperament was like a short fused time bomb. He snapped at Rochelle without reason, but worst of all, demanded sexual acts that repulsed and gagged her.

Eventually she found the busy nightlife, the parties and social

life taxing. It was a purposeless and pretentious way of life for a group of people who had nothing better to do. When the bubble finally broke, the essence of what Rochelle once found pleasure in was like a sun going behind a dark cloud. The thrill vanished, and her prince became her tormentor, a monster who abused and regulated every minute of her life.

She looked about Michael's office, noticing the thick carpet on the floors, the high ceilings with dark wood paneling on the walls, the framed watercolors of cowboys, horses, and ranch hands. Dominating the wall behind his desk was a framed print of a tall building of glass and steel in an interesting architectural design, uniquely modern and beautiful. In the corner, behind his desk, flourished a tall, well-tended plant, such as were on the lawns of Tobias's estate. The thought brought on another rush of memories.

The manicured grounds where she had found peace from the pain, humiliation, and fear Tobias frequently inflicted, had become her escape. She used to spend hours roaming about the lawns and gardens. Other times she sunned by the crystal blue pool, often swimming as many laps as she could as part of an exercise program for her otherwise idle life. Late night partying, dining on foods rich with butter, sauces, calories and fat grams, and sleeping to nearly noon, weren't exactly pastimes conducive to a healthy body; therefore, she tried to make up for it by exercising—the only pastime she had that wasn't monitored by Tobias. At least, she had not thought so, until she learned the security cameras watched her wherever she was on the estate, except in their bedroom. Tobias's possessiveness was all-inclusive, and monitoring every move she made was part of his sick obsessive nature.

Would he ever give up the search for her? There was a time when he might have wanted her back because he truly seemed to adore her. That seemed a lifetime ago. Now, she was sure he felt

only contempt and would be satisfied with nothing less than putting her in her grave.

A knock on the door startled Rochelle. She turned in her chair in time to see a woman open Michael's office door and peek inside. "Miss Rathbone, can I bring you some coffee?" she asked politely.

"Oh, no thank you. I'm fine," Rochelle replied.

"Mr. Matheson said he wouldn't be much longer."

"Thank you."

The door closed quietly, and Rochelle returned to her thoughts, now turning to last night. A warm peachy feeling spread over her, her body thrilling to the remembered touch of Michael's hands and lips. He drew passions from her she thought were lost, and in a sense, he gave her back her womanhood that Tobias nearly destroyed.

She was so involved in her reflections that Michael came into his office unnoticed by her. When he touched her on the shoulder, she could feel the rush of blood to her face after he caught her in self-absorbed thoughts about their lovemaking.

"Were you taking a nap?" he asked, running his hand beneath her long hair to slide along the base of her neck.

"Resting," she replied, smiling up at him.

Taking her hands, he pulled her from the chair. He put his arms about her, pulled her close to him, just holding her like that for several seconds.

"Are you ready to go?" he asked, releasing her.

She nodded her head.

They left the bank with many pairs of inquisitive eyes following their movements. One could nearly imagine employees waiting until Michael and Rochelle were out the door so they could discuss the latest gossip about their boss and the wealthy redhead.

Chapter Twenty-Two

John and Ruth Shipley greeted Michael cordially when he and Rochelle went into the real estate office. Both were middle-aged, friendly, and eager to show houses to Rochelle. John Shipley expressed surprise to see Michael farther away from his bank than at the restaurant across the street, and the insinuation brought a blush to Rochelle's cheeks.

"It's only a temporary reprieve. Even now, duty calls," Michael told him, and turned Rochelle over to the Shipleys.

Ruth took Rochelle in hand, and with a book of listings, began showing them to her before Michael was out the door.

"Come by the bank when you're finished. Your car should be there by then," Michael told her, holding her gaze a moment longer before leaving.

Rochelle smiled and nodded. Focusing her attention, she gave serious concentration to the listings. Eventually, she found three that might meet the requirements of what she wanted. Ruth hustled her into her car, and drove to each of the houses. The first one was too far away from town, the deciding factor against it. The second one was a two bedroom, and the living area was much too small. The third one seemed nice enough, but the neighborhood did not appeal to Rochelle. She sighed with regret.

"There's a couple more I can show you. Exactly what kind of home are you interested in, large, small, comfortable?"

At that same moment, they passed a beautiful home as elegant as any Rochelle had ever seen. The gorgeously manicured lawn spread over a spacious area with shrubs closely clipped and shaped.

“Does anyone live in that house?” Rochelle blurted out before Ruth passed it by.

Ruth pulled over to the curb, backed up until she was in front of the house. “No one lives there presently, but I don’t believe it’s for sale. There’s a possibility you might rent it.”

“I’d like to see it if I may. Is it furnished?”

“It’s furnished. I’ll call John and see if he can get the key.” She had a two-way radio in the car and called him on it.

Rochelle was out of the car in a blink and heading toward the house. It was large, elegant, and stately. It was a two-story structure with tall shuttered windows, a long gallery spreading across the front with the roof supported by pillars. It resembled homes of the old south, but its spaciousness was the attractive characteristic that impressed Rochelle.

Ruth joined her after her husband agreed to bring the key.

“John won’t be long, so we can explore the grounds while we wait. The house has been vacant for some time now, but the owner keeps it up. I believe he was in the process of remodeling the kitchen.”

“Why doesn’t the owner live here?” Rochelle asked, looking at the large brick patio in the rear of the house with lots of shrubbery and plants to create a lovely landscape.

“The owner built his own home. This one belonged to his parents.”

“And where are the parents?”

“They both are dead.” Ruth was hesitant to tell her the house belonged to Michael, and that his parents had lived there. There had been so much bad publicity surrounding the house that she thought it best to say as little as possible.

“I believe I hear John now,” she remarked, turning to go toward the front of the house. “You just keep looking and I’ll be right back.”

“Surely, she doesn’t want this house,” John Shipley said to his wife.

“It’s the only one she’s shown any interest in. Did you speak to Michael about it?”

“He said he would rather rent it, but if she’s intent on buying, he’ll sell.”

“Did he say how much?”

“He wants Two Hundred and Twenty-Five Thousand.”

“It’s well worth that and more with all the land, but there aren’t too many people around here who can afford that or would even buy it if they could afford it because of its history.”

“Can she afford it?” John asked, nodding his head toward Rochelle.

“Gossip has it that she’s very wealthy. Anyway, I doubt Michael would offer to sell if he didn’t think she was financially capable of buying, and I imagine if anyone should know, he would.”

“This house was in his family for many years, but I suppose it’s become a burden with taxes, insurance and upkeep. Michael doesn’t need it, and his brother doesn’t want it.”

“There’s the matter of the violent deaths that occurred here. I have an obligation to tell her, but you know how opposed Michael is about people discussing anything involving his father and stepmother’s deaths.”

“I told Michael she would have to be told, and he said be as brief as possible. He’d rather she didn’t know all the details.”

“You know she’s going to ask questions?”

“Then you will simply have to refer her to Michael,” John said, turning to leave.

Rochelle came from around the house and met Ruth at the front door. Ruth unlocked it and they both stepped inside.

The interior was spacious, richly designed, elegant and well maintained. The house was completely furnished, and when Rochelle lifted some of the dust covers from the furniture, she saw upholstered sofas and chairs done in rich fabrics, and beautifully carved rosewood tables that were old and probably priceless. As they toured the dining room, a library, a study, a den with a full bathroom, a large breakfast room that joined the kitchen, Rochelle had nearly made up her mind to buy the place.

As Ruth had said, the kitchen was undergoing remodeling. Old cabinets, stored against one wall were due for replacement with new ones that were more modern and made of dark pine. The new floor made of eggshell ceramic tiles looked recently finished. The rest of the kitchen shone with decorative ceramic tiles between the lower and upper cabinets. The soffit above the cabinets, papered with a lovely leaf pattern design, added color beneath the generous ceiling lights.

Rochelle liked the house, liked the furnishings, liked the location close to town and the interstate, and visualized herself living there. She and Ruth went upstairs.

“There are five bedrooms upstairs and two have their own full, elaborate baths with tubs and showers,” Ruth explained as they made their tour. “The other three bedrooms share a bath, but it’s just as luxurious as the first two.”

Rochelle began looking in each room, impressed by each and the delightful décor of expensive furnishings. When she turned the knob on the last door at the end of the hallway, it would not budge. She turned to Ruth. “Do you have the key to this room?”

“Yes, but there’s something I must tell you before I show it to you,” she stated hesitantly sliding the key in the lock and turning it.

“This room has been closed up for a good reason. It is the master bedroom and once belonged to the owner’s parents. They were killed in this room.”

Rochelle gasped. “Killed? How were they killed? Why? What happened?”

“The people were shot while they slept. Their murderer has never been caught.”

“Didn’t the police have any idea who it might be?” Rochelle asked with shock.

“They made an arrest, and there was a trial, but because there was no evidence against the man, the defense cast so much doubt on the prosecution’s case the jury found him not guilty. Anyway, no one believes the person charged was guilty anyway. I believe most people call it a trumped up charge.”

“Who does this house belong to, Ruth?”

Ruth hung her head and watched the toe of her shoe poke at an imaginary object. “James Matheson owned this house.”

“James Matheson, the banker? James Matheson, Michael’s father?” A flash of remembrance crossed her brow. She had been in the house the time she had visited with her parents. Being a young girl, she had found nothing there to interest her; thus, the reason she had forgotten about it.

“Yes, Michael’s father owned this house. I didn’t think it was my place to tell you since you know Michael. I’m sorry I had to do so.”

“Who was charged with the murders?” Rochelle asked, holding the doorknob of the door to the room.

“Michael was, but no one in this town believes he did it. He was, unfortunately, in the wrong place at the right time.”

“Who is Wayne?” Rochelle asked, recalling what Wayne had said to Michael that morning.

“Wayne was a gardener and handyman here.”

“Why do he and Michael dislike each other so much?”

“Miss Rathbone, my husband and I have great respect for Michael, as we did for his father. I really do not feel it is up to me to tell you these things. Perhaps Michael can...”

“Is it a secret to the people in this town?” Rochelle asked softly.

“No, everyone knows. It’s no secret.”

“Then will you please tell me? I am still interested in buying this house. I don’t see any reason why my realtor can’t disclose the history of the house, and if a bit of information on the people who lived here is accidentally mentioned, then I don’t see anything wrong with that either.”

She turned the doorknob and walked into the room, gazing at a king-sized bed, his and her chests, and a dresser and mirror. It also had a sitting area with a small French sofa and two matching chairs surrounding a coffee table. All the furniture was in a warm white, complemented by a thick, dark blue carpet. The room apparently had received a thorough cleaning, and nothing appeared disturbed by the violence that had occurred there.

“I suppose you’re right, but I hope you will consider my confidences a private matter. Michael might not appreciate me telling you.”

“Tell me about Wayne and Michael. Why do they dislike each other?”

“The senior Mr. Matheson remarried after Michael’s mother died with cancer. He married a woman much younger than him and word had it that she wasn’t... well, she wasn’t a highly moral person. Gossip had it that she was sleeping with Wayne when Mr. Matheson went off to work. The police investigated Wayne, could not prove anything against him, so they went after Michael.

“You see, Michael had come here from San Francisco for his father’s birthday, and when Mr. and Mrs. Matheson were shot and killed Michael was at the other end of the hall, asleep in his old bedroom.”

“But did something happen between Michael and Wayne?”

“Michael caught Wayne and Tina downstairs in his father’s study before the killings took place. Tina was James Matheson’s wife, Michael’s stepmother. He didn’t want to hurt his father by telling him, yet, he felt compelled to do so. His father refused to listen. People said Tina had Mr. Matheson so twisted around her little finger that he didn’t want to know her faults or infidelities.

“Anyway, Michael told Wayne to get off the property. Wayne refused to leave, saying James Matheson hired him, and he would not leave unless James Matheson fired him. He and Michael got into a terrible argument. They even threw punches at each other, but Tina called the police, who came and broke it up.

“Mr. Matheson did fire Wayne, and it came out at the trial that Wayne forced himself past Mr. Matheson into the house where he found Tina and demanded that she leave with him. The housekeeper later testified in court that she had never seen any man as angry as Wayne when Tina laughed in his face and told him he had lost his mind. Mr. Matheson tried to get him out of the house, finally calling the police when Wayne kept after Tina to leave with him. The police made Wayne leave after he collected his things from the apartment above the garage.

“It was about three days later that both Mr. Matheson and Tina were shot and killed right here in this room,” she said, nodding toward the bed that was covered with a beautiful dark blue comforter and a matching bed skirt.

“Wayne had more motive than anyone else. Why wasn’t he investigated more thoroughly?”

“Wayne told the police he’d caught Michael and Tina having sex together, said they’d been having an affair off and on since Tina married Michael’s father, so it became Michael’s word against Wayne’s. Since Tina had made a few trips to San Francisco where Michael lived at the time, the circumstantial evidence started adding up against him.”

“Were they having an affair?”

“I would bet my life that they weren’t. Michael’s mother instilled sound morals in her children. Michael’s conscience wouldn’t allow him to do such a thing with his father’s wife.

“Anyway, as it finally turned out, the police decided Michael not only had a motive, he also had the opportunity. The motive was that when he told his father about Tina and Wayne having sex, his father was furious with Michael and threatened to change his will and disinherit him. The housekeeper testified to that story, and it seemed that Michael had no defense against the charges made by the police.

“The night it happened, the police received an anonymous tip that someone had murdered the senior Matheson and his wife, and when the police arrived, they found Michael still asleep in his bed. He didn’t know anything about what had happened until the police woke him. Even a fool would not have killed his parents, then gone back to bed and fallen asleep.

“Miss Rathbone, it was terrible for poor Michael. He has been through hell and back again. But everybody in this town loves him and knows he could never have done what he was accused of doing.”

“The gun shots must have been extremely loud. How could Michael sleep through that?”

“Well, like I said, Michael came home for his father’s birthday. Mind you, they never celebrated just one day as most folks do—the

first day's celebration was for family, the second for employees and associates, and the third for close friends. There was too much drinking that third night and Michael admitted later that he had been upset with his father and drank far more than was his nature. One of the bank employees, Zimmerman, I believe, had to help him upstairs to his room, which is at the far end of the hall from the master suite. He passed out, and that's why he didn't hear the sound of the gunshots."

"Is the case still open? Are the police still searching for the killer?" Rochelle asked, finding it hard to believe that the police might even consider Michael as a suspect.

"Since Michael was tried and found not guilty, the police have put no further effort into finding who it might be. I understand Michael keeps encouraging the police chief and the sheriff's department to pursue the investigation, but if they are, I haven't heard about it. They never did find the gun used to kill the Mathesons, and without a weapon, I hear it is hard to make a charge stick without hard evidence. They only had circumstantial evidence against Michael at the trial. That's why the jury found him not guilty."

"Did the police search for the gun?"

"They searched every possible place here on the premises where a gun might be hidden. The housekeeper, who had to clean up the mess made by the police, said they turned everything upside down, and inside out, both in and outside the house. Not a single place was left undisturbed, she reported."

"Then it stands to reason whoever killed them must have taken the gun with them. How could they possibly suspect Michael when he was still in bed asleep? Further, who was the anonymous caller who reported the killings? Did they ever question that?"

"They did, but nothing ever came of it."

“Poor Michael must have been devastated.”

“He was indeed, and for a number of reasons. His brother didn’t know who or what to believe so he turned against Michael. Then when the police jailed Michael he wasn’t allowed bail because he had a thriving business in San Francisco and they were afraid he would jump bail. His business failed miserably during the time of his incarceration without him to run it, and finally, he gave up the business, sold out everything. I don’t know if it was due to financial loss, or if he simply chose to run his father’s bank. Larry, Michael’s brother, wanted no part of it.”

“What kind of business was Michael in?”

“He was an architect, and a very good one, I understand. Although San Francisco was his base, rumors were that he was getting clients from all around the country, and he was making lots of money for what he did. He was into major developments such as high-rises, billion-dollar commercial projects and more, and he had a large team who worked with him. At the time of his arrest, he had been actively preparing to set up his own construction company so he not only drew the plans, but implemented them as well. Michael is a very intelligent man, but everyone feels he is not happy with what he’s doing now. He made a lot of money in San Francisco, and many people felt he was destined to go far, until the deaths of his father and Tina and he was put through the whole horrible ordeal of being charged for their murder.”

“I take it, you strongly believe in his innocence,” Rochelle said, pulling the door of the bedroom closed behind her.

“The entire town believes in Michael’s innocence. He is one of the most respected and well-liked persons around. When he was younger, before he went away to college, he was always doing something to help people. He would mow the yard for some old lady, baby-sit someone’s animal while they went on vacation, fix a

leaky faucet for someone he knew couldn't afford a plumber, and dozens of other things. Never was there a shortage of people who needed him to help them, and Michael did it in the best of spirits. He likes helping people, and it has earned him a great deal of respect and many friends. Since he's been running the bank, he's made some fairly risky loans to friends of his that no other banker would have touched, but they paid off and Michael came out ahead, not only financially, but also by gaining some strong friendships.

"Everybody still believes it was Wayne who did the killings, but it seems we'll never know the truth."

"Where does Michael live?"

"He built his own house, a beautiful ranch style structure just on the outskirts of town. It's in a wonderful location, and some say it's the only thing Michael cherishes since the death of his father."

Ruth noticed Rochelle was staring at her with a strange look on her face. She felt panic growing inside her, fearing she might have said something to ruin the friendship that seemed to have sprouted between Michael and Rochelle. "If I've said something..." she began.

Rochelle's expression, however, proved to be a thoughtful one. "Ruth, I'd like to buy this house. Please draw up the necessary papers. Do you know who's doing the work on the kitchen?"

"Michael is doing the remodeling."

"Michael?"

"He likes working with his hands. I think he enjoys it as a hobby when he's not working at the bank."

Rochelle thought of Michael's hands that bore none of the softness of a banker's hands. She remembered the calluses on his fingers, and now felt, after Ruth's explanation, that she truly knew Michael Matheson and understood the emotional scars he was reluctant to expose.

Ruth still worried that she might have said too much. “Miss Rathbone, Michael is one of the finest men I’ve ever known. No one is more respected in this town than he is. If I have said anything that concerns you, please say so. I would not have you leave here thinking anything bad about him.”

Rochelle regarded her with understanding. “Everything you’ve said merely confirms what I knew all ready. Michael really is a very special man.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

Rochelle asked Ruth to drop her off at the bank where a bright, shiny new blue sedan sat in the parking lot. She smiled, happy to have her own transportation even though after five years of not having driven a car, she would have to learn all over again. The car would allow her greater sense of freedom to come and go as she chose. Windy Point was quickly becoming home as she established roots with her car, a home, and... she was thinking of Michael.

Dare she hope for a normal life, considering Tobias was always in the background of her thoughts and fears?

When Rochelle went into the bank, she looked around for Michael. Not seeing him, she inquired at the nearest teller window. “I need to see Mr. Matheson, please.”

“Yes, Miss Rathbone. Just a second, please.” The teller picked up the phone, pushed a button, and spoke briefly into the phone to announce Rochelle. “Mr. Matheson said for you to come to his office.”

“Hi,” she said when he opened the door for her. “Your tellers are very courteous. They’re even calling me Miss Rathbone now.”

He trained an amused grin on her. “Don’t laud them too much. I hear they are making bets about us. We have become reason for a great deal of speculation. I hope you don’t mind.”

“It sounds innocent enough. I think it is rather amusing. Everyone treats me very special after seeing you accompany me these several times. Why would I mind that?” She gave him a warm intimate smile.

Michael closed the door behind her, and recklessly drew her against his hard chest, the professionalism temporarily put aside. “You feel so good,” he said, brushing his lips against her cheek. Then as she turned her gaze up to meet his blue eyes, he covered her lips with his in an exploration of the familiar territory he had so enjoyed last night.

When he let her go, Rochelle’s knees were weak. Taking a big breath, she lowered herself in the chair next to his desk.

“Did you find a house?” he asked with mild interest.

Before she could answer, his phone rang, and he lifted it to his ear.

“Yes,” he said, his attention seeming to perk up at hearing the voice of the person calling. He listened for at least two full minutes before he said anything else, and when he did, all he said was, “I see.” Then he listened some more, his proud face oddly composed until it transformed with a deep, inexplicable regret. “I see,” he said again. Then, “Thanks for telling me.” He hung up the phone.

Rochelle saw the tiredness in his face, the regret in his eyes, and suddenly she wanted to give comfort. She rose from her chair and went to him. “Michael, is something wrong?” She laid her hand upon his arm.

He turned away from her, oddly distant considering he just held and kissed her. “I understand you learned a great deal about me today,” he stated with an injured air.

The remark sounded accusing.

Rochelle flinched at his tone. When he turned to face her again, she saw he was angry and disturbed. “I suppose I did,” she maintained calmly.

“And?” It came out in a sharp retort, his eyes darkening with challenge.

“And what? What are you asking me?”

“I suppose you’ve formed a few opinions,” he accused brusquely.

He turned his back to her again, his attention seeming to take in the framed enlargement of the glass and steel building on his wall as if studying it. Rochelle went up behind him, reaching around to touch his arm. “Michael, I don’t know any more than everyone else in this town, and if you think it changes my opinion of you, then you’re wrong.”

He did an about face, nearly unbalancing her. His brows knitted close together. “I was charged with murder, Rochelle. Doesn’t that bother you?” His voice took on an edge of contempt, and Rochelle could not decide if it was toward her or the memories of his father and stepmother’s deaths, which brought him up on murder charges.

Rochelle stared at him, knowing she had done nothing to provoke such animosity. Why should he be so angry with her, displaying an attitude as if she betrayed him in some way?

Then recalling how evasive he had been to all her questions in the three days she had known him, she knew why he was angry. Ruth had furnished her with information that gave her a close look into his life, and to him it bordered on an invasion of his privacy. He could have been angry with Ruth for betraying his confidence, but he wasn’t. Instead, he was angry with Rochelle for knowing more than he wanted her to know.

“No, Michael, your having been charged with murder doesn’t

bother me, but I can see it bothers you.”

“Did she tell you I slept with my stepmother?”

Rochelle felt the blood rush to her head. Was it an admission or question? “No, she didn’t tell me that. She said Wayne accused you. Did you sleep with her, Michael? Is that why you’re so upset by my knowing?”

His lips curled, and his fine, proud features became corrupted by whatever venom boiled inside him. “Is that what you think?” he demanded, and his voice bore no resemblance to the tender man whose kiss she enjoyed just a few moments earlier.

She should have known what was happening inside him, should have suspected it right away since she had suffered from the same pain, anguish, and humiliation so many times herself. It was frustration turned to anger, and anger turned to hostility over circumstances that caused him to lose control of his life. She knew a person could never be free so long as they lived under any suspicion or threat—she was a good example of that. Even if a court of law did find Michael not guilty, until the police caught the real murderer, he would feel the weight of public opinion from now on—just as he was assuming that Rochelle believed the worst about him.

Rochelle should have understood, but at that moment, all she saw was his anger directed toward her and it hurt her feelings.

“I don’t think anything about you and your stepmother, Michael. Would it matter if I said I could never believe those things about you?”

She became quiet a second or two, and when he failed to reply, she continued. “This is obviously a bad time. If you’ll just give me my car key, I’ll leave you alone with your distorted view of what I think!”

He snatched the key from his pocket and threw it upon his desk, his eyes looking as dangerous as Tobias had looked many times.

Rochelle's face must have reflected her disappointment as she grabbed up the key and sped from his office, forcing herself to keep a lady-like pace through the bank lobby. She looked neither left nor right, but headed straight for the door that led to the parking lot to her new car.

Her hands were shaking, her mental state still precarious at best with all the drudgery of the past and fear of Tobias finding her. A sudden rain of angry tears blinded her as she started to put the key in the ignition. With an aggressive thrust, she shoved the key in the hole and turned it. The engine started up immediately, purring just as new engines were supposed to do. She put the gear in reverse and flew backwards—her actions reminiscent of the time when she had run into Tobias's car—unmindful that her foot was pressing on the gas pedal when she changed gears. She hit the brake, coming to a sudden stop that threw her forward then backward. As the car settled, she froze in her seat in a stiff upright pose, her face suddenly contorting into an exasperated expression with moisture clouding her eyes.

“Is there a problem, Miss,” a customer coming out of the bank asked after tapping on the car window.

Shamed by her display, Rochelle quickly brushed at her eyes and shook her head, feeling suddenly ridiculous. “No, no problem. This is a new car and I'm just trying to get used to it. Thank you,” she said, keeping her head turned aside to hide her tear-stained eyes.

With a shrug, the man gave her a sympathetic look and walked away.

In the meantime, her unskilled driving ability suddenly struck her as funny, and she burst out laughing. She imagined how she must appear to that kind old man while she tried to back her car out, bawling like a kid because she could not get the knack of it.

Finally, concentrating intently, she touched her foot to the pedal very gently, her other foot riding on the brake, and backed up at a snail's pace. After she safely backed up enough, she put the gear in forward, wheeled it around and continued to move at a snail's pace until she was out on the street. By the time she pulled in the parking space at the motel, she was breathing more normally again, and believing she might still know how to drive after all.

Her elation was terribly lacking, however, where her and Michael's confrontation was concerned.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Michael neither called nor tried to see Rochelle. Ruth Shipley didn't call her either, and it appeared the two of them were putting her on hold. Three days later, she called Ruth. "I was just calling about the house," she told Ruth after giving her name.

Ruth stretched the truth, and Rochelle recognized it right away. "Oh, Miss Rathbone, I've been meaning to call you. I've just been so busy..." She left the statement hanging.

"Has it been decided if I am to rent or buy?" Rochelle asked directly.

A tone of regret sounded in Ruth's voice. "I'm sorry, Miss Rathbone, Michael hasn't given me his decision yet. I really can't tell you anything. If you would like to look at other houses, I'll be glad to show you."

"No thanks. I'll just wait for his answer."

She felt wounded and betrayed. She resented Michael's standoff, and was determined not to put herself in his presence until he had the decency to call her. She knew he had breakfast at the

restaurant every morning between seven and eight. To avoid running into him, she purposely waited until ten to have a late breakfast, it enabling her to skip lunch. Then in the evening, she bought fast food and carried it back to the motel. Hibernating in the closed motel room the rest of the time, she either read or watched television to pass the time.

On the fifth day, she was having a second cup of coffee at the restaurant following her late breakfast when Michael slid in the seat across from her. She grabbed her purse to leave, but he reached across the table and restrained her, holding her arm. “We have to talk.”

“I don’t think there’s anything left for us to discuss,” she snapped. He had left her for five days to ponder and stew over his attitude toward her, which she took no responsibility for causing.

“I’m sorry,” he said, still holding her arm. “I had no right to act that way with you.”

“And it took you all these several days to come to that conclusion? I have recently run away from one temperamental man. I don’t need another, Michael.”

“You have every right to be angry. I just could not deal with having you know those things about me. I wasn’t ready to face that with you.”

“I didn’t mention any of it, Michael, if you’ll recall, until you brought it up yourself. You didn’t have to face it with me until you were ready.”

“I know that. Rochelle, I have spent the past couple of years trying to live down all the gossip and tales that have circulated about the deaths of my father and Tina. I was accused, tried, and fortunately found not guilty. Nevertheless, do you think that exonerates me? It doesn’t, not by a long shot. There are still people

who will always think I'm guilty until the perpetrator is found, and from the little the police are doing, that may never happen.”

She was angry and hurt, but humbled at his disclosure. She agreed with his analysis and knew a dark cloud would hang over his head from now on until the case was resolved. At least he was finally sharing a little of who he actually was. She hated to admit it, but his sudden absence in her life after three wonderful days with him was painfully miserable.

His hand moved to her wrist, and she shook it off. Still hurt, she retorted in an injured air, “I was never prepared to believe the worst about you, but you were prepared to read the worst into my thoughts. You were angry with me, and I did not deserve that. I did nothing wrong.”

“I know that. I simply reacted to something that is still very personal. I am sorry. I don't know what else to say.”

Rochelle let go of her purse, and settled back in her chair. Letting her eyes trail to her cup of coffee, she resisted the urge to give Michael a strong taste of her anger, or more aptly, her frustration over his five-day rejection. Instead, she recalled her misery over the past few days, now wanting things to be as they were before he became upset with her—and frantically needing a decision about the house. That motel room was driving her stir-crazy.

“What have you been doing?” he asked, trying to break the icy chill that clung to the air between them.

“What do you suppose?” she countered tritely.

“How does the car drive?” He tried again.

“It drives like it's in charge instead of me,” she snorted, and then watched a smile grow on Michael's face. “It isn't funny,” she reprimanded crossly.

He reached up and drew his hand across his mouth, and put on a steely face of seriousness. "I'm not laughing," he stated, staring at her with a blank expression.

Rochelle's mouth twitched and she bit back a reluctant grin, until she could contain it no longer. Then she giggled. "If you expect me to forgive you for treating me so badly, I don't," she said petulantly.

Michael covered her hand with his. "You don't have to. I was wrong."

Rochelle stared at the strength and character in his face, her gaze moving down to where he touched her hand. Thoughtfully she began speaking. "Michael, I'm the authority on pain and anguish. I know how it feels, and I know what it can do to someone. Why do you think I avoided telling you all about me? I could not face telling you and having you know the kind of shame and degradation I have faced and lived with. It hurts, and I know you were hurting, but do not make me the enemy, because I'm not."

"Chelle, I'm sorry, honey. I just wasn't prepared to have you know about the sick tale of what happened to me. You think things are behind you, that you can go on with your life, maybe find some happiness, but it is a faulty concept. Nothing is ever behind you."

"Then we're in the same situation, Michael. Do you think my life just began? At least you have a second chance. I am not sure I do. If Tobias ever learns where I am..." She couldn't finish her thought.

"I feel like a heel, Chelle. It was just a bad moment, and I was more worried and hurt over what you might think than the fact that you knew. I am glad you know now. It is out in the open. Mabel told me I should open up my closet of skeletons and let them out. Perhaps the time will come when you'll feel comfortable enough with me to do the same."

“There are some things I can’t share with you, Michael. It isn’t that I want to keep secrets, it’s just that there are hurts in a person’s life too painful to share.”

Then quickly changing the subject, she said, “I called Ruth a couple of days ago. She said you haven’t decided about the house. I have to do something soon. Living in that motel room is beginning to turn me into a cranky old lady.”

He expelled a tiny chuckle. “Feeling your age, huh? You must be all of twenty-three.”

“I’m twenty-four to be exact. It was my birthday the day you drove me to Bozeman.”

His mouth dropped open a moment in surprise. “Now, I do feel like the worst kind of heel. Chelle, why didn’t you tell me?”

“Birthdays stopped being important to me about four years ago,” she said contemplatively, recalling her twenty-first birthday, which was the worst night of her life. Tobias had been brutal with her, and as drunken as he was, and angry, she was certain he was going to kill her that night.

She had drunk too much champagne at the disco where he took her, accompanied by two other couples and a young single man she had never previously met. For the first time in months, she felt carefree and happy because Tobias had made special plans just for her because of her birthday, seeming more his old self.

When Tobias excused himself to go to the men’s restroom, her reasoning ability, sedated by alcohol, did not permit analytical thought of what she was doing or the possible consequences, thereof. When the man, called Steve, asked her to dance, she agreed readily. Unwittingly, she smiled, came to her feet and waltzed out on the dance floor with him, not the least thought that Tobias would find her behavior unbecoming.

When Tobias came from the restroom, he observed Rochelle

and Steve quietly with a poker face. He watched while the song ended and they stood waiting for another, all the while staring into each other's face and laughing at some joke or other. Tobias's control was masterful.

Rochelle was having such a good time dancing with Steve, she saw no indication of Tobias's ill regard when Steve brought her back to their table and seated her next to Tobias. He smiled at them as though nothing in the world bothered him.

Internally though, he was a bomb ready to explode—and he did as soon as they arrived home at two-thirty in the morning. He slapped and beat her into near unconsciousness, then raped her with as much brutality as he could muster.

Like all the other times when Tobias had abused her, she needed a doctor, but he refused to let her see one. She was bedridden for nearly four weeks, certain she had sustained a fractured rib where he punched her with his fist.

“Tell me why you stopped having birthdays,” Michael prompted.

Rochelle shook her head. “No, it's not exactly a topic for conversation.” She glanced away, then straightened her shoulders, took a deep breath and changed the subject. “What about the house? I need an answer.”

“Is it your intention to buy it or rent?”

“If you will sell it to me I'd like to buy.”

“Even after knowing what happened there, you still want to buy?”

“Isn't that what I just said? If you're still concerned about Ruth telling me, she indicated that she was obligated to do so.”

“What else did she tell you?” he asked darkly, a grim look instantly shadowing his tanned face.

Noticing the sudden darkening of his mood, Rochelle proceeded to repair the breach threatening between them again. “Michael, it doesn’t make any difference what she told me, but I can assure you there was nothing derogatory in her manner. Her attitude is very positive toward you. If you ever need a friend, you certainly have one in her.”

He leaned forward, crossing his arms in front of him on the table. “How much did she tell you?” he demanded firmly.

Rochelle sighed. “You’re grilling me, Michael. I had best just leave. I can see you’re not ready to let the subject rest.” She stood up, grabbing her purse.

“Sit down!” he said abruptly, drawing attention from other customers.

Rochelle glanced about her, seeing the inquisitive looks from all around. The waitress came over with the coffee carafe at that moment, setting a cup in front of Michael, and filling Rochelle’s partly empty cup. Taking a deep breath, Rochelle gave Michael a sharp glance, and suddenly not caring who heard, she shot at him, “Michael, I will not sit here and be party to a scene.”

“Then sit down and quit making one,” he demanded. “Are you certain you want to live in a house where something so violent has happened?”

Slowly, she sat back down. “My mind is made up. The house is the only one I liked out of those Ruth showed me. I would probably change the furniture in that room.”

“It’s already been changed. All the furniture and carpet in there are new. There are smaller homes that require less upkeep, you know.”

“Are you trying to talk me out of it? If you don’t want to sell, just say so and I won’t press you.”

“It isn’t that. I just wonder if you have thought this through. You said yourself you may have to leave in a moment’s notice. Wouldn’t you prefer renting, or even better, I’ll be happy to let you stay there for nothing.”

Rochelle looked in his handsome shadowed face, his statement not what she hoped to hear. The play of emotions across her features reflected her sudden unrest. “Michael, I have been taken care of all my life, and I truly want to do something on my own for a change, if for no other reason than to prove that I can.”

“I’ll make a deal with you. Why don’t you live there for six months, and if after that time you still want the house, I’ll sell it to you.”

“Is that the only way we can do business?”

“I’m afraid so. Let’s just say I’m not ready to sell.”

“Then we need to work out a rental agreement.”

“That isn’t necessary.”

“Yes, it is.” She grabbed a napkin from the holder and began writing. When she was finished, she handed it to him. “This amount should be worthy of adequately compensating you through the six months you’ve given me. Will you accept it?”

“Accepted,” he said, wadding the napkin and tossing it down.

“I also need your permission to have a security system installed.”

“Permission granted. What else?”

“I need to know what to do about the kitchen.”

“I’ll finish it, maybe not as fast as you’d like, but the kitchen is usable as it is.”

“I’ll need a live in combination cook-housekeeper. Can you refer someone?”

“I’ll give it some thought, and get back to you on it. What else?”

“Can you please stop being so abrupt?” His profile turned to her as he looked out the window, and for a brief moment, Rochelle saw a flicker of vulnerability written on his proud face. He was in a contemplative mood, reflecting neither anger nor disapproval, but there was an expression of a deep, inexplicable regret. Rochelle knew he was acutely distressed at having her know the profound misery and remorse he had suffered after the death of his father and stepmother. It would probably stand between them for some time, until he trusted her enough not to let it bother him any longer.

Turning, he locked gazes with her. Not caring in the least what anyone around him thought, he reached across the table, taking her chin between his thumb and forefinger. “I’m not angry with you. I am, however, angry about an unsettling period in my life that I never had any control over and still don’t have. I wish Ruth hadn’t told you.”

Very gently, she said, “Michael, I’ve shared things with you. Why do you want to shut me out when everyone else knows? It doesn’t change how I feel about you.”

He glanced at her questioningly. “And exactly how do you feel about me?” he inquired seriously.

Rochelle had previously thought him very casual and lighthearted with all his teasing, but beneath that charm was a warm, vulnerable human being who cared a great deal about a lot of things. She opened her mouth to answer him, and then stopped when she realized exactly what he was asking. Blurting out that he was all too quickly becoming the most important person in her life was too revealing. She just wasn’t ready to trust him with her heart.

“What do you want me to feel, Michael?” Her response was one he likely would have given had she asked him the same question.

He was completely serious. “I’m not sure, Chelle. I’m a realistic sort of guy, and I try to set realistic goals.” He stopped talking, and

glanced down thoughtfully. When he looked up, a puzzled expression dulled his blue eyes. “I know you are married and neither of us can offer commitments. That is the realism of our situation.”

Rochelle stared at him, afraid to breathe, fearing he was going to end their brief relationship. She had told herself dozens of times it was best to end it, to become independent and self-reliant. Still, there was that single night of glory, when fire-works exploded in her brain and left her surrendering to the most pleasant feelings yet known. Despite all the obstacles, she did not want to lose that shared closeness. She wanted independence, but she wanted the relationship, too. Likely, it was a road map to disaster, but she didn’t want it to end. Even if she and Michael could never plan a future, or anything except a day-to-day existence, they could at least try to squeeze what joy they could from a precarious relationship.

“What you say is true. I cannot give you a commitment. I have no choices to speak of, at least not in a relationship. You do, however. We can end this now and go our separate ways if that is what you want. I don’t want either of us hurt.”

A noticeable grimace of pain hovered about his mouth. “I think it’s gone beyond that, Chelle.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

That afternoon, Rochelle wrote Michael out a check to cover six months rent. She called the utility company to change the service over to her name, ordered a telephone, hired a security firm to put in the security system, and moved her things from the motel to the house. Michael went back to the bank and stayed until closing to

give her time to get used to her new surroundings. Nothing could have made her happier than leaving that tiny motel room.

She toured the house, exploring each room, wanting to become familiar with the total layout. She removed the white sheets from the furniture and was pleasantly surprised at how lovely the furnishings and décor were. Someone had put a lot of love and effort in the decorating of the house, and Rochelle guessed Michael's mother was probably responsible long before his stepmother moved in. Everything Rochelle would need, right down to vacuum and cleaning chemicals, came with the house. All she would need to shop for was groceries.

When she went through the bedrooms upstairs, her biggest problem was choosing which bedroom to sleep in. The master bedroom was so much more beautiful than the other rooms. Two rooms contained decorations and furnishings specifically for two young men, likely the rooms Michael and his brother had once used. The guest room was smaller, and the last one showed signs of someone using it as a nursery in the distant past.

Rochelle kept glancing at the closed door to the master bedroom and realized the room would become a nightmare with its door always closed. There was only one-way to overcome the fear, and although Mabel stopped by and advised her against it, she made a decision to sleep in that room. Fortunately, the closets were empty of all clothing and personal items once belonging to Michael's father and stepmother, so at least there were no other reminders to dampen her spirits. In fact, she felt good, her life suddenly taking on anticipation of having her own house. With her car out on the front driveway, she could come and go as she chose without someone to monitor her. She was free—at least she was almost free.

There was still Tobias.

“Sweetpea, what in the world, are you going to do in this big house all by yourself?” Mabel wanted to know.

“I’m going to live in it and feel like a bird in flight for a change. I like lots of space, Mabel. You will visit me often, won’t you? Maybe you can have lunch with me occasionally, or dinner?”

“I wouldn’t miss it for anything. You just let me know when.”

“Michael is going to work on the kitchen after work and on weekends. When it’s finished, you’ll be my first dinner guest.”

“Has Caroline bothered you anymore?” Mabel asked.

“No, should I expect some problem from her?”

“I don’t know, Sweetpea. Caroline has a temper that makes her crazy. I am glad Mikey finally saw the light. She was never right for him, not that he wanted her particularly. She just wouldn’t leave him alone.”

“You know him well, don’t you?”

“I’ve known him since he was a little boy. His daddy loved both his boys, but sometimes I thought he loved Mikey the best. He was smart as a whip and his daddy liked to brag that Mikey would be a banker like him. He never considered Mikey might have other plans, but he did, even when he was just a kid.

“He used to draw all the time, made sketches of anything he found interesting. Then he started drawing houses and buildings. The outsides were like shells without fruits, so he started designing the floor plans. Even before he went away to college, he was already sharp in mathematics, knew how to draw his buildings to scale, and self-trained himself in design. I still have the pictures he used to give me when I would see him on the street sometimes.

“I’d say, ‘Mikey, what are you designing today?’ He would look at me with those big blue eyes and smile, then say, ‘I’m designing you a new house, Mabel.’ Then he would rip a sheet from his drawing pad and give me. I came to know him pretty well in all

those years, and he is about the nearest I have ever had to a child of my own. I do love him like my own.”

“What was his mother like?”

“She was the most beautiful and gracious lady in Windy Point. She was gentle and sweet, and in all the years I knew her, I never heard her raise her voice to either of her children. Both her boys loved her, as did their father. They all went a little insane with grief after her death.

“James quit eating, lost weight, began drinking too much, and that’s when he met Tina in some bar. He was ripe for just about anything in his life to drive out the melancholy and depression. Tina was never right for him. She was a cheap imitation of what James thought she was, and the only reason she married him was because the man was rich and could give her what she wanted. Both of the boys hated her, and once they were away from home, they rarely came back for a visit. When Michael came for his father’s birthday party, just before James and Tina were killed, that was his first time in over a year.”

“How did he fare when they arrested him? Was it hard on him?”

“I should say it was. Not only had he just lost his father, but he also drew blame for his death. The judge refused to give him bail, so he had to stay in jail, and during that time, he knew his business in San Francisco was taking a beating without him to run it. That was hard on him. It was as if everything had fallen out from under him, as if he had lost all control of everything important in his life.

“I don’t think he’s known real happiness since then. It really messed him up for months, but when he got involved with the bank, it sort of took his mind off things, gave him some purpose on his father’s behalf. Mikey is very special, Sweetpea. I don’t know from where you come or what your hopes and dreams are, but Mikey

seems to think a lot of you. I hope you will be gentle with his heart. He's had enough pain."

"So have I, Mabel. Michael and I have that in common."

Knowing Michael planned to come by after the bank closed, Rochelle took a quick spin to the market after Mabel left. She picked up everything she needed to make spaghetti and a salad. She bought a bottle of wine, a loaf of French bread so she could make garlic bread, and some fresh strawberries with whipped cream. Then she added coffee, milk, and an assortment of staples and other necessities every kitchen required. She ended up with a shopping cart loaded to overflowing.

At home—oh, how good it felt to think of the house as home—she put on the spaghetti sauce to simmer. She set the table in the breakfast room with plates, cutlery, and candles, praying all the while that everything would turn out well. It had been years since she cooked, but her memory of making spaghetti was still vivid. She tasted the spaghetti sauce frequently, added whatever she thought it needed, then put the lid back on and adjusted the burner. She was really having a good time puttering in the kitchen, doing simple things, and feeling unusually normal now that she had the freedom to do as she chose. She understood how prisoners must feel upon their initial release from confinement.

That thought made her think of Michael. She could just imagine how horrible it was for him, penned up in some awful jail, and blamed for the death of his father.

When Michael came by after work, he had already been home and changed into his jeans and T-shirt. He arrived and started hauling his toolbox into the kitchen, ready to start working. When he smelled the spaghetti sauce, he stopped and sniffed. "I know that didn't come with the house," he said, his sensual lips curling into a pleasing smile.

“It’s a surprise. I’m making dinner for you,” Rochelle stated, smiling in that generous way that showed her perfect white teeth.

He looked at her questioningly. “I’m impressed. I didn’t know you could cook.”

She sent him a censoring look. “There are likely many things you don’t know that I can do.”

“What are you cooking?”

“Spaghetti, with my own special sauce, too.”

“Why aren’t we eating in the dining room?” Michael asked when Rochelle escorted him into the breakfast room.

“I thought this would be more warm and cozy. Dining rooms are very large and cold.” She recalled all the times she sat at Tobias’s long dining table, alone, waiting for him, when he never showed.

He cocked a brow and studied her. “Do I hear a hidden message there?”

“Probably, but we aren’t going to discuss it and ruin our meal. Have a seat, and let me serve you.”

“This is bound to be good,” he teased, watching her every movement in the white shorts worn with the sleeveless shirt.

Rochelle served up two plates of spaghetti and loaded it with her delicious homemade sauce. She served the salad and put two kinds of dressing on the table. “I didn’t know what kind you liked,” she said, but I hoped you might like blue cheese.”

“That was a good guess,” he praised her.

“Will you pour the wine while I get the bread?” The garlic bread had browned crusty hot in the oven. Rochelle put it in a bowl lined with a white linen napkin and covered it to keep it warm. Then she joined Michael at the table.

She sat there watching him, waiting for him to taste everything. He returned her gaze, and waited for her to begin the meal.

“Aren’t you going to taste it?” she asked.

“Shouldn’t I let you taste it first?” he teased.

She lifted her fork and twirled spaghetti around the prongs, finally taking the first bite. She had already tasted it enough to know that it had turned out better than she expected. “There! It didn’t burn or kill me. Now, you can taste it.”

Michael smiled and lifted a forkful to his mouth. He licked his lips, chewed and swallowed, then licked his lips again, all the while keeping a blank look on his face.

“Well?” Rochelle demanded.

His face softened with a big smile. “Excellent,” he said. “The sauce is perfect. No way did it come out of one of those jars from the grocery store. I should know because it’s the only kind I’ve ever used.”

“It’s a special recipe I use, and you’re right, it is better than that stuff from the market. Do you like it?”

“If all of your cooking is this good, then I hope you’ll invite me often. There is nothing like a good home-cooked meal. The restaurant we’ve frequented is okay for breakfast and lunch, but dinner is questionable.”

Michael had two large helpings, and looked as though he wanted more but admitted he was too full. When it came dessert time, they fed each other strawberries dipped in whipped cream, laughing all the while when they purposely dabbed whipped cream on each other’s face.

“I thought you were going to work on the kitchen after we ate?” Rochelle said when he pulled her on his lap, fondling her familiarly.

“I can think of many things I’d rather be doing, but since you gave me such a wonderful dinner, I suppose I have to show my gratitude.”

He whispered something in her ear and she burst out laughing. “No, absolutely not!”

She gave him a hug then slid off his lap, and started cleaning off the table, putting things away while Michael reluctantly turned to the carpentry in the kitchen. He became serious now, concentrating on his task. Rochelle enjoyed watching him work, so she sneaked glances while she cleaned up and put the dishes in the dishwasher.

“Can I help you with anything?” she asked after she finished.

He stopped what he was doing and glanced up at her, a couple of nails held between his lips. “Not at the moment,” he said from one side of his mouth. He used his measuring tape to measure a piece of wood, only mildly distracted by her question.

“Then I’m going to run the vacuum in the living room.”

Chapter Twenty-Six

The serenity of Rochelle’s coming days knew no disturbances as she slowly eased into a comfortable routine revolving around familiarizing herself with her new residence and making new friends. Ruth and her husband stopped by to visit a few minutes with her, Mabel came by two or three times per week, and Rochelle had made a special point of inviting Sally, the waitress from the restaurant who befriended her. New faces of people whom Rochelle had not met previously stopped by to introduce themselves. They brought cakes, jams, and other offerings of welcome. In no time, she made a number of new friends.

Tillie Somers, Michael’s housekeeper, whom he was willing to share only if Tillie would still keep her two days a week job with him, moved in with Rochelle. Although she proved an indispensable

helper, both in the kitchen and as a housekeeper, Rochelle still cooked dinner for Michael on the nights when he worked to complete his kitchen project. As promised, Rochelle shared Tillie with Michael and the friendly woman worked at both houses.

Being a gentle soul of meager finances, Tillie could not have been happier at the opportunity to live in the Matheson home. It was an honor for her, since many of the locals considered the house the initial foundation for the outgrowth of their small town. For many who lived in the little bedroom community, the Matheson house served similarly to a memorial depicting the prestige and affluence accorded a small growing community through James Matheson's generosity in financing the entrepreneurs of small businesses needed in the area. Additionally, while he was the financial force behind the town's growth, his wife was its grand lady of distinction.

The first Mrs. Matheson was a kind and caring woman whose doors were open to people of the community. She knew nearly everyone in her small town and befriended most of them at one time or another. She catered to the needy, contributed her time to charities, and was a strong example of what a true humanitarian was supposed to be. With such honorable people in a fine old house, it stood like a monument of prophetic significance and meaning to those who forged a town from an empty cow pasture.

Now the house had taken on an additional character. Not only was it a memorial to commemorate a town's birth and growth, it was also a memorial for two people murdered within its walls. The community of interested spectators looked expectantly toward the new resident for any mark she would leave on the overall atmosphere surrounding the aura of the Matheson home.

Rochelle had no knowledge of the interest and speculation surrounding her, which proved a blessing since she chose to avoid notoriety of any kind. She grew so contented with her new life, she

could almost forget the dark scars implanted in her soul by Tobias. Only occasionally did she have renewed flashes of fear that kept her on guard against the inevitable possibility of Tobias finding and killing her. Nonetheless, following the first month of her newfound freedom, she could almost believe Tobias had given up looking for her. She had been thinking he might find someone else to replace her and would forget she existed.

She could not have been more wrong.

TOBIAS AWOKE MID-MORNING, the bright light filtering through and around the edges of the drapes, hurting his bloodshot eyes. He squinted until his vision adjusted, and then glanced at the clock on the nightstand. As he did nearly every morning since Rochelle left, with his eyes still partly closed, he subconsciously reached across the bed to enfold her in his arms. The emptiness of the bed beside him caused his eyes to snap open wider and he stared at the fluffed pillow where her head, framed with flaming gold hair, once lay.

With a pained jerk, he pushed himself up and swung his feet to the floor, cupping his aching head in his hands. Rotating his head in half circles on his shoulders to release the tension, he stared at the empty space beside him, as if by sheer will he could bring her back to his bed and into his life. Taking her for granted as he had done when she was with him, he never considered he might actually miss her if she left him. Nevertheless, he did. He missed her so damn bad it actually hurt. The smelly, perfumed broads he kept falling in the sack with held not a candle to Rochelle's naiveté, innocence, and refinement.

Hammers were beating inside his skull and any movement increased the intensity, causing him to groan in pain. He shook his aching head, trying to clear out the cobwebs, unable to recall what

business he was supposed to handle that day. Searching his mind like a blind man rifling through a filing cabinet, he glanced across the room where a bureau sat. Like every other morning, he saw her picture there, an eleven by fourteen enlargement she gave him in the early part of their relationship before they were married. A sickening loss clutched at his chest, it quickly turning to anger as he remembered how she ran away from him, her act upsetting the equilibrium of his control over his business and personal obligations.

Rushing across the room, he jerked the framed photograph off the bureau, pulled back his arm and almost flung it at the wall. However, he stopped himself just in time, as he did on the other occasions when he had wanted to batter her within an inch of her life. It took all his reserve to keep from destroying the picture at moments of intense rage. He really did not want to destroy it. He needed it, wanted it to remember her by, to remind him of how much he both missed and wanted to kill her.

Almost gently, he put the photograph back in its place, and with his back stooping like that of a beaten old man, he slid his feet laggardly across the floor to the bathroom. He looked in the mirror, gagging at the smeared lipstick on his face, the smell nauseating him. He grabbed a toothbrush and squeezed a gob of toothpaste onto the bristles. His tongue felt thick, like hairs growing out of it, and his breath sickened and made him gag. God, he must have been drunk and out of his mind to fuck that bitch with him last night.

“Shit, the broad might have given me something!”

That would be just his luck, contacting some disease with all his screwing around, and the hell of it all, he was usually so damn drunk he couldn't remember if he enjoyed it or not. Half the time he couldn't even get it up anymore.

Rochelle was the reason. She was the cause of all his problems.

She was in his mind like a cancer. Even drinking himself into oblivion couldn't erase her image. All the angry contempt he had felt for her before she ran away had dissolved as he recalled the good things they shared in the beginning of their relationship and marriage. Those were the things he missed and wanted back again.

Nothing had gone right since she left.

Before she ran away, it had never occurred to him he could miss her so much. Taking her for granted when she had been with him, he could not have known the suffering he would experience over losing her, or realize how severely her absence would affect his life.

Trying to replace her with other women proved more a chore than a comfort. The women he once found so amusing in the past suddenly became sickening broads he could no longer stand. Their makeup on his shirts, their cheap perfumes clinging to his nostrils, the musky smell of their sex left on his body, all the things previously used to torment Rochelle with now repulsed him. Not only that, last night his sexual attempts had failed to excite him, and the bitch had actually laughed at his limp manhood. His flaccid penis scared the shit out of him, and he blamed it on Rochelle's absence. He missed her. God, how much he missed her! Why had he treated her so contemptible? Why had he abused her so badly, his cruelty driving her away from him?

In all the five years they were married, Rochelle showed quiet tolerance for all his bad habits. Maybe she had been scared shitless of him, considering the way he treated her, and was afraid to be assertive. Regardless of the reason for her docile attitude, he recalled explicitly how uplifting her presence was, how homey she somehow made the huge, cold mansion seem; and the sad joke was that he had not even realized it then.

Since she left him, he drank himself into a stupor nightly; was brought home bodily by his so-called friends, and then put to bed by

his guards. Night after night he hoped the booze would help him forget her, help him get just one decent night's sleep without her face invading his brain to leave him wakeful, exhausted, and irritable.

The detectives he hired to find Rochelle, despite him paying them a fortune, failed to come up with a single trace of her. It was as though she had simply disappeared from the face of the earth. Even after all this time, he still sent his men out on the streets with her picture trying to find someone who might have seen her. Inquiries at the bus station, with taxi companies and taxi drivers, as well as airport personnel, rendered not a single trace.

Rochelle had taken several cabs during the time she had transferred her savings to the safe deposit box. It was a miracle that Tobias's men or the detectives hadn't encountered at least one of the drivers.

Tobias purposely avoided filing a missing person's report with the police. He could not afford drawing attention to himself, so he excluded the police from the search. His wife was gone, and he was going out of his fucking mind with longing for her body, for her guileless personality that intrigued him and fired his loins with yearning, and for her warm presence in his cold, cold mansion.

He showered and called down to request a pot of coffee. Ten minutes later, he gulped the first cup, took several aspirin and poured a second cup. With the coffee clearing his head a little, he remembered with another groan what was on the agenda for the day.

He dressed in a suit, not looking forward to the scheduled trip down to Columbia. Bile rose up in his throat and he ran to the bathroom and puked the toilet full of foul smelling vomit, all the while carrying on an internal dialogue, telling himself he had to pull himself together. He was going down the tubes unless he got a grip on himself and on his life.

He had been so out of sorts the past few weeks, his contacts with the drug cartel was finding reason to criticize his efforts, to threaten him with expulsion from their organization, or use even worse methods of retaliation. He knew he had to get his head together, and he would not be able to do that until he backed off the alcohol. It had become such an addiction he wasn't sure he could leave it off.

A look in the mirror, however, told him he must take control of his life again. He looked like hell—turning gray and faded like an old man, and taking on wrinkles much sooner than he should. His paunch had grown another three inches so his pants no longer fit properly, and his belt would not accommodate another hole to make it looser.

He went through every piece of Rochelle's clothing hanging in the closet. Hell, he went through it daily, touching and sniffing at her scent like a lovesick fool. Her jewelry was still in the chest, all pieces untouched except her watch and the diamond wedding rings. He wished he had a snapshot of them. Perhaps passing it around would revive someone's memory, since people's attentions often focused on diamonds and shiny baubles. However, he had nothing to promote his search. How she could have disappeared without a trace was beyond his imagination. He never would have believed she had the guile or cunning to plan such a perfect scheme.

He turned on the television and went to the bathroom to shave, the noise from the television serving as a distraction to offset the silence of the room, which was like a death pall without Rochelle there. More and more, he considered filing a missing persons' report. All his other efforts failed to offer any clues, and nearly deciding he had exhausted all attempts to find her, missing persons was the only thing left. Without the police, he might never discover her whereabouts.

He pressed his palm against his forehead, both the inside and outside of his skull throbbing so painfully all he wanted to do was go back to bed. Regretfully though, the flight to Columbia was only a few hours away. He needed to get himself together and in gear, maybe eat a huge breakfast to ease his bloated stomach.

As he shaved, looking into the mirror, he kept seeing her face staring back at him. He was sure the alcohol had screwed up his brain, probably burning up brain cells so his mind didn't work so well. The damage reflected in the fact that Rochelle's image embedded itself in his mind and he was unable to exorcise it. It reminded him of the way he had awakened from nightmares as a kid, and the nightmare continued like a movie reel even after he was wide-awake.

Day and night, her face haunted him, disrupting sleep, subordinating his business obligations. Her absence made him a sick son of a bitch, and it was an area of his life he had no experience with which to resolve the problem. He was an intelligent man, but he knew he was losing it. His head was so fucked up the only way he was going to get it straight again was by finding Rochelle. The only way he was going to do that was by filing a missing person's report.

He went back to the bedroom lifted the phone, and pushed a button. "Dave, get your fucking ass up here," he yelled into the receiver and plunked it back down. Dave was there in less than two minutes, zipping his pants, fastening his belt, and then buttoning up his shirt.

"What's up, boss?" Dave's eyes gazed at the bed that showed only one side slept on. Like his boss, he could not seem to get used to the idea that Mrs. Matheson was gone. Her absence had taken its toll on his boss, and he knew if things didn't get better soon, they were heading for disaster in the organization. Such laxness on

Tobias's part could leave holes in the blueprint of his operation where some sharp state attorney might sneak in unexpectedly with an all-out investigation. Aware of an ensuing situation, the cartel had been making threats, and not idly. They usually followed through, too. It didn't help matters that Chandler was so engrossed over the loss of his wife that he failed to take their threats seriously. He was courting disaster with some dangerous colleagues.

"I'm going to the police, Dave," he said, watching Dave closely to measure his reaction.

Dave never knew what to expect with Tobias anymore. The man's moods could swing far right or far left in a tenth of a second, and he was careful as hell what he said to him. The least word or phrase that Tobias took offense to could send him off on an insane tangent of verbal violence. "I thought you didn't want to use the police," Dave said, choosing the least antagonizing response.

"I've changed my mind." He staggered and caught himself by grabbing onto the bedpost. A wave of dizziness nearly overcame him. When he got his bearings, he went to a table containing liquor and glasses, and poured a good measure of scotch in a glass. He drank it down at once, gagging in the aftermath.

"I'm going fucking crazy, Dave," he exploded emotionally, and big tears rolled down his cheeks.

Fuck! Dave thought. The son of a bitch really is going crazy. This whole operation is going down the tube and me with it, he thought, trying to consider the best way out of impending disaster. He might have to disappear like Matheson's wife.

"What do you want me to do, boss?" he asked in a calm and businesslike voice with no hint of the sudden discontent over the present state of affairs.

"We're going to the police and file a missing person's report. What do you think about that, Dave? You think it'll be okay?" He

sounded like a kid trying to get his father's approval. He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and blew loudly into it, and let out a fart that reverberated off the walls.

Dave backed away from the smell. "Sure, boss, if that's what you want to do. They send pictures over their computers and fax machines to other police stations. Maybe some sharp rookie might have seen her and can pair her with the picture."

Glancing toward the king sized bed again, Dave waited for Chandler to challenge his remarks, dismiss him, or tell him what to do next.

"Well, what in the hell are we waiting for?" Chandler snapped, lifting the decanter to pour another generous drink.

"Boss, there's something here you ought to see," Dave interjected, carrying the morning paper in his hand, and reluctantly holding it out to Tobias. "The police raided the warehouse last night. The paper says it's the biggest drug bust ever made in Miami. The losses were the greatest ever, and they have four of our guys in the slammer. The other two were buyers."

Tobias froze, grabbing the paper and letting his eyes scan down the page. He flung the paper across the room where it hit a vase on a table and sent it shattering to the floor. His hands were shaking like a jackhammer vibrating. His heartbeat accelerated and his face turned bloody red.

"Buyers, like hell you say! They were probably goddamned feds. That damned son of a bitch who was handling the sale did not check them out. What in the hell is wrong with everybody? Can't any fucking body do anything right without me having to lead them by a leash?"

Tobias's gray eyes glittered like ice and his face settled in stern, grave lines. He marched over to the broken vase and snatched the paper from the floor, glancing with maddening little jerks as he

scanned the lines again beneath the bold heading: *Drug Bust Produces Largest Yield Yet.*

Tobias grabbed the phone and dialed. The voice that answered sounded half-asleep. “Tanner, you drag your fat ass out of bed, and read this morning’s paper. Then get the fuck downtown before some feisty detective turns their heads with promises of a deal. Bail them out if you can, and I’ll handle it from there.”

“Chandler, why in the hell can’t you call at normal times like everybody else?” Tanner demanded through a sleepy yawn, knocking something over on his bedside stand as he reached to turn the clock for a better view.

Tobias didn’t bother to answer. He slammed down the phone. He was considering canceling his trip to Colombia when his phone began ringing. “Yeah!” he snapped impatiently, suddenly softening his tone considerably when he heard the voice on the phone. “Good morning, Mr. Sanchez, what can I do for you?”

“Chandler, I just got a call from Gonzalez. How in the fuck could something like this have happened? I told you a month ago to find another location. What do I have there, a fucking bunch of old women handling my stuff? What in the hell are you doing about it? You son of a bitch, either you get off your ass, or I’m going to personally cut your damn balls off, then chop you up in little pieces for fish bait.” He screamed out a long expletive in Spanish.

Tobias listened to his own voice, it sounding like a tired old man, quavering and hoarse. He cleared his throat. “I’ve been in touch with the attorney. He is on his way down there as we speak. If he can get them out on bail, I will see to everything else. Do you still want me to fly down there today? This might be a good time for me to stay here.”

“Take care of it, and then get the fuck down here. We have some things to discuss. Either you shape up you son of a bitch, or

ship out, Chandler. You're leaving too many cracks in security, and you would be wise to either straighten out the problem with the bitch you married, or get rid of her. She's affecting your efficiency." With another burst of curses in Spanish, he severed the connection.

Tobias hung up the phone and stood staring at it. Gonzalez must have told Sanchez about Rochelle leaving, he suspected. The son of a bitch was after his job!

Dave was still standing there waiting for further instructions. "You still want to go downtown and file that missing person's report, boss?" Dave sounded about as humble as any human being could be, lest he provoke Tobias at a very charged moment. He knew Chandler's temper, and he damn well didn't want to be the butt of it.

"Hell, yes, that's what I said, isn't it? Bring the car around. I'll meet you downstairs."

Dave left the room, thinking things were only going to get worse if Tobias stayed on the booze. His boss knew how serious things had become, but he seemed unable to focus beyond thoughts of his wife. Dave was certain the alcohol had more to do with it than did Mrs. Chandler's leaving. Sanchez couldn't afford incompetence, and he never fired people; he killed them. Dave's biggest worry was that he would be in the crossfire when they took out Chandler. He was thinking seriously of pulling out. He just didn't know how to go about it and still avoid the fate three previous guards had met, along with numerous others tied to the organization.

Dave had no idea how Chandler managed it, but Johnson, Mrs. Chandler's chauffeur, had been found a couple of weeks after her disappearance. Someone discovered him in a trash bin near the bus station with his brains blown out. That bit of insight made Dave think twice about trying to disappear. He wondered how in the hell Mrs. Chandler had done it so successfully, at least so far.

Tobias got on the phone, calling everyone together for that afternoon. Sanchez would have liked him to find a way to get his coke back, but if that wasn't possible, the next move was to protect the new shipment scheduled two weeks away.

If something should happen to it...

Tobias avoided thinking about that. He just wanted to think of Rochelle and the difference it would make in his life if he had her with him. Things had gone like clockwork with her close by to keep his head balanced. Now, everything was going to hell.

He would file his missing person's report, have his meeting that afternoon, wait until Tanner bailed the four bastards out, if he could, who had caused all his problems, and then when they were taken care of he would fly down to Colombia.

Maybe by the time he came back, there would be some word on Rochelle.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Caroline was breaking for lunch when she passed by the facsimile machine and saw it spitting out a photograph of a woman. Usually she never let anything disrupt her lunchtime, but something about the photograph caught her attention and she waited to have a better look. Although it was a black and white, the full head of hair looked familiar, the eyes resembling that bitch who stole Michael from her. The facial features defined her like a reflection in a mirror.

She ripped it apart from the other faxes and held it away from her for a better look, her farsightedness making close-up visibility a bit blurred since her glasses lay beside the switchboard. She ran back and grabbed them, ignoring the office clerk sitting in for her,

and nearly sticking the earpiece in her eye in her rush to put them on. She stared at the picture, and reality dawned upon her that the likeness was a worthy reflection of the redheaded bitch. A slow smile etched the corners of her mouth, growing into a toothy grin.

“Well, I’ll be damn!” she snorted. The sandwich she brought for lunch slipped her mind. She went to the tiny lounge and read the information on the faxed document, and then poured herself a cup of coffee. The woman might be missing, but it was by choice, Caroline figured. Yet, somebody was looking for her.

She finished reading the information while considering what to do about the missing person’s report. She plopped down upon a chair, considering as many possible implications as her mind would register. Why was the bitch missing? Further, who wanted her bad enough to put out a missing person’s report? Could it be a concerned parent? Maybe it was an irate lover, or even a jealous husband.

Getting out of the chair, she went back to the little alcove where the copy machine sat on a table, and made a copy of the fax transmission. Looking about to make sure she was unobserved, she buried the original behind other missing persons’ reports, and then stared at the copy while she returned to the lounge for her lunch break. She would handle this little matter from home where no one would interfere, and she could perhaps have more time to gather information that was available about—she looked at the name. “Mrs. Rochelle Chandler,” she whispered to herself.

That answered the question of who was looking for her. Rochelle Rathbone had changed her name to escape her husband. Caroline was only sorry it wasn’t a wanted poster. She would have liked that even better.

Remembering her lunch, she went to the refrigerator and plucked her brown bag from the fridge. She went back and plopped down in the empty chair, pulling her bologna sandwich from the

bag. Unwrapping it with the free hand that wasn't holding the missing person's report, she lifted it to her mouth and took a big bite, smiling all the while, her eyes glittering over her bitter taste for vengeance.

Several hours later, after she left work for the day, she was on the phone as soon as she arrived home, but not to the police department in Miami. She was talking to the operator and writing down names and addresses and phone numbers of all the Chandlers listed. Then she started calling each one, crossing off names one after the other until she had crossed off all. The Chandler she sought obviously had an unlisted number.

"Damn it!" she swore and realized she would have to go through the Police Department in Miami. She dared not call them while she was away from her job, just in case they needed to call back to verify the information.

She took care of it as soon as she arrived to work the next morning. Feeling exhilaration, she hoped if things worked out as planned, Mrs. Rochelle Chandler would be history in a couple of days. All ready Caroline planned how she would get back in Michael's good graces. He would be disheartened and sad over his loss and would need a sympathetic friend to lean on.

"Hot damn!" She slapped her fist in the palm of her hand. "Mrs. Rochelle Chandler, your husband must want you pretty bad to put out a missing person's report on you. You're about to be history in Windy Point," she mumbled to herself.

ROCHELLE HAD BEEN IN HER new residence for a period of nearly four months. Michael put as much spare time as he could on remodeling the kitchen, and it was nearing completion. Left alone by Tillie Somers, who liked attending church on Wednesday evenings, Rochelle and Michael enjoyed an intimate dinner together.

Before Michael started on his carpentry chores for the evening, he took Rochelle in his arms and kissed her. When he would have turned to his carpentry, she held onto him. She traced her fingers over his lips, watching them grow into a delicious smile she could hardly ignore. She kissed him, letting her hands trail along his shoulders, down his back, grasping his buttocks and pressing herself against him.

“Honey, do you know what you’re doing,” he inquired with a sly twinkle in his eyes.

“I believe I might, but if you think I need to be instructed...”

Needing no further convincing, Michael waltzed Rochelle up the stairs, and made passionate love to her in the room where his father and stepmother had met their deaths. He and Rochelle both had grown familiar with the room by now, and were troubled only fleetingly by what happened there. Her theory about using the room instead of leaving it locked had proven to be sound reasoning. Maybe there was something to that cliché about looking fear in the eye.

There was something unusually special about their lovemaking that evening. Michael was never more amorous, and Rochelle never more loving and affectionate. As he kissed her lips and breasts and navel, his hands sluicing over her entire body to send her into delirious shimmering ecstasy, she clung to him as never before, returning kiss for kiss, caress for caress, and embrace for embrace. When he eventually ended the foreplay to relieve their eager yearnings by sliding inside her, she whispered her love for him for the first time ever. “I love you, Michael. I love you.”

It was a poignant moment and Michael crushed her into his arms as if he would never let her go, his own mutterings of love warming his breath against her cheeks. They were in love, a glorious condition both accepted.

They spent much longer than they planned in bed that evening, and only the thought of Tillie coming home from church to find them gave them the incentive needed to crawl from its comfort and get dressed.

“Honey, I’ve sure messed up my plans tonight. I intended to get the kitchen finished before I left. Now I won’t be able to. It’s getting late.”

“Do you want to wait and work on it tomorrow night?” Rochelle asked him, gazing into his eyes with so much love it poured into his veins through her touch.

Kissing her, he muttered, “I’ll work for about an hour, and then maybe I can finish up tomorrow.”

“I’ll balance my checkbook while you do that,” she said, smiling at his earlier inquiry to see if she was keeping good financial records.

They went downstairs where Michael went straightway to the kitchen, and Rochelle went to the living room where her checkbook lay on a table next to the calculator Michael gave her.

She was subtracting purchases and putting totals in her checkbook when the doorbell rang. Thinking it was Tillie who likely forgot her key on her way home from church Rochelle went and opened the door.

A BLAST OF SUN PARCHED AIR, putrid with the smell of aged booze and sweat, blew through the open doorway.

Rochelle froze in her tracks!

Her heart stopped beating.

She gasped and stepped back, eyes growing round with shock and fright. Her heart seemed to plummet to the floor from her chest. She felt a scream rise in her throat, but no sound escaped. She was a

statue, frozen as stiff and still as she was during and after one of her immobilizing nightmares.

Tobias stood at her door, appearing as tall, powerful, and domineering as he had ever been before. His face looked dark, angry, and dangerous. His beard had grown since his morning shave, and thick dark growth on his jaws and chin gave him an ominous appearance that made Rochelle's skin crawl. He stood looking at her for several seconds, neither of them saying anything, just staring as if neither could believe what they saw.

Then a slight flicker of pleasure eased the hardness of Tobias's features. When the first stab of shock passed, Rochelle's mouth fell open in surprise, solidifying her expression like a frozen block of ice. When she could think and move again, she shoved hard at the door, trying to close it in Tobias's face before he crossed the threshold. She was too late.

He jerked his arm up, shooting it out so his palm stopped the door from closing. He immediately moved inside, pushing past Rochelle. At that same instant, Rochelle saw he wasn't alone. A woman stepped inside behind him, a puckish smile on her face. She was full of herself, unusually pleased.

"Where's Michael?" Caroline asked in a tone besmirched by a mixture of anger and triumph over finally getting even. "I told the son of a bitch I'd get even with him, and I hope I have. Does he know you had a husband looking for you?"

If Caroline had known Michael was in the kitchen just a short distance away, she would have been more careful with her outburst. The fact that he always parked in the garage so neighbors wouldn't know the amount of time he spent there served as a deceptive measure against gossipers, and obviously against Caroline as well. Yet, she could not resist the temptation of showing up with Chandler

and watching Mrs. Rochelle Chandler's face as her husband shocked the shit out of her with his unexpected presence.

Rochelle guardedly backed away, daring not to even imagine what Tobias planned for her. Would she wind up in some swamp in Florida, her remains carried off by alligators and other wild animals, or did he have more immediate plans for getting rid of her?

Caroline kept up her accusations in a burst of curses and strong disapproval. "You little bitch, you should have known better than mess with me," she cursed, not once noticing the dark disapproval growing in Tobias's eyes.

Rochelle saw it though, as she stood locked into a frozen stance between her two enemies, staring at a despised husband on one side, and a sick and embittered woman on the other.

"I hope to hell you get what you deserve!" Caroline snorted contemptuously and took a lunge toward Rochelle with an outstretched hand.

Before Rochelle could back away, Tobias reached out an arm, catching Caroline by the collar of her shirt. He snatched her back, an ugly snarl about his mouth. "Get the fuck out of here!" Tobias cursed, and sent a staggering blow to Caroline's cheek, unbalancing her, sending her slamming to the floor.

Caroline lay there, temporarily stunned. Then, upon seeing Tobias bending over her with his arm pulled back, a balled fist ready to crash into her face, she suddenly cowered away from him, slithering and sliding on her backside along the floor toward the door. She thrust herself across the threshold, gaining her feet in a frantic motion of startled flight. Turning her back on her attacker, her feet took wings and she ran as fast as they would carry her to some place of concealment outside.

Now, with no one to interrupt them, Tobias reached out and grasped Rochelle's shoulders. "Baby, I've missed you like hell. I've come to take you home."

His eyes took on a bright glow as they traveled her length and back up to her face. His right hand slid in a caress up and down her bare arm, the fingers of his other hand combing through her long silky strands of hair.

His attitude was hardly what Rochelle expected. Seeing him at her door, a flashing thought warned her he was there to carry out his threat to kill her. She had been certain that her death was imminent. Now, she wasn't sure what Tobias's intentions were except to take her back to Miami. Did he plan to wait until he got her home to kill her, or had he really missed her and wanted to continue from where they had been before she left? Either way served no worthy choice for her. Her life was about to become hell again.

"Get whatever things you want. We're leaving," he said more gently than she could ever remember, his fingers now tracing a path along her cheek as though he found fulfillment in the mere touch of her.

She thought of Michael just a few steps away in the kitchen. A prayer ran through her head that he would not hear the commotion, or that he would not try to intervene. She had no doubt Tobias would use whatever force required for dealing with Michael.

Rochelle shook her head, her hair flaring out as if wind-blown. The words came pouring from her mouth, a desperate plea. "No, Tobias. No. I don't want to go back with you. Just go away and leave me in peace. Please, I beg you."

"I can't do that, baby. I have missed you like hell. I need you," he admitted, pulling her against him, his sickening scent of sweat, and stale alcohol breath creating an offensive zone all around him.

“You don’t need me. You have all your other women. Just let me go, Tobias. Just let me go.” Tears invaded her eyes, blinding her and she stood there staring at him, her life suddenly shattered by his presence, her future threatened by the man she loathed and despised.

“God, I want you so much,” he invoked hungrily. In a single motion that caught Rochelle off guard, he clamped his mouth upon her lips.

Snatching her head back away from him, an involuntary scream tore from her lips. She struggled uselessly to get away from him, but his strength was no match for her. While he grasped her at the nape of her neck, she watched as his lips descended upon hers, claiming what he silently vowed was his to take.

“Let her go, Chandler!” Michael’s voice came from the doorway, strangely calm.

Rochelle cringed inside with fright, struck by the memory that Tobias never went anywhere without a gun. Even before she could open her mouth to warn Michael, Tobias was pulling the gun from the waistband of his pants, pointing it straight at Michael.

“Nooooooooo!” Rochelle screamed, throwing herself in the path of the gun, and was instantly snatched back by Tobias’s firm jerk on her arm.

He pulled the trigger, firing a single shot, and Rochelle watched in horror as Michael crumpled to the floor, blood flowing from his wound and quickly spreading in a red puddle on the carpet beneath him.

Rochelle screamed, instinctively wanting to run to Michael, to hold him, minister to him, and help him. Instead, she saw Tobias taking aim for another shot, and with all her strength, she jerked from Tobias’s hold and threw herself between the gun and Michael. The gun pointed straight at her chest this time, and she squeezed her

eyes shut waiting for the explosion of the bullet to penetrate her flesh.

In that instant, Rochelle felt her whole world sliding away from her. No sound came from Michael and her heart felt like a time-bomb ready to explode inside her chest with pain and fear that Michael might be dead or dying. Without Michael, life wouldn't be worth living, and a bullet from Tobias's gun would be a blessing. Anything would be better than returning to Miami with him. Sobs rose in her throat and burst from her mouth.

Then she heard a sound, a scrape, some small movement that told her Michael was alive, and her only purpose in life at that moment was to keep him alive, to protect him with her own life however she could.

"No Tobias, please, I beg you!" she cried hysterically, still using her body as a shield for Michael against the gun Tobias aimed at him.

"He has nothing to do with any of this," she continued. "Just leave him alone, I beg you. If you kill him, you will have to kill me, too! Leave him alone and I will go with you right now! We will walk out that door right now! I'll do anything you ask of me!" she cried desperately.

Tobias's finger seemed to press harder on the trigger. He waved the gun to one side of Rochelle, then the other, trying to get a good shot at Michael. Rochelle moved with the gun, defying his attempt to pull her aside with his other hand, her body the only protection against Tobias firing a fatal shot into Michael's body.

"No, Rochelle!" Michael invoked through a spasm of pain as he watched her attempting to deflect a bullet from him with her body.

She was afraid to turn her back on Tobias, fearing he would point the gun and shoot again. At least Michael was alive, and that

was the only important thing. Nothing else mattered except keeping him alive.

“Walk toward the door, Baby,” Tobias said, still trying to get a clear aim at Michael while Rochelle continued her dance to shield Michael against the gun pointed at her chest.

She smelled the rotgut scent of alcohol on Tobias’s breath, nearly gagging from it, knowing he was drunk. She knew the threat of prosecution for shooting Michael was the least of his concern now. He would kill Michael without blinking an eye.

“Tobias, please listen to me. If you want me to go with you, then let us both walk to the door. If you shoot him again, I will not go anywhere with you. You might as well just go ahead and shoot me, too.”

Tobias wavered, seeing Michael was in no condition to present a problem. However, he knew the loud explosion of the gunshot might have prompted someone to call the police; thus, getting the hell away from there seemed the most important thing on his agenda now. He lowered his arm, stuck the gun back into his belt, and then grabbing Rochelle’s arm, moved toward the door.

“No, Rochelle!” Michael cried out as he struggled to gain his footing. Blood flowed from his wound, and his strength was quickly dwindling. He watched Tobias nearly drag Rochelle out the front door.

From the clump of bushes where she hid, Caroline crouched and watched. She saw Chandler push Rochelle in the back seat of the car driven by another man. He crawled in behind her, closed the door, and the car sped down the street.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

After the car was out of sight, Caroline ran inside the house, stepping warily across the threshold, not sure what she would find after having heard a gunshot. She eased deeper into the room, her eyes scanning about until they lit on Michael struggling frantically to get to his feet. She ran to him.

Her face registered alarm. “Oh my God, Michael, I didn’t know you were here. Are you hurt badly? Are you all right? Oh God, I’m sorry. I’m so sorry,” she cried, reaching out to touch him, honestly touched by an emotion other than anger for a change. She was fearful and teary eyed by awareness that she was indirectly responsible for the harm done Michael. The police could charge her as an accomplice, considering how she manipulated the system to get in touch with Chandler.

“Sorry for what, Caroline?” he demanded, staggering to his feet with her support, and walking unsteadily toward the phone. “What were you doing here? Why are you sorry?”

“I’m sorry I told him. I had no idea it would turn out like this.” She was noticeably rattled or else, she would have kept her mouth shut.

“You told him?” Michael exclaimed, completely confused by her admission. “How in the hell did you know him?”

“There was a missing person’s report sent to the station. I called Miami and informed them Mrs. Chandler was here. I left my name with them and Mr. Chandler called me directly. I had no idea he was that sort of person.”

Suddenly realizing the magnitude of what she had done and the damage wrought already, Caroline was scared. “Oh, God, you don’t suppose he’ll hurt her, do you?”

Contempt and disgust filled the look Michael sent her. The side of her face looked red as if it had received a hard impact from a hand. The skin beneath her eye was turning purple.

Caroline saw him looking at her face. "He hit me. The son of a bitch hit me." Her eyes blinked wildly, and she kept looking back at the door, fearing Tobias might come back. She was scared out of her wits, and was out of form at the moment.

Michael snatched his arm away from her, her touch more contemptible than anything he could imagine. He was thinking she deserved worse than a slap, but he bit back the venom he felt. Finally, gaining his footing, he struggled across the floor to the telephone and called the police, a task Caroline should have thought of, but she was presently mentally rattled. What he really would like to have done is go after Chandler, but he knew he wouldn't get far in his condition. The bullet hadn't hit any major organs, but he was losing a great deal of blood, which left him weak and dizzy.

Tillie Somers, just getting home from Wednesday night prayer meeting, came rushing through the open door. "Good Lord, Mr. Matheson, what in the name of God has happened here?" she cried when she saw his bloody shoulder and chest where the blood ran down and soaked into his shirt.

"Tillie, it's a long story. Take the keys and lock up here after I leave. I have to go to the hospital. Take a suitcase and stay at my place tonight or as long as needed. I don't think Rochelle will be here anytime soon."

"Mr. Matheson, that sweet, gentle girl didn't hurt you, did she?"

"No, Tillie. That sweet, gentle girl wouldn't hurt a fly," he said, glaring at Caroline with contempt in his eyes. He was pressing his wound, trying to stop the bleeding, but it wasn't stopping and he feared he would pass out soon. He called Mabel, who said she

would be right there the second after he said he needed her. Tillie went running to the kitchen and brought back a towel for Michael.

The police came, which was really a waste of time. Michael hoped they would put out an APB on Tobias for kidnapping, but he could not make the new rookie believe a man had kidnapped his own wife. It seemed Caroline was the only person who worked at the police station who knew about the Missing Person's Report, which should have been sufficient indication that Rochelle didn't want to be found by her husband.

"Did she struggle when they were leaving?" the policeman inquired. Stupid question, Michael thought, as the young cop in uniform tried to look and act professional.

"No, she was coerced into agreeing to leave with him to keep him from putting another slug in me," Michael said irritably. When that made no dent in the thick skull of the policeman, Michael tried another tactic. "The last time I heard, it was against the law for a man to shoot another man. Don't you think that deserves an APB on him?"

"What's the license number?"

Michael shook his head in despair. He had no idea what the license number was or the kind of car. "How in the hell am I supposed to know? I was inside all the time."

"I think it was a rental car because I heard them say something about having flown here on a plane." Caroline spoke up, still looking frantic and worried over her foolish blunder.

"What color was the car? What was the model?" The rookie policeman asked. His pen was poised between his fingers, and his tiny writing pad was taking his complete attention.

"Hell, what difference does it make," Michael cursed. "Before you get around to doing anything, they can be out of the country."

“It was a black car, but I couldn’t determine the make,” Caroline supplied for them, shrugging her arms and hands in a pose of uncertainty.

The policeman spoke into his two-way radio.

Car lights shone outside just seconds before Mabel rushed through the door and headed straight for Michael. “Mikey, good Lord, what has happened? Are you all right? Where is Sweetpea?”

“I need a ride to the hospital, Mabel. I’ll fill you in on the way.” Looking at Tillie, he said, “Tillie, lock up and take care of things for me, please.”

“I will, Mr. Matheson. You don’t need to worry about anything, but if you don’t mind, I’d rather stay here for the time being.”

“If you’re comfortable with that, I don’t mind,” he told her, and then went with Mabel. The rookie was at his heels asking further nonsensical questions.

Other police cars screamed onto the scene and several policemen swooped down on them, dogging Michael for information while he climbed into Mabel’s car. A small town police department employed men who seemed to have only half the training that they did in larger cities. Michael swore they were all rookies. Anyway, hadn’t he seen the kind of work they did when his father and Tina were murdered. The bastards were inept, he thought, and slammed the car door in their faces before Mabel drove away.

Caroline came out on the gallery in time to watch Michael crawl into Mabel’s car. With the lights of police cars lighting up the place, Michael caught sight of Caroline, and glared his contempt for her. She recoiled in alarm at the blazing anger on his face, knowing without a doubt that whatever she had shared with Michael was over for good. What she had done was unforgivable. Her actions could very well have gotten him killed. In afterthought, she speculated it

was reasonable to believe Chandler might very well kill his wife, and if he did, she, Caroline, would be an accomplice.

With her head bowed remorsefully, she begged a ride with a policeman, who wanted to know what in the hell she was doing there in the first place. She made some nonsensical answer, not wanting to revisit her part in the whole situation.

Tobias Chandler, who had been happy to pick Caroline up in order to gain directions to Rochelle, had used her, just as she had used him. The anticipated thrill of flaunting Tobias in Michael's face, and the joy in letting him know she was responsible for setting Tobias on Rochelle, was gone. In its place, was a dull throbbing ache etched with stirrings of strong guilt and a sense of loss that was as final as anything she had ever experienced. She used bad judgment and it cost her every opportunity of any further relationship with Michael, even friendship. In addition, she would lose her job—or maybe have charges filed against her—when word reached her boss that she precipitated the entire situation that got Michael shot and Rochelle abducted.

She would be an outcast from now on in this small town. For the most part, she all ready was, and knowing that, she made a decision.

It was time to move on.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Tobias was confident he had covered all bases. While the police in Bozeman were checking the airport for Miami fares, and racing up and down the main thoroughfare looking for a black car, Tobias, Rochelle, and Dave were already airborne in the plane that awaited

them at the small airfield not far from Windy Point. Things went exactly as he planned. His only disappointment was that he had not killed Matheson, then there would be no witnesses against him for the shooting, except Rochelle, but he could handle her.

No doubt, there would be a warrant out for his arrest, but he hoped he had enough manpower in the police department to curtail an arrest by issuing sufficient payoffs. For the time, only one notion was paramount in his thoughts; he was going to enjoy having his beautiful wife back in his life. Her presence had already sent a new surge of energy through him that felt like wholesome renewal.

He glanced at his wife, who sat with stooped back, her arms folded across her lap, and her head drooping nearly to her knees. She was clearly distressed, but he would use his old charm on her, as he did in the beginning of their relationship, and bring her around again. He reached over and put his arm around her. She jerked to an upright sitting position and tried to shrug off his arm. He tightened it about her, drawing her close, until resting her head against his shoulder became necessary to avoid a cramped position.

“I’ve missed you, baby. Things are going to be different this time, I promise you.”

Rochelle recalled that promise. It was something he said on all the mornings after he put her through a night of abuse. Then he forgot the promise the next day after he started drinking again. He was the devil and he was taking her to hell with him.

His day-old beard, which was like tiny prickly spears, scraped Rochelle’s forehead where his chin rested. He smelled like a barroom the morning after, the scent of soured booze and sweat radiating from his body heat. He lit a cigarette and the smoke wallowed in the space around them like clouds, the stench adding to Tobias’s disgusting smell

The sound of his voice grated on Rochelle’s nerves. Angry bile

gorged her stomach. She made no reply to his statement, holding her face expressionless as she always had done with Tobias. All the while, her brain roiled in misery over concern for Michael. She knew the bullet hadn't killed him, and that was the only consolation for the hell that surely lay ahead of her. Still, she had no idea how bad his wound was, and all she could do was say silent prayers for his survival. A dead numbness took hold of her, it a reprieve against having to think of the prison she was returning to and Tobias's domination over her life. Everything felt dead inside her except the terrible misery she now felt and would continue to face.

“Talk to me, baby. I know you are upset now, but you'll see, things really will be different. I won't hurt you anymore, and there won't be any other women.”

Dave sat staring off in space, trying to keep a stone face against exposing his contempt of Tobias' behavior. He was sure the man didn't know what in the hell he wanted. One minute he was degrading Rochelle, screaming that he was going to kill her and the next he was trying to woo her again. He was unpredictable and capricious where Rochelle was concerned. He had little sympathy for anyone, but now he almost felt sorry for her.

Rochelle yearned to tell Tobias he could have as many women as he wanted and it would not matter to her, but inciting his anger would serve no purpose. Despite his declaration not to hurt her anymore, she knew it was a lie. His caustic temper wouldn't allow him to remain in this repenting frame of mind for long. Once the newness of her return wore off, and it would very soon, he would be back to his old habits of avenging any anger she aroused, whether she did anything to cause it or not. Actually, she didn't have to do anything. Tobias's vicious bent for control caused him to manufacture reasons for vengeance.

She thought about Caroline, and about why she did what she did. It was for vengeance—just like with Tobias. Caroline had wanted vengeance and had nearly gotten Michael killed.

“Tobias, I don’t know what you expect me to say,” she replied, taking the middle ground she learned from long-practiced survival techniques with Tobias.

“Just tell me you’re glad to see me, that we can put things together again.”

God, his ego was as inflated as a balloon, Rochelle thought. And oddly, she knew he was sincere for the moment, as sincere as someone like him could be, but in no time at all, when he didn’t get the desired response he sought, his temper would kick in and then the abuse would start all over again. Except for her fear about Michael, she felt empty, passive, and no longer cared what happened to her anymore. If she must spend her life with Tobias, she had rather be dead. It would have been merciful if he had killed her instead of forcing her back to the prison his home would be for her.

What she would go through from now on would be worse than death—especially now that she had enjoyed freedom and happiness with Michael. Tobias destroyed a little at a time by inflicting pain intermittently day by day. Gradual abuse was his way of exercising control and eliciting obedience. His method was capable of breaking down her psyche a little at a time, until it could bend her will quicker than even the threat of death, and Tobias knew that. Just knowing what her coming days would be like, if the previous years of their marriage was any indication, she didn’t see how she could survive going through such hell again.

“I’m tired, Tobias. I’m very tired and would simply like to rest.” She saw fire splinter in his eyes, and she was sure he would never have let it drop so easily if Dave hadn’t been present. His arm tightened about her, and she had no choice but to lean against him

and rest her head on his shoulder, all the while, hating the touch, the smell, and the heat of him. She closed her eyes, pretending to fall asleep even though the sound of the plane engine kept her awake. Numbness spread over her like slow death.

MICHAEL WAS ADMITTED TO the hospital, not so much because of the bullet wound which turned out to be a clean shot that went through his shoulder, but because he had lost too much blood. Mabel stuck with him, even though it was probably close to two o'clock in the morning when they finally stopped the bleeding, and put him in a room. He was spinning his wheels, every nerve in his body activated, and his tension was at a peak.

“Mikey, you’re worried about her, aren’t you?” Mabel asked while he tried to get comfortable on the bed, using the hand control to raise the head, to lower the foot, and then just the opposite in continual agitation. His body wasn’t suffering with discomfort. It was his brain. He couldn’t stop thinking how Rochelle threw herself between the gun and him, how she had talked Tobias out of killing him. He would very likely be dead right now if not for her. Yet, he had lain on the floor like a helpless pup, unable to help her when Tobias led her out the door.

“Mabel, she saved my life. That son of a bitch intended to kill me. She agreed to go with him, to do anything he asked if he would just let me live. The man is capable of anything. She told me that he threatened to kill her if she ran out on him. For all I know, he could mean to carry out his threat. I’ve got to do something to help her, to get her away from him.”

“Come on, Mikey, that’s a matter for the police. What do you think you can do? You’ll just go out there and get yourself really killed the next time.”

“Don’t you understand? She threw herself between his gun and me. She would have taken a bullet for me. Do you think I can ever forget that? I have to do something. I just don’t know what. I’ve never felt so damned helpless in my life!” He slammed his fists into the mattress, anger and frustration building up in him to explosive force.

“I know she’s a decent human being, Mikey, but why did you ever get involved in a situation like this? Did you know these things about her husband when you first got involved?”

“She told me, even warned me about spending time with her, but Mabel, I’ve never met any woman I could love until I met her. When I think of maybe never seeing her again, it wrenches my guts out. I couldn’t live with myself if I didn’t try to do something to help her. I want her back. I want her in my life. God knows it hasn’t been much of a life without her.”

“She’s a lot like your mother,” Mabel said in deep thought. “I noticed that as soon as I met her.”

“Yeah, I guess I did too. She is gentle and kind like mom was, and gracious and poised. She’s special, Mabel, and there isn’t another woman who can measure up to her. As God is my witness, I will get her back some way or other providing that son of a bitch doesn’t kill her.”

“If he wanted to kill her, he could have done it after shooting you. I think he wanted her back.”

“I’ll kill the bastard if I ever get the chance,” Michael threatened.

Mabel frowned. “What you need to do right now is get some sleep and think on this other stuff tomorrow. Let me get the nurse to bring you a sedative. You cannot just lie here all night long pushing those buttons to raise and lower your bed. You’ll drive yourself crazy.”

“No, I don’t want a sedative. I will feel too drugged tomorrow. You go on home. I’ve taken enough of your time. And, Mabel, thanks for everything.”

“What are friends for, Mikey? You have certainly been one to me when I needed you. Something puzzles me, though. Why was Caroline there? What did she have to do with this?”

Michael’s face took on a look of pure hatred, his dark brows drawn together, his lips curled into a snarl. “If I live to be a hundred years old I will never despise anyone as much as I do Caroline. This entire event was her fault, every bit of it. Chandler filed a Missing Person’s Report on Chelle and when Caroline discovered it at the police station, she made it her business to inform Miami without the courtesy of talking to Chelle or me first. All of this might have been avoided if she had come to either one of us and learned what the situation really is. I hope to hell I never see her face again after what she did.”

“Jesus, I knew Caroline had a streak of vengeance in her, but I never thought she would go this far. She should have gotten an explanation from Rochelle—poor kid, she never had a chance.”

“If it’s not too much trouble, I’d appreciate it if you’ll check on Tillie tomorrow. This must be tough on her. She just gave up her apartment, and has no place to stay. I told her she could stay with me, but I don’t think she’s too keen on that idea.”

“She can stay with me,” Mabel remarked gleefully despite the grim atmosphere. “I probably can’t pay her as much as you and Sweetpea were paying her, but I can make it worth her while.”

“Well, just don’t forget that she still puts in her time at my house.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Mabel assured him. She kissed his cheek and said good night.

Michael watched her leave. She was no sooner out the door than his mind went back to Rochelle. He recalled their lovemaking, how feverish and frenzied it had been, almost as if the both of them had some inner warning of unforeseen disaster. She told him she loved him, which was her first declaration of love to him. That it should come on the day Tobias snatched her from his life was too much to deal with.

He knew he needed rest, needed to get well so he could find a way to help Rochelle. Nevertheless, his mind kept replaying the memory of every second from the time he had heard her scream.

Daybreak was pouring through the hospital window when his haggard thoughts finally tired him to the point where he eventually fell asleep.

ROCHELLE HOVERED IN THE FAR corner of the car as Dave pulled up to the tall metal gates. The guard sitting in the small cubicle pressed the button to open it. She felt like someone chauffeured to the cemetery for burial.

When they drove through the gate, and she turned to watch it close behind them, her heart seemed to plunk to the bottom of her chest with a mixture of pain, dejection and tears forming deep within. She refused to cry, swallowing the moisture in her throat, and wishing she were dead. An image of Michael provided the only solace for her troubled mind. Memories of him were all she would have in a house that would become her prison.

Tobias opened the front door for her after they exited the car. He had to give her a tiny push to send her across the threshold. Once inside, she knew her life no longer belonged to her. During her stay in Windy Point, she enjoyed freedom unlike anything known with Tobias. Now, the vacation was over, and her prison sentence would commence.

Lights were on all through the house, the spotlessly clean interior gleaming like a sterile shrine all cold and empty of life. The house seemed more like a tomb than a beautifully decorated mansion. The deathly pall of its atmosphere greeted her with foreboding and despair.

She stopped on the foyer and looked about while loneliness kicked in with desolation and lost hope. She was standing on the place where Tobias had ripped off her gown, had shoved her to the cold marble floor and sadistically raped her. She shuddered at the memory, still shamed at knowing the guards had viewed it all on the monitor screen.

Tobias's arm tightened about her, adding to her sense of dread. She saw the long days ahead filled with his abuse, and topped with boredom and loneliness. She could not muster hope of ever gaining another chance to escape Tobias. He would keep her under such a close watch she wouldn't be able to do anything without first getting permission and then having someone watch every move she made.

Tobias escorted her straight to the bedroom. "I've missed you baby. The whole damn house has seemed empty without you."

That was quite an admission; however, Rochelle wanted to scream at him that she did not want to be here, that she did not care how empty the house was. Instead, she kept her silence. The look in Tobias's eyes presented a greater concern just then.

Standing just inside the bedroom door, she felt total reluctance to move, but Tobias had other plans. He put his arms about her and pulled her next to him. His hands cupped her buttocks and pressed her against his erection.

Rochelle shuddered internally, feeling suddenly chilled, the hairs standing on end on her arms. She knew what Tobias planned to do, and she could feel a scream of refusal rise in her throat. With Michael, her body had never felt so whole, so nourished, so clean

and pure after their loving making. With Tobias, the very thought of him touching her sexually sent a chill of revulsion racing through her. The sensation was akin to having a bucket of human excrement poured over one's head, thus, leaving the feeling of being dirty and tainted.

“Baby, I’ve dreamed of this moment since the time you left. I know you’re tired from the flight, but I need you. Do daddy a favor and take off your clothes. I want to see you.”

Biting back tears, agony, and repugnance, she knew it would do no good to resist. To do so would only invite his anger and abuse. He wouldn’t think twice about ripping off her clothing. Like a zombie, realizing she no longer had freedom of choice, she did as bid. She cringed sickeningly as his eyes perversely raked over her. Her nakedness shamed her before Tobias’s greedy gaze, and it took every bit of strength she could muster to stand in front of him without cowering like a wounded animal. To do so, would only have invited his wrath, and believing that survival could still offer some future with Michael, she stood like a passive statue before this man she despised.

He wrapped his arms about her, and kissed her, his breath so rotten, she nearly gagged. Instinctively she pulled away from him and turned her head aside.

“Baby, just be nice to me. That’s all I ask.” His hands were exploring, touching her in places that still held the intimacy of Michael’s touch. She felt moisture threaten behind her lids, and gaining unforeseen strength from some unknown source, she forced back the tears.

Almost gently, Tobias pushed her down on the bed, his mouth and hands working toward trying to initiate desire and some response from her. His lips claimed all the privileges he had taken

with her when they were first married, but regardless of his attempts to arouse her, all desire had shut down. She felt entirely dead inside.

“Baby, you may not want me now, but you will. I promise you that. I will change. You will see. I will change and it will be good for both of us. I promise.”

I had rather be dead, she wanted to scream at him. She knew, however, it would have been a mistake to anger him. She must keep peace between them while she planned and nurtured the hope to find a way to return to Michael. The meager thought was the only spark of hope she had.

Tobias was staring deep into her green eyes, his icy gray ones imploring her to open to him, to respond to him. “Come on baby, we’ll be good together again. You’ll see.”

Against everything she wanted, she nodded her head. She thought of Michael, his tender kisses, his gentle touch, and his restraint until she reached her peak. Nothing in what Tobias did could ever excite the woman in her. That part of her would always belong to Michael, even if she never laid eyes on him again, and she feared that was a strong possibility.

Anger rose in Tobias’s face at her silence and indifference. He was a vengeful and hateful man. When he didn’t get his way, nothing made him feel better than administering pain and hurt of whatever quantities to gain acquiesce. Blood rose to his face turning it crimson. He nursed a strong desire to slap the hell out of her to force her compliance. However, truly glad to have her home again, he controlled his abusive urges.

Trying to keep his word to make things different, he pushed the anger aside. When he entered her with a full erection, it gave him a sense of power, a return of control. He believed Rochelle’s absence had weakened him, and now that she was back, nothing was impossible to him. The flaccid penis, that just recently caused him

delirious concern, now swelled with a tumescence that gave him pride and revived his sense of manhood.

Rochelle lay like a dead thing beneath him, and his psychological introversion was so intense he no longer seemed to expect anything of her. Like always, he pumped with excruciating force in and out of her, causing great discomfort and pain. Fortunately, for Rochelle, Tobias wasn't a man who could go for an extended period before climaxing. His peak came shortly, to Rochelle's vast relief.

If Tobias expected her to reach a climax, he didn't show surprise when she didn't. The encounter was no different from all the other times he found completion with her. He was certain it was the best climax he ever experienced. He felt a return of full male power, his relief apparent over being able to perform again. Having Rochelle back revived his self-confidence, renewed his faith in his virility. Everything came together, making him more appreciative of what was his. She belonged to him, and she would never get another chance to leave him.

When Tobias rolled off her, Rochelle lay there like a zombie with her eyes stretched open staring up at an imaginary spot on the ceiling, much like what she would do in a doctor's office during a pelvic exam. She felt dead and lifeless, her loneliness for Michael so intense that the world seemed empty of any reason to go on living. Tobias held her in his arms as if he were trying to make up for all the time lost, and Rochelle hated everything he represented, hated his touch, hated his sperm that seeped from inside her, staining the sheets. The gentle kind person that was her persona with Michael had transformed overnight into a shell of a woman who seethed with bottled-up hate.

"Tell me about that man who was with you," Tobias said, feeling her tense in his arms.

Rochelle knew his silence, thus far, on Michael was too good to be true. She knew the subject would come up eventually. She took a deep breath. "He was remodeling the kitchen," she stated simply. She knew he didn't believe her. His hand glazed up and down her arm, his fingers making little circles now and then on her nipples, his touches aimed at demonstrating his possession of her.

"Did he make love to you?" Tobias asked, rising up on one elbow so he could see her face better and read the expression in her eyes.

"No," she lied. "One doesn't necessarily choose to be hurt when they can avoid it." The insinuation was there, aimed like a poison dart at Tobias.

Tobias reacted. "I don't mean to hurt you," he said, knowing he lied. It was his nature to hurt, to use pain as a power play to subdue. It was all part of his perverted fantasies. Hell, he knew it was sick perversion, but he didn't give a fuck one way or the other, so long as he got his jollies. He learned early in life, that if it feels good, then go ahead and do it.

"Did you want to do it with him?" Tobias asked shortly

She caught his eyes and held them in her unswerving gaze. "Do you really think I care about sex after all the pain you've caused me, Tobias? I think I would have despised any man who so much as made a pass at me. You need not worry. I'm just like you left me, abused and embittered. That man was doing exactly what I said he was doing. He was remodeling the kitchen, putting in new cabinets."

"What is his line of work?"

"What do you think, Tobias? Who do you suppose remodels kitchens? He's a carpenter, a mere handyman."

"And a handyman is below your haughty station in life, isn't he, baby?"

“Tobias, if you were no longer a part of my life, believe me, I would never want another man.”

She turned her back on him and silently prayed for sleep or death.

Chapter Thirty

Tobias stayed close to home for the next three days, to Rochelle’s dismay. He acted like the happy husband on his honeymoon. He had sex with her so frequently she ached with bruises and abrasive soreness. By the third day, she was miserable from his touch and from his overly stimulated need. If he noticed her discomfort, he didn’t let on. His gentleness quickly fled soon after her arrival home. It just wasn’t Tobias’s nature to be gentle. It would probably be only a matter of time before his energies extended to his women friends to humiliate her with the stench of them on his person while he groped and abused her. She believed he needed other women to authenticate his belief in his own sexuality. Whatever his reasoning, she knew he was a perverted and immoral monster.

Rochelle was greatly relieved when Tobias turned his attention to business once again. Strange looking men in expensive suits started coming to his study, much as they did before she ran away. She often wondered if they were all local, or if they perhaps had flown in from some other state or locale. Regardless, it was a reprieve for her, knowing Tobias would be too busy to disturb her.

Late afternoon, they would get dressed and go out for cocktails and dinner with the old gang she remembered so well. None of them had changed. The men were still like uncivilized morons, their social habits as despicable as ever. Nevertheless, she could almost

stomach the men more than she could the women. Each of them quizzed her about her *vacation*, as they chose to refer to her running away. They wanted to know how she did it, how she managed to survive, what she did during the time she was gone.

“I lived like a normal person,” was all she ventured to say to them, drawing their disdainful snorts and stares. No doubt, they probably enjoyed a field day talking about her while she was gone. She was always glad when those evenings were over and she could return home to the solitude she preferred to their company.

When she wasn't outside on the lawns or by the pool, her and Tobias's bedroom became her refuge, a place where she read, watched television, or lay thinking of Michael. Finally, one day while Tobias was busy with the men in his study, she had a strong need to get in touch with Michael. Locking the bathroom door, she sat on the toilet and wrote a letter to him. She told him she was okay. She told him how much she missed him. She told him she hoped he hadn't been too badly hurt by the bullet wound.

When she read what she wrote, she tore it up, flushed it down the toilet, and started all over again. What could she say to someone she loved more than life, but would probably never see again? Most importantly, how would she prevent Tobias from intercepting the letter? How would she mail it unobserved?

Tears seemed to come easily now when she was alone. Her anguish tore at her heart in waves, and there were times when the thought of taking her life grew increasingly stronger. Once she looked in the bedside stand where Tobias always kept a gun. It was still there, and she thought he must be completely crazy to trust her enough to leave it there. She closed the drawer, fearing she might actually find the nerve to turn the gun on herself. Yet, she did not really want to die. She just didn't want to spend her life with Tobias.

Sitting on the toilet, she shook her head despairingly after flushing her first letter. She started writing again, determined to communicate with Michael at all cost.

Dearest Michael,

Our time together was too brief, but it was the most important and blessed time of my life. Your affection, your gentleness, your every endeavor on my behalf fills my thoughts each minute and allows me to believe there might still be reason to go on wanting to live.

As I write this, I am thoughtful as to how I will be able to mail it. I also have some dread of where I can hide it to keep Tobias from finding it, or how I will be able to sneak it from the house without detection. I am determined to find a way, and if Tobias allows me freedom to shop again, I know I can get Remy, the manager of a shop I frequented, to mail it for me. She was a good friend before, and I believe trustworthy. Perhaps if you wish to, you might write me and send it to her address. (She jotted down the address.)

I must close now, but all my love accompanies this letter, and I pray you are healing from the bullet wound, and growing stronger.

Tears blurred her eyes as she signed her name. Then putting the letter in an envelope and addressing it to Michael, she tucked it in the pocket of her robe. She began a thorough search of places to conceal the letter until such time when she could go shopping. She pinned it beneath the lining of a long winter coat shoved to one end of her closet in the dressing room and prayed Tobias wouldn't search through her things. If he ever found it, she might possibly pay a penalty with her life. Maybe that wouldn't be so bad.

When Tobias had threatened to kill her if she ever tried running away from him, she took him literally. The fact he had not carried

out his threat, did not deceive Rochelle into believing she was immune to him following through if the notion struck him. A moment of intense anger is all it would take. She knew his bent for deadly violence. She was aware that three guards had disappeared, and no one ever found their bodies. The second time, Tobias disappeared himself for two days, and when he came back he was highly agitated, nervous, and tense. The papers carried a story about a woman who was murdered and found on the beach. Tobias followed the story diligently every day until it lost its reader appeal and the newspapers quit writing about it. He was shaky and nervous for a long time following the release of that story, and everyone around him felt the tension of his irascible behavior.

Rochelle believed he might have killed the woman himself.

All those things were coming back to her now, and not least among them were the deaths of her parents. There was hardly any doubt in her mind anymore that Tobias had perpetrated their deaths. The belief caused so much hate for him that she sometimes dwelled upon taking his gun and shooting him. Fear of her own inability to pull the trigger kept her from attempting such an action.

Rochelle dressed to go out, pinned the letter beneath the skirt of her dress, and then pushed the button for the in-house phone that a security guard answered. "Tell Johnson I'd like the car brought around, please. I'd like to go out."

"Johnson no longer works here, Mrs. Chandler. You have another driver, Ted Anderson. A bodyguard will also accompany you from now on. The bosses' orders," Dave stated.

"Where is Johnson?" Rochelle asked, fear surging up in her throat for the middle-aged man who always treated her respectfully.

"He left town soon after you disappeared."

Dear God, Rochelle thought, Tobias probably had him killed. She was silent several moments, unable to get the thought of

Johnson from her thoughts. “Did he really leave town?” she asked, needing confirmation that she hadn’t been responsible for the man’s death. She was aware of how Tobias’s associates disappeared upon their release from jail after bail was set. Killing or having someone killed meant no more or less to him than planning an evening out on the town.

“He really did leave town, Mrs. Chandler. Your disappearance made him too afraid to hang around.” That part was at least the truth, Dave thought, careful not to discuss such ugly details as Johnson’s death with the delicate young wife of his boss.

She breathed a sigh of relief. “Thank you for telling me that, Dave. I would be very unhappy if I thought something had happened to him because of me.”

“I’ll have the car sent around, Mrs. Chandler,” Dave replied, deeply sorry that Johnson had not been spared the fate Tobias dealt him. The man had never bothered anyone, just did his job without complaint.

Dermot Gibson, the bodyguard who would accompany them, introduced Rochelle to Ted Anderson, the new chauffeur. Ted was a much younger man than Johnson had been. In his late twenties, he was tall, muscular with an angular face and features, and he wanted to make a good impression on his boss. After finishing with the exchange of greetings, Rochelle slid in the back seat while Dermot Gibson sat up front with Ted. Neither of them said anything after Rochelle stated where she wanted to go, until they arrived at The Boutique.

“I’ll probably be here for about an hour,” Rochelle said, thinking both men would wait in the car for her. However, when Gibson opened the door and she stepped out, starting toward the shop, both men fell in pace with her, dwarfing her on either side.

She stopped, and glanced from one to the other. “If you don’t mind, I’m capable of walking by myself.”

“Sorry, Mrs. Chandler, the boss said to stay with you. You’re not to get out of our sight,” Dermot Gibson said.

“I hope that doesn’t mean you plan to come in the dressing room with me. I think my husband’s orders may not extend that far.”

Now, she felt like a prisoner must feel out on parole. Tobias would make sure she didn’t run again, and if she did anything at all suspicious he would know about it—maybe even prevent her from shopping. Not wanting to lose that freedom, she would have to be extremely careful.

Gibson, the spokesperson, smiled. “No, Ma’am, we won’t be obliged to do that.”

The three of them entered the shop. Ted Anderson walked straight through to the back door and stood there with his legs spread and his arms crossed, looking totally out of place. Gibson looked about the shop to see who was there, then tried to become less conspicuous by backtracking out the front door where he stood next to it. He turned in silhouette, so he could cast glances into the shop through the plate glass.

Upon seeing Rochelle for the first time in more than four months, Remy exclaimed delightedly and hurried toward her. “Rochelle, where have you been? I was so worried when I heard you’d disappeared. Are you all right?” She threw her arms about Rochelle’s neck and hugged her.

“I’m all right, Remy. I’ve been away for a while. Do you have any new things I might like?” she asked, trying to think of a way to communicate with Remy without the hound at the back door overhearing.

“We just got in a new shipment yesterday,” she replied, leading Rochelle to a rack that hid them from Ted Anderson by a narrow

partition.

Rochelle got Remy's attention and put her forefinger to her lips. "Remy, this is your shop. Make the man at the back door wait outside. I need to talk to you," she whispered.

Remy nodded. Then in a raised voice, said, "Go ahead and look. When you find something, let me know." She headed toward the back where the chauffeur stood in front of the back door. At first, she pretended something else was occupying her attention as she went through a rack of clothing. When she finished, she turned about, stopped, eyed the chauffeur disdainfully, and said, "Is there some reason why you've planted yourself at my back door?"

Ted's spread legs came together, and he wavered only slightly before replying. "Yes, I'm Mrs. Chandler's bodyguard."

"Well, I'm sure that with one of you at the front of my store, you can surely wait outside. I have women customers who will not step a foot in this place if they see a man parked here."

Remy pushed the back door open. "You can wait outside here at the back door, or you can join your friend up front." Remy could sound very authoritative when she wanted, and Rochelle mentally applauded her performance that brought only mild resistance from the young chauffeur.

The man wavered beneath her gaze, thought about the directions his boss gave him, saw the critical look in the woman's eyes and realized he was trespassing. If she wanted, she could call the cops and have him thrown out. Not wanting a problem, he opened the door and stepped outside in the alley.

Rochelle quickly took a couple of dresses from the hanger, handed them to Remy, and then went toward the dressing room. As soon as they were inside, Rochelle whispered quickly. "Remy, I need your help. I have to send a letter to a friend, and I need you to

mail it. He will also be sending me mail here. If you have objections, just say so, and I won't ask you again."

"Of course I'll mail your letters, but I just don't understand."

"You recall when we used to have lunch together and I told you how I wish I wasn't married?"

"Yes, I knew you were never happy with your husband."

"I left here, but he forced me to come back. He is having me watched so closely I won't be able to get away again, but I need to be able to communicate with the friends I made while I was away. Will you help me, Remy?" She spoke quickly in hushed tones.

"I helped you before when you disappeared by not telling them that I knew you had made several trips from my store through the back door. Considering there is a bodyguard on it now, your husband must have guessed what you did. You know I'll help you, Rochelle."

"If I get a reply to this letter before I return here, call me at home and say my dress has been altered and is ready to be picked up. Say nothing about any of this when you call. I'm sure my phone is monitored." Rochelle gave her the phone number. Then she took the letter from beneath her skirt and handed it to Remy who hid it beneath some dresses she took from the dressing room. She added it to her own outgoing mail.

Rochelle chose an assortment of items, a dress, pants, blouses, a skirt, and some lingerie. When the items were packaged, Remy went to the back door and told Ted Anderson Mrs. Chandler was ready to go. Remy loaded him down with Rochelle's packages and watched them leave, having heard enough about Rochelle's marriage over their lunches to know how unhappy she was. She also knew Rochelle was no less than a prisoner with two guard dogs watching her every move.

In the car, Rochelle leaned back comfortably against the seat and sighed almost contentedly. Knowing she would be able to communicate with Michael brought a semblance of peace. The deep loneliness from her separation from him felt soothed by the knowledge he wasn't totally lost to her—not if he still lived.

Chapter Thirty-One

With his arm in a sling, Michael sat at his desk in his office at the bank. All morning he attempted to go over some paperwork that required his close attention, but Rochelle filled his mind so completely, he could not think of anything else. A million thoughts poured through his brain, and one that pounded at him more than any other was Tobias kissing her that night. When he thought of Tobias touching her, making love to her, it ate at him with such acid fervor he was sure he would lose his mind.

He had become irritable, sullen, and grouchy with everyone who spoke to him, and he seemed no nearer to overcoming the deplorable characteristics that left his bank employees afraid to speak to him. He was bad-tempered with everyone, even Mabel who took every opportunity to inquire if he had heard from Rochelle. She had stopped by earlier that same morning, and he guessed it was probably more to check on him, than to inquire of Rochelle.

“Mikey, you’re not doing yourself any good letting it get to you this way. As your friend, I must warn you to get hold of yourself. The time may come when Rochelle will need your help, and you can’t even help yourself in your present frame of mind.”

“Mabel, do I pay you a salary to bitch at me every chance you get?” he demanded sourly.

“No, Mikey, you don’t pay me a salary, but if you don’t stop being so bitchy yourself, I’m going to demand a salary for putting up with you. Your employees are praying you will take a long vacation and put Zimmerman in charge.”

Michael kept perusing some papers on his desk, not really seeing them. He listened and responded to everything Mabel said, his mood as irascible as ever. Finally, when she started lecturing him, he threw up his hands and pounced from his chair.

“What in the hell do you think I can do? If the cops won’t do anything, then how in the hell can I? Mabel, if I didn’t have the experience of that trial I went through, I think I would consider killing the bastard. It is about the only thing that will stop the son of a bitch. My hands are tied, and you’re not helping with your meddling,” he retorted in sheer frustration.

Mabel dropped her hands in futile bewilderment and turned to go. At the door, she turned back to him. “If that son of a bitch can come here and take her from you, why can’t you go and take her from him?” With a toss of her head and a mild snort, she went out, not waiting for an answer.

Michael jerked his head up and observed her departure through the doorway. He was sorry for being so sharp with her. Hell, he was sorry for being sharp with everybody. It seemed to be his normal disposition now.

Then it hit him what Mabel had said. *If that son of a bitch can come here and take her from you, why can’t you go and take her from him.* He mulled over the thought for several minutes, his paperwork totally forgotten. Why couldn’t he? Why in the hell couldn’t he go take her back?

Without meaning to, Mabel planted a seed that at first shriveled and died a number of deaths, and then took on life again with nurtured fruition. The idea took shape and form. Exasperatingly

though, every plan running through Michael's head had weak links, and he couldn't come up with any adequate strategy that might suffice to insure his goal. The idea stayed with him though. Every time he thought of Rochelle, which was mostly all the time, he meditated on ways to take her back from Tobias Chandler.

"Come in!" he thundered impatiently when a light tap sounded on his door.

The door opened slightly. "Excuse me, Mr. Matheson," one of the bank clerks said, sticking her head inside the door with meek hesitancy. "I brought you the morning mail."

"Put it on my desk!" he bellowed, not bothering to look up at the woman who tiptoed into his office, laid the mail on his desk, and then tiptoed out.

Michael looked up as she was leaving, and upon seeing her tiptoeing, pure irony hit him with a wallop. It was almost laughable. All the people who until recently, held him in the highest esteem, were now afraid of him. Mabel was right. He did have to do something about his disposition. When people started tiptoeing around him, then it was time for change.

Naturally, everyone either knew, or had heard some version of what happened. Nothing was safe from the small town grapevine. While he expected some negative responses from employees and associates, their attitudes were sympathetic and concerned. They deserved better than his sour attitude that caused people to tiptoe around him and whisper as though afraid to disturb him.

He grabbed up the stack of mail and shuffled through it, glancing at the return addresses as he usually did, opening the ones he deemed most important. Then his eye struck on an address from Miami.

He dropped the packet of mail from his hand except for that one letter, ripping it open like a kid tearing into a present. Eagerly, he

pulled the letter out and unfolded it, his eyes raking greedily over the contents. When he finished reading, he went back and read it again, finally reading the first paragraph several times until he memorized every word.

Our time together was too brief, but it was the most important and blessed time of my life. Your affection, your gentleness, your every endeavor on my behalf fills my thoughts each minute and allows me to believe there might still be reason to go on wanting to live.

The words knifed through him with such sharp regret over his loss that he swallowed spasmodically at the lump rising in his throat. His fingers caressed the paper touched by her hand, her script written with delicate even strokes, and he groaned inwardly at the deep pain and loneliness from losing her.

He had to do something to get her back. He couldn't just sit idly by and allow Tobias Chandler to destroy the best thing that ever happened to him. He must formulate a plan. As Mabel had said, if Chandler could come take Rochelle from him, he could take her from Chandler. The only problem, Chandler hadn't been dealing with fortresses, walls, gates, and guards with the likes of which fortified his estate, as Rochelle had told him about. Michael needed all the information he could get about the place if he was to conceive a plan that would work.

Immediately, he drew stationery from his desk and began penning a letter. It was probably the most poignant letter of his entire life, but due to the state of depression Rochelle's letter reflected, he hoped to say something, anything, that would give her strength. He first assured her the bullet had done small damage and he would be as good as new in a few weeks. Next, he told her what he had wanted to say numerous times when he held her in his arms; he told her he loved her and would never rest easy again until he had

her back beside him.

With that declaration, he carefully worded his following requests, hoping not to alarm her. He inquired about the address where she was staying, about the estate itself, if it was fenced, what sort of security devices were in place, if there were backup generators for electrical blackouts. He inquired as to the location of her bedroom in conjunction with the rest of the house, and urged her to draw a rough sketch of the layout of the house and grounds, to indicate the location of security devices, and areas posted by guards. Then he asked her to tell him Tobias's routine, his schedule, if he ever took trips or was away for several days.

When he finished his four-page letter, he reread it, deciding there was no way he could spare her concern and still get the information he was requesting. The letter clearly indicated his intentions. She would recognize his intent immediately even though she wouldn't know when he planned his coup. He stamped the envelope, addressed it in care of Rochelle at The Boutique, and put it in the outgoing mail.

REMY'S CALL CAME TO ROCHELLE four days after Michael mailed the letter. "Rochelle, your dress has been altered and we have in some new things you might be interested in," she said.

Rochelle thanked her, and dressed eagerly, her hopes flaring like a blaze of light over the prospect of hearing from Michael. She pushed the button on the phone and Gibson answered. "Let me guess," he said in lighthearted humor, "you need the car brought around."

"Yes, but..." she was going to ask how he knew, but the thought took shape immediately that he had heard her phone conversation with Remy. They had her phone bugged.

Gibson realized his error, and quickly tried to cover his mistake. “Mrs. Chandler, I’m really not psychic. It’s the only reason you ever call downstairs.”

“Yes, of course,” she replied, letting him think she believed the explanation for his blunder.

She sat in the back seat of the car with anxious anticipation for the letter from Michael. He’s alive, she kept thinking. He’s alive. Being miles apart, the letter would be almost as good as having him in person. Thinking of the letter also brought memories of Michael, all their times together, his touch and the excitement he could unravel in her veins, his strength when he held her in his arms and pressed her to his body. An intense yearning grew inside her, not unlike a profound and aching hunger.

Understanding her need to be discreet so as not to provoke the bodyguard’s suspicions, Remy knew a little of what Rochelle wanted to do. She wanted privacy to read her letter, and would probably write a return. She watched Rochelle choose several dresses from a rack and go into the dressing room. Once there, she asked Remy to clandestinely bring her a writing pad and envelope, then suggested she come in randomly with other dresses and carry out the ones she supposedly would try on.

The two hounds took up the same positions they took the last time she came to The Boutique.

Hurriedly, Rochelle tore into Michael’s letter, skimming over the words with a hunger to know all he had written. *Rochelle, I love you and I will never rest easy until you are back beside me again.* Rochelle read that part several times. Then realizing the need to hurry, she quickly read the rest of the letter, spending a thoughtful couple of minutes on Michael’s request for information about Tobias’s estate.

Just to make her lengthy stay in the dressing room look less suspicious, she put on one of the dresses, and went out into the shop to look at things on another rack. Gibson's head turned to look at her from his position out in front of the shop, and he was satisfied that all was well. Rochelle took a couple of dresses from the rack and went back to the dressing room to pen her reply to Michael.

My dearest Michael,

I am sending you the information you requested, but I must caution you. What you are planning is highly dangerous, and I would rather never see you again than know your life is in jeopardy over trying to rescue me. I beg you not to attempt this.

The five guards have guns and would not hesitate to use them on any encroachers discovered on the property. One of them monitors the televised security system in a security room near the kitchen in the rear of the house. It comprises numerous cameras that televise every inch of the property outside. The mounted cameras are on all sides of the house and at the gated entrance, which usually has a guard stationed there. While the cameras have back-up batteries and record on video tape, the security monitor can't televise them when there is a blackout, except when the generator kicks on.

During an electrical blackout, the generator automatically comes on after five minutes—the delay meant to offset power surges. It is located toward the left side of the house in the rear. A six-foot wall surrounds the estate with spikes at the top. Four guard dogs are on the property at night, and are capable of tearing a man to pieces. The master bedroom where I sleep faces the east with the only balcony on that side of the house.

Tobias mostly handles his affairs here at home, and often meets with his associates in his study. To the best of my knowledge, he routinely schedules his visits to South America

about every other month, sometimes monthly. I have no idea just now when his next trip will be since I wasn't here the last time he went. I dare not question him on such information lest he get suspicious of my interest and forbid me to leave the house.

Michael, please consider the dire consequences of such an attempt. I could not live, would not want to live, if something happened to you. I love you and though our lives may be separate from now on, I will always hold you dear in my heart.

She signed her name, and quickly sketched out a floor plan of the house and grounds on a separate sheet of paper. Remy came in with another armful of clothing, sweeping back out again with the ones she had brought in the last time. Rochelle quickly read what she had written.

Folding the pages, she stuffed the letter in the envelope, addressed and sealed it, giving it to Remy the next time she came in. She tried on another dress and came out into the store to model it for Remy and the other clerk. As she expected, Gibson's eyes swept over her, watching longer than necessary as she spun about, letting the skirt of her dress swirl about her silky thighs.

Gibson quickly looked away as her green eyes caught his. He dared not risk familiarity with her that might spur her to speak to Chandler about him, knowing as he did that the man was obsessed with his wife. He needed little provocation to take dire measures against any employee's unnecessary interest in her.

Remy boxed up Rochelle's purchases while Rochelle used the bathroom to reread Michael's letter. Finished, she tore it into dozens of tiny pieces, touched the last piece gingerly to her lips, and flushed it all down the toilet. Loneliness echoed throughout her body as she watched the torn bits disappear down the toilet bowl, the flushing water gurgling noisily.

When she was ready to go, Remy opened the back door and let Anderson inside. He immediately asked if he could use her restroom.

A resounding alarm went off in Rochelle's head. Had all the pieces flushed down? She cringed at the idea she had considered in the bathroom, debating over hiding the letter beneath the sink with tape so she could read it again. Her better judgment had won out against it. Now, she breathed with relief that she sent the letter to the sewer. Otherwise, it could have meant no further communication with Michael, and she would most likely have been restricted from leaving the house at all—or worse.

MICHAEL RECEIVED ROCHELLE'S LETTER, read it carefully many times, his mind absorbing the knowledge while he gave considerable thought to various other information he was considering. He would need someone who knew security systems, would need an electrician, a trucker, then two others who would back up his endeavors. He made a list of names of people he knew and their abilities. He calculated the time needed, the cost, and mentally toyed with numerous strategies. As the plan took shape and form inside his head, his final goal took on dimension.

Rochelle would be his again.

Chapter Thirty-Two

The following week, Remy called Rochelle to tell her she had gotten in a new shipment of clothing she might find interesting. For the sake of those whom she knew were listening in on the phone conversation, Rochelle joked about all the clothes she already had

and no place to wear them. “However, since shopping has become my only pastime, I suppose I must come see what you have. Perhaps tomorrow or the next day I’ll stop by when I go to the drugstore for some personal items.”

Rochelle’s heart thumped erratically every time Remy called. Happiness surged through her like a rush of energy, and she purposely fought to hide her excitement. Even with a mere letter, Michael had the power to send her into a buoyancy of spirit marred only by extreme longing for him. She craved his lips, his hands as they wove their magic, and she craved him, his physical presence in her life.

“Come whenever you like, but you know they’ll be picked over if you wait too long,” Remy replied, understanding the word game Rochelle played to keep the listeners from becoming suspicious of her frequent trips to the shop.

The next day when she visited Remy’s shop, just as she had done the last time, she read Michael’s letter, which began with gentle devotion. *Honey, I miss you more every day, and long to have you with me again.* She held the letter to her breast several moments before reminding herself she had to write a reply. Michael wrote a number of questions requiring answers, and in the dressing room, she wrote hurriedly, trying to be as thorough as possible. She declared her love for him, and how she missed him, and after sealing her letter in the envelope, handed it to Remy when she came to the dressing room again.

ROCHELLE’S NEXT STOP was to the drugstore. She purposely asked Tobias for spending money to use at the drugstore for smaller items she didn’t want to use the charge card for, and he peeled off a fifty-dollar bill. He was unwilling to give her more for fear she might try to use it to get away again. When her two bodyguards

followed her around like a puppy dog, bruising her delicate ego with prying eyes as she gathered personal items she needed, she felt impelled to object.

“Dermot, I don’t think my husband intended for the two of you to dog me to the point of making me nervous. Now please give me a little space.”

The two large men looked just slightly ill at ease, and moved away from her. They busied themselves at the magazine racks, pretending to read, when in reality, they were watching Rochelle’s every move. She could just imagine Tobias telling them not to take their eyes off her, and they knew better than disobey him.

Rochelle put her purchases in a tote basket, and thought about the letter Michael sent her, now flushed down the toilet.

By now, you know what my intentions are and what I am planning. As soon as you know when Tobias will be going out of the country, I need to know. Please have your friend at the shop give me a call. I will not be able to forewarn you of the time, so be prepared to move quickly. Bring nothing with you, just what you will be wearing.

Rochelle, I realize the danger in this, and if there were an easier way, I would opt for it. Unfortunately, there is no easier way.

She had given Remy Michael’s phone number, and worked out a communication technique whereby she could inform Remy when Tobias left the country again. Remy would call Michael, and then Michael would begin putting his plan into action. She could feel the excitement bubbling in her veins, fear of what lay ahead, as well as anxiousness over the prospect of seeing Michael once again.

MICHAEL TURNED THE BANK over to Ronald Zimmerman until further notice. Using the information Rochelle gave him, he

spent long hours drawing out plans, procedures, techniques, keeping some, discarding others. When he was certain all his plans were in place, he proceeded to hire the five men who would help him.

Curly and Joe, the two giant-sized truckers, who had stepped in the day of Michael and Wayne's confrontation, agreed readily to help after receiving an offer of Five Thousand Dollars each. Michael informed them that the generous sum was because of the danger involved. Wallace Udell, who installed the security system in Michael's home as well as in his father's house, also joined the team for the generous offer that would help catch up on unpaid bills. The risk Michael outlined was also worth it to Leland Maxwell, an electrician.

The last man was not as easy to come by as the others were. Since they would not be able to use weapons, he needed a man who could take someone out quickly if the need arose, someone who could back him up in a confrontation. After querying the four men, Udell said he knew such a person who lived in Bozeman who would fill the requirements.

Ramm Prescott was a black-belt martial arts instructor who frowned and said no when Udell approached him of the job offer. When Udell explained the Five Thousand Dollar payment for a job that would require going to Miami and putting in about an hour's effort, Ramm mentally calculated how much he needed to keep his dying Karate school afloat. He accepted.

With his selection of men completed, Michael called them together over several evenings at his home and went over every detail of his plan. Each man was given a special task to perform, and would be responsible themselves for whatever tools they would need. Michael discussed every minute detail, along with possible problems and with back-up measures if something should go wrong.

He developed his carefully charted plans on a time scale, right down to mere seconds.

“It’s important that we synchronize our efforts. We have to know what everyone else is doing at any given time. There will only be five minutes before the generators kick on after we shut the electricity down. Wallace, it will be up to you to knock out the generators within that five-minute period. The cameras have battery backups, and I would like them knocked out since they carry video footage; however, my main concern is putting the generators out of commission in order to black out the security monitors. That will keep the guards from tracking our movements.

“Curly, I’m counting on the diversion you’ll make at the gate to draw the guards. We have to prepare for any guards inside the house, as well. Ramm, that’s where you’ll come in to back me up, in the event I’m confronted by a guard,” Michael explained.

“Won’t we need a van that looks like it’s from the electrical company?” Leland Maxwell asked.

“I thought about that, but since the hour will be late at night, I think we’re safe with any kind of vehicle heavy enough to total the iron-gate out front. Leland is only going to be on the pole long enough to knock out the power to the house. We can pick up a used vehicle; possibly find something for sale in the newspaper and pay cash for it without leaving a paper trail.”

“What about the dogs?” Curly asked.

“That’s Joe’s job. He’ll set the lead by ten minutes, throw in about ten pounds of meat that’s been injected with a sedative the vet says will have them sleeping until noon the next day. Let’s just hope they haven’t been overfed so much that they’re not hungry.”

“Suppose they don’t eat it, what then?”

Michael reached to a table near him and drew a gun forward. He handed it to the men who looked at it and passed it around.

“It’s a dart gun. I have seen it used on television to put down wild animals. But where do you get the darts or the stuff that’s needed?” Joe asked.

“A banker makes lots of friends,” Michael smiled. “But this wasn’t easy to come by, and I do have to return it, so let’s not leave it behind.”

He reached back to the table again and brought out more hand-held items. “These will put a man down immediately if you can get close enough to touch him with it. I call them zappers, but I believe most people call them stun guns. They carry enough of an electrical charge to put a huge man out of commission. Each of you will carry one of these. However, keep in mind the men you will be encountering will have weapons and they will use them without hesitation. You may never get close enough to use these. I also have pepper spray, but again it is useless unless you are close to your foe. Our greatest strength will lie in avoiding detection. Hopefully, Curly will give enough diversion at the gate to keep the guards preoccupied.”

Leland Maxwell spoke up. “My job is to knock out the electricity at the same time that Curly implements his diversion?”

“Right, and you and Curly must co-ordinate your efforts simultaneously. It has to look like the accident knocked out the power, and it will take them a while to realize that is not the case. Fellows, do all of you know what you have to do?” Michael asked. He passed his gaze over each of them, and they nodded in turn.

“I’m waiting for a phone call, and I have no idea when it will come. When it does, we have to be prepared to leave immediately. We’ll be flown there in a private plane, but coming back, we’ll be driving.”

“Why? Couldn’t we get out faster on a plane?” asked Udell

“When they discover Rochelle missing, the airport will be the first place they look and I don’t trust the police there. Fellows, I must remind you that this is extremely dangerous. If any of you want out, say so now.”

No one said anything for a minute, and then Joe spoke up. “Mike, I’m with you.” He was remembering how Michael had loaned him the money for his rig after he had decided he could make more money working independently than driving for a truck broker. His credit report had been disgustingly sad, but Mike believed in him and trusted him.

“Yeah, me too,” agreed Curly who had also received his share of help from Michael when his wife needed some serious surgery for which he had no insurance to cover it.

The other three fellows nodded their acceptance. The promise of Five Thousand Dollars for a couple of days work was too enticing to turn down.

TOBIAS SPENT A LONG TIME on the phone one evening nearly eight weeks after Rochelle’s return home. They sat together in the family room downstairs, and Rochelle watched television while Tobias took his call. She heard snatches of his conversation, which sounded defensive. Whatever the other party was saying to him did not set well with Tobias. He was argumentative, and every word he said carried strong defenses. Then he said what Rochelle had been hoping to hear for the past several weeks.

“I’ll be out of here on the first available plane,” he said, and slammed the receiver down on the phone cradle. He continued staring at the phone several minutes, his mind deep in thought.

Rochelle glanced toward him and watched while he lifted his fist and slammed it on the table with a crash, sending an ashtray smashing to the floor. She jumped automatically, the old fears

waking with the speed of lightning at Tobias's display of anger that edged his face with worry lines about his eyes and mouth. Something wasn't going well for him, but Rochelle had no idea what the problem was, except, the source of the call came from someone down in Colombia. From the snatches of conversation she heard, she gathered that someone wasn't too pleased with Tobias.

"The fucking sons of bitches!" he swore loudly, reacting in an anxious rage to the message just received.

He picked up the phone and dialed a number. "Frank, what the hell is going on? You said everything was in the bag. Why is Judge Salvador not handling Monroe's case?"

Tobias listened, shaking his head. "Who in the hell told him he could take a vacation now? Get that son of a bitch back here and tell him to do something. Contact the attorneys and tell them to find some way to slow things down until Salvador gets back. If something goes wrong with this, we all go down together. Frank, don't let me down, man. I am counting on you to handle this. We're in one hell of a mess."

Tobias's fears were closer to home now instead of down in Columbia. Sanchez was madder than hell over the loose structure his Miami organization had fallen to, but the state attorney's office was Tobias's biggest concern just now.

Berne Lindberg, State Attorney, had been trying to put Tobias away for years. Busting Monroe Tatum and getting the judge to deny bail, was the ideal situation Lindberg had kept waiting for a long time. If Monroe suspected he was going to do time, he would be compelled, and completely willing, to turn state's evidence against Tobias for a deal. If he turned on Tobias, he would name others; thus causing the police to issue arrest warrants, and arrest everyone named. In turn, Lindberg would be obliged to offer them a deal to turn state's evidence against Tobias; thus, he would gain the

evidence he needed to bury Tobias Chandler. It was a chance in a lifetime to wrap up the whole drug network in his city. Tobias had been using the justice department at his disposal and flaunting the courts for years. Lindberg wanted Tobias. All the others meant nothing to him.

Tobias listened to what Frank was saying, and then hung up the phone.

Rochelle pretended to be preoccupied with the television program, but she could tell Tobias was extremely worried about something. *We'll go down together*, he had said, and she wondered at his statement. Was the drug cartel in Columbia unhappy with him, or did he mean the police were on to him? Either way, it gave her a surge of adrenaline to know that he was experiencing just a dab of the fear he had inflicted upon her over the past years. Nothing would make her happier than to see him arrested on charges for whatever it was that he might be guilty of perpetrating. Perhaps there was light at the end of the tunnel after all.

When the television program ended, she went upstairs. Tobias came up much later, showered and lay down beside her. She expected him to reach out for her as usual for his nightly sexual activity. Instead, he lay still on his back for a long time, eventually tossing and turning restlessly. She knew he was preoccupied with whatever was on his mind after the telephone conversation.

Rochelle went to sleep, blessed with relief that Tobias was too absorbed to bother with her.

THE COMING MORNING, IRRITABLE and sullen, Tobias packed a bag. "You are not to leave the house while I'm gone," he ordered, the worry lines on his forehead having grown deeper since last night.

He had lost weight over the past few weeks, having to tighten his belt. He hadn't minded so much losing weight since his paunch needed some reduction, but it bothered him that the worry lines in his face had aged him considerably. Wanting to hide some of the new wrinkles that seemed to spring up in his face overnight, he stopped shaving and started growing a beard, it as black as night with traces of gray. Rochelle not only hated its sandpaper abrasiveness against her face and body, but she hated the way Tobias looked. It made him look diabolical, frightening, and more dangerous than previously.

"Tobias, what will I do here twenty-four hours a day? Surely, you don't expect me to sit here all that time and do nothing."

"I do expect it, and I damn well will have you locked in your room if you even look like you're going to disobey me. There'll be no more running away like you did before."

"What if I need something from the store?"

"Then you send one of the boys. I am warning you, Rochelle, I will not tolerate any more of your foolishness. If you ever attempt to do something like you did before, I will not be so forgiving. I'll bury you if I have to."

"How long will you be gone?"

"I'll be gone five or six days, maybe seven at the most. A jet is being sent for me," he added, his suitcase in his hand. At the bedroom door, he turned and looked at her several moments, a hard frown further marring his rough features just before he walked out.

After he had sufficient time to leave the house, Rochelle looked out the window, watching the limo roll down the drive. She wanted to call Remy, but decided to wait lest the guards be suspicious at her calling so soon after Tobias's departure.

Downstairs, while the cook served her breakfast, she scanned the pages of the newspaper, looking for someone named Monroe

who was on trial for... whatever it was. In the local section, she found it. The charges against him were for smuggling drugs into the country. There wasn't much written, and no reference was made to Tobias directly.

Sources say Monroe Tatum is tied to the Columbia drug cartel in conjunction with several prominent residents in Miami. The mayor's office has issued an all out crackdown on drug trafficking between the two factions, and the state attorney's office is proceeding with an extensive investigation into allegations against possible suspects attached to the drug trade.

Rochelle read the article, and then read it again. She recalled what Tobias had said on the phone. *If Monroe goes down, we go down with him.* He had indicated concern over Judge Salvador being away on vacation, the judge obviously one of Tobias's reliable sources within the justice system. She gathered that Tobias must have been paying bribes to Judge Salvador and others to prevent prosecution of associates.

If Tobias failed to do his job, then the organization would have too many weak links that could curtail the smooth functioning of their operation. The meetings Tobias conducted with men who came to his study suggested he likely headed the entire Miami drug operation for the cartel. If Tobias fell short in his responsibilities, it could wipe out their entire Miami network. Everything Rochelle had learned about Tobias confirmed everything her parents had told her, or at least tried to.

Rochelle was thinking of calling Remy when the phone rang around eleven o'clock. Remy informed her she had in a new shipment with some adorable dresses for the changing season.

"I can't come down, Remy," Rochelle said unhappily. "Tobias has left the country for five or six days and he doesn't want me to go

out while he's gone. I will see you when he returns. Maybe you won't sell everything by then."

"I'll choose a couple of things I think you'll like and save them," Remy said, hanging up the phone. Immediately, she picked it up again, and dialed Michael's number.

"Mr. Matheson, Mrs. Chandler asked that I inform you her husband will be out of the country for five or six days."

"Thank you, Remy."

Michael immediately called his men together to implement their plans.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Each night after her shower, Rochelle put on slacks and shirt and slept in them. She kept comfortable sneakers handy to complete her ensemble. Michael's last letter indicated she was not to take anything with her except what she wore, and she wanted to be ready on a minute's notice.

It was hard to fall asleep now, knowing she might be seeing Michael in a matter of hours. The fact they would all be in danger of the guards who would not hesitate to fire their weapons at intruders left Rochelle extremely worried. However, she must trust Michael to know what he was doing, and the fact that his intrusion would come as a surprise might very well ensure their safety and success.

Tobias did not permit the guards upstairs, except when he summoned one, which was rarely, but she knew they would not hesitate to come up and check on her if they suspected foul play. Therefore, nightly she locked her door, and propped a chair back

beneath the doorknob, sure Michael would come from the outside onto the bedroom balcony.

Lately, she had spent a good deal of time on the balcony, looking out over the wide stretch of green lawn where the dogs, released around five each evening, ran about playfully, barking at the least noise or movement. They were vicious animals as Rochelle had witnessed when the trainer worked with them, seeing their sharp fangs tearing into the padded sleeves on his arms and legs. She thought about Michael and the damage the dogs were capable of doing, hoping he would wear pads like those the trainer wore.

She knew she was making a nervous wreck out of herself trying to anticipate all that would be happening. She even tried to formulate her own plan in the event something went wrong. Checking the nightstand on Tobias's side of the bed, she found the gun he kept there, checked it for ammunition, which she learned how to do by watching Tobias, and slipped it in her purse. If she had to use it to save Michael, she would. That would probably be the only reason that would prompt her to fire the gun.

THE THIRD NIGHT FOLLOWING Tobias's departure, at exactly three o'clock in the morning, Joe threw a large bag of raw beef over the fence. Scenting the smell, the dogs came awake with growls and snarls, their eyes keening anxiously as they rose up on their haunches, barking and running in the direction of some unknown source.

"Damn!" Joe cursed. He was hoping to draw the dogs without them barking. They would wake every guard on the place. Wearing dark clothing, like the other men, with a ski hood over his head, he scaled the wall so he could watch as the dogs came hurdling toward where the meat lay upon the ground. As soon as the scent touched their nostrils, they stopped barking, sniffed about the meat, and then

with grunts and snarls, began tearing into it. Michael had said the sedative was fast acting, but just in case, they all kept their pepper spray in readiness.

Joe scanned the area of lawn inside the brick wall, and breathed a sigh of relief when he didn't see guards running out to investigate. They obviously were not sensitive to the dogs barking, or else, believed the dogs were vicious enough to patrol the grounds independently.

Exactly ten minutes later when the dogs began wobbling on weak legs, falling, then struggling up only to fall again, Leland Maxwell was already at the top of the power pole, looking at his watch, ready to synchronize his efforts with the distraction Curly would initiate.

Leland saw Curly come roaring down the street in a large utility van weaving dangerously, taking a sharp right that brought it crashing into the gate with a noise that sounded like an explosion. At the same moment, all the lights on the estate suddenly went dark, giving Michael, Ramm Prescott, and Wallace Udell the blackout they needed. They scaled the wall in meager seconds and hastened across the lawn, keeping to the shadows of trees and shrubs.

Wallace Udell sabotaged the generator in just a few seconds after he reached it, and headed back toward the wall where he would be in readiness when Michael and Ramm returned with Rochelle. He could hear the high-pitched voices of men as they ran toward the gate, and in the darkness, he could see the light colored shirts of three. That meant there was still at least one or two inside somewhere.

“Where are the damn dogs?” One of the guards asked, looking all about.

“Something's wrong,” another stated in alarm, suddenly reaching the gate to find it lying upon the driveway, and the front

end of a van smashed to smithereens, with no sign of a driver. The gate guard was flat on his back, his face looking pulverized like hamburger, but he was alive.

“Stay here, Anderson. Gibson you take the left and I’ll take the right,” said Dave, running along the edge of the six-foot brick wall with his gun in his hand. Then tripping on the dogs, he stumbled and fell, and Joe stepped from the shadows and sent a deafening blow to the back of his head. Joe retrieved the gun slung from the guard’s hand, it lying like black ink in the pale moonlight.

Curly and Leland were already in one of the two cars that sat along the street in the shadow of a huge old tree while Joe waited in the shadow where the sleeping dogs lay beside the unconscious man.

ROCHELLE WOKE FROM a light sleep to what sounded like a heavy clap of thunder. Listening carefully while her senses remained dulled by the dredges of sleep, she closed her eyes again when she heard nothing more. She dozed peacefully when a gloved hand closed over her mouth, and her eyes flew open, but she could see absolutely nothing because wherever she looked there was complete darkness. Only on the balcony was there any trace of light, the soft glow of the moon spreading a silvery cast. She saw a shadow and the gloved hand smothered the startled scream rising in her throat.

“Rochelle, it’s me, Michael. Do not scream. I am going to remove my hand. We have to move quickly.”

At that same instant, heavy pounding sounded on her door, and a tiny squeak indicated someone trying to turn the doorknob. “Mrs. Chandler, open the door. Open the door.”

“Don’t answer,” Michael told her, and pulled her off the bed. She slid her feet into her sneakers and grabbed her purse at the same time a heavy thud struck the bedroom door. The chair she put there

kept it from opening, and the thud sounded again. This time a spray of splintered wood flew inward and the chair disintegrated.

The shadow Rochelle had seen on the balcony seemed to float with easy grace into the room on stealthy feet. Her eyes were more accustomed to the darkness now, and she could see the shadow standing with his back to the wall next to the door. Another kick sent the damaged door slamming back against the wall, and when the guard stepped inside the room with his gun extended in front of him, he never knew what hit him.

Ramm, the shadow Rochelle had seen, knocked the gun from the guard's hand. He sidestepped the man's beefy fist, and then put him down in one fast move with a hard, fast kick that knocked him unconsciousness.

The noise made by the guard kicking in the bedroom door brought another guard, the light from his flashlight bouncing up the stairs as he came in pursuit. "Troy, what's going on?" he shouted as his feet pounded on the upstairs landing and he sprinted the distance to Rochelle's bedroom. His flashlight waltzed horizontally back and forth across the space in front of him, bouncing off the hallway walls.

When Troy failed to answer, his steps became slower, more hesitant and careful, stepping across the threshold with caution. Upon aiming his flashlight into Rochelle's room, the first thing he saw was the sprawled figure of Troy on the floor. Before he could move the beam of his flashlight anywhere else in the room, a harsh chop on the back of his neck sent him down on all fours. He crumpled flat on his face and stomach on the carpeted floor next to Troy.

By the time Ramm joined them, Michael had already lowered Rochelle over the balcony by a rope tied around her, and was going down a second rope. Ramm shimmied down the rope right behind

him, following in Michael and Rochelle's wake as they sprinted around the house toward the wall where Joe and the others waited.

The sound of gunfire rang out, and the whiz of a bullet spun by Michael's ear, so close that another inch would have found the bullet buried inside his skull. Another hissed somewhere nearby, and they had to make an instant decision to either go straight for the wall, or fall back in the shadows.

Ramm made the decision. "Michael, keep to the darkness beneath the trees. I'll try to cut back around through the shade of the shrubs and trees and draw his attention while the two of you make it over the fence.

The sound of another gunshot exploded in their ears, much closer than the last.

Michael pulled Rochelle behind a tree trunk while Ramm ran toward the house in a weaving pattern, the moon just light enough to cast his black-clothed figure in a dark shadow against the pale light. More gunfire burst out in sharp repeated explosions, and as soon as Michael saw the guard running in the same direction Ramm took, he pulled Rochelle into a run toward the wall.

Joe stooped on the top of the wall now, ready to help. He grabbed hold of the rope wrapped around Rochelle's waist after Michael threw it up to him. He put pulled her up, and then lowered her to the other side where Curly caught her before her feet touched the ground. Michael was close behind, scaling the wall as soon as Joe tossed the rope back to him. He was on the other side in less than thirty seconds, encircling Rochelle with his arm.

"Go, go!" Curly called in whispered shouts as he motioned Joe, Michael, Rochelle and Leland toward the lead car. "Me and Udell will wait for Ramm."

At that moment, Ramm hid in the shadows behind a tall bush around the corner of the house. As the guard came tearing around

the corner, Ramm was waiting for him, and before the guard could get off the shot his finger was already squeezing the trigger to discharge, Ramm disarmed him as his leg swung out, his foot slamming with enough force against the gun-hand to break the man's wrist. Following with a fast punch to his middle, the man bent double. Ramm followed with a chop upon his neck and shoulder, and the guard went down without a fight.

Ramm wasted no time getting to the wall. He shimmied up the rope, and scaled the wall in brief seconds, sprinting to the waiting car that was already moving before he jumped inside. He closed the door behind him.

"Whew!" he said in a puff of breath. "Those bullets came awfully close. Did Michael and Rochelle make it okay?"

"They're at least three blocks ahead of us," Curly stated with a pleased grin on his face. Slapping each of their hands, he said, "We did great, fellows. We did it!"

Up ahead in the lead car, Leland Maxwell, the electrician, squirmed in his seat, turning toward Joe who was driving. "I'm glad that's over with. Those damn bullets nearly gave me a heart attack."

"It was like taking candy from a baby," Joe laughed, experiencing a surge of adrenaline he hadn't felt since he was a young man involved in Saturday night barroom brawls that kept him and his friends preoccupied against boredom. He glanced at his busted fist and laughed some more. "That damn guard at the gate won't be breathing out of his nose for a long time. I haven't had so much fun in ages."

"We're not out of it yet," Michael told them. "They'll probably put the cops on us. Watch your speed and watch out for police cars. Curly will stay far enough behind so we won't be suspected of traveling together in the event one of us is stopped."

Neither Rochelle nor Michael had spoken to each other. She sat on the seat next to him trying to control her violent shaking as though she were freezing to death. Michael put his arm about her and pulled her next to him. “Are you all right?” he asked softly, feeling her trembling against him.

“Yes, but I’m afraid this car will need a wheel alignment if I don’t stop shaking.”

That remark brought chuckles from all around, and Michael kissed her cheek, catching the soft scent of lavender he recalled so well. He breathed deeply, and gave her a warm hug. He had just pulled off what Rochelle had feared might be an impossible feat. Yet, sitting next to Michael was proof of their success. Tobias wouldn’t be pleased with his guards, she decided, and wished she could see Tobias’s face when the guards informed him of what happened.

Their car moved into an area bright with streetlights, which shone inside the car. Rochelle observed Michael in his dark clothing looking like some dark, dangerous and shadowy figure that belied the gentleness she remembered so well. Withdrawing his arm from about her, he quickly pulled the black shirt over his head and discarded it on the floorboard. Then pulling a short-sleeved sport shirt off the seat, he put it on quickly and buttoned it. The men up front did likewise, changing out of the dark shirts to don lighter ones. When they passed a dumpster, Joe brought the car to a stop, and Leland threw the dark shirts and black hoods in the dumpster. Just in case the police stopped them, there wouldn’t be any incriminating evidence to mark their recent activities.

Rochelle glanced at Michael, the thrill of elation at seeing him again leaving her giddy. “I didn’t hear the dogs, Michael. Where were they?”

Michael chuckled. “They had a steak dinner and turned in for the night. I imagine they’ll sleep soundly until morning.”

Michael kept looking out the back window. Joe was also glancing through the rearview mirror. “You see that Mike?” he asked. “You don’t think its Curly, do you?”

“I see it. Take a right at the next street. If it follows us, Rochelle and I will hop out and hide in the shadows. Call Curly on the two-way radio and give him the name of the street so he can pick us up if something goes wrong. If worse comes to worst, we will take a cab to the nearest motel from this location. If you can’t find us and we get separated, I’ll get a rental car and head out of town. You guys do the same.”

Handing Rochelle a brown paper bag, he said, “Honey, you’re going to be a blonde again. You’d better put this on.”

She quickly stuffed her hair beneath the wig, and straightened it upon her head. “I think I like this one better than the last one I wore,” she said with a nervous chuckle to hide her anxiousness. She was scared and still shaking. The lateness of the hour did not offer heavy enough traffic to give them good cover.

Leland called Curly on the two-way radio and gave him their location. “Keep your eye on that car that’s moving up behind us. I can’t tell if it’s the police or not. If it is, Michael and Rochelle will jump out and take cover in the shadow of a storefront. I’ll be in touch.”

Joe turned on another street, and they all were keeping an eye on the rear to see if the other car would follow them.

The other car, a couple of blocks back, turned in behind them.

“They’re following us, Mike. I am going to turn another corner, and the two of you jump out and hide in the shadow of a doorway. If it is the cops, I will ask for the nearest motel as a diversion and make my way there. I will circle back here just in case Curly misses

you. Don't take a cab unless you absolutely have to. The police will put them on alert, I imagine."

They turned the corner and Michael and Rochelle jumped out and ran for the cover of a darkened doorway. They hovered in the shadows and watched as a police cruiser rushed by, following Curly and Leland. Staying in the shadows of the buildings, they backtracked to the first side street where Joe had turned off. Soon they saw headlights and Michael thought it looked like the car Curly drove. When it came close enough that he recognized it, Michael stepped out of the shadows, and waved.

When Curly stopped at the curb and they jumped in, he turned around in the street and went back the way he came, picking up his route again at the light. "Was that the police following you, Mike?"

"Yes, they'll be all over the place soon. We have to get out of here as fast as possible. We will wait for Joe to call us. It won't be safe for us to call him if the police pulls him over."

"Maybe we need to find a motel and lie low until tomorrow. With more traffic on the streets, we'll be less observable," Curly suggested.

"No, that's out. As soon as Chandler learns what has happened, he will have everybody he knows out looking for Rochelle. I think we best get the hell out of here. Let's just keep moving."

"You got it!"

Chapter Thirty-Four

Keeping in touch through the two-way radios, Michael's group hooked up with Joe after he gave them directions to the gas station where he had stopped. The few remaining hours of nighttime

seemed to crawl as the two vehicles, traveling with at least a block between them, took numerous detours away from main thoroughfares. Near dawn, the traffic began picking up with delivery trucks and early morning proprietors beating the regular work crowd who would pack the streets bumper to bumper soon after sunrise. Joe, being in the lead vehicle, determined their detouring routes until they could pick up the Sunshine State Parkway far enough outside the city so they would be less apt to encounter a patrol car.

Approximately six hours later when they came to Wildwood, everyone was breathing easier. Stopping at a car rental place, they decided to trade the two cars for two others, just in case the police had a make on the cars. Then they had a late breakfast and got back on the road.

No one said a great deal during their drive from Miami, all keenly aware they could be the source of an APB. All the men in both cars kept their eyes peeled for patrol cars, careful to flow at the speed of traffic to avoid drawing attention.

“Chelle, I think it’s safe to take off your wig now,” Michael said.

“Are you sure?” Rochelle asked. “I was sort of getting used to wearing it.” She was snuggled up against Michael and loving the feel and texture of his body next to her.

“I’m sure,” he said, reaching up and playfully plucking the wig off her head. Her long auburn-gold curls tumbled off her head and down over her shoulders. Michael ran his fingers in her hair, and pressed a kiss upon her cheek.

They had all changed their seating arrangements following breakfast. Leland went to ride with Udell and Curly, and Ramm took the wheel of the lead car. Joe rested on the passenger seat after having driven all the way from Miami. Rochelle and Michael sat in the back seat.

“Miss, that’s some place you were living in back there,” Joe said, turning on the seat to glance at Rochelle.

“Yes, I suppose it is,” she said. “Please call me Rochelle.”

“Okay, Rochelle. What exactly does your husband do?”

Rochelle glanced at Michael, not certain a discussion about Tobias was something she wanted to get into. Michael nodded his head, however, and she answered as best she could. “I was prevented from knowing about his business, but I suspect he was involved in the smuggling of drugs out of Columbia and the drug trade in Miami. I never knew a great deal of what goes on, but I suspect things aren’t going well just now. I think my husband might be on the hot seat and it all has to do with a man recently arrested, whose name is Monroe Tatum.

Rochelle had cut out the article about Monroe Tatum from the newspaper and put it in her purse. Careful not to expose the gun she carried there, she pulled the clipping out and handed it to Michael. “I thought you might be interested in this. I think it might be at the root of some of the problems Tobias is experiencing right now.”

He took the article, unfolded it and scanned the contents. “It sounds like the State Attorney is going after Chandler, probably by cutting a deal with Tatum. That means Chandler is under the gun to get Tatum out of jail by any means he can.”

“I heard him mention the name of a judge. He is feeling intimidated right now because of this Tatum person. The judge who was supposed to get the case is on vacation. I heard Tobias tell someone on the phone to get Judge Salvador back on his bench and have the attorneys do what they could to stall the trial. From the tone of his voice on the phone, the Columbia people were upset with Tobias. That was his reason for flying down there.”

“If the state attorney can get one of the organization’s men to cop a plea by turning Chandler over to them, then he’s in hot water.

I imagine that is what he is afraid of happening. What I do not understand is how he could have avoided the same kind of situation in the past. Surely there have been other arrests of people in his organization,” Michael said.

“I’ve heard bits and pieces of information when Tobias has talked on the phone. I think the attorneys get them out on bail and then they disappear. I’ve heard Tobias on a couple of occasions on the phone tell someone to make so-and-so disappear.”

“Jesus!” Joe exclaimed. “Mike, did you realize all this when you decided to bust the little lady out?”

“I didn’t go into it totally blind, Joe,” he said, glancing at Rochelle.

“Well, I for one am glad it’s over and we got Rochelle out of there. I’m not going to ask how you got involved with someone like him, Rochelle.” Intended or not, it came out as a question.

“Thank you for not asking,” Rochelle replied and let the conversation drop.

Everyone was in a lighthearted spirit thus far, their success giving them an adrenaline high that simmered down by slow degrees until a normalcy prevailed. Everything occurring back at the estate took no longer than twenty minutes or less, but opinions and reactions to occurrences strung the tale out much longer than it actually was. It had been a successful venture for them and they could go back to their lives without an afterthought; at least, everyone except Rochelle and Michael. Tobias would be a dangerous opponent now for them both.

“Living in a fortress like that, and with the number of people on his payroll, your husband obviously has a lot of secrets to hide. Mike, I wouldn’t take him lightly. A man like him doesn’t take easily to their wife being snatched from their bed,” Joe said, thinking about the gunshot wound Michael had sustained, and

understanding fully why Michael paid them so much. Their lives had been at risk and only a generous sum would have compensated them in such a dangerous venture.

Michael looked slightly grave, his jaws clamped tightly shut. He was thinking about that very bed Joe had mentioned. He was thinking about Rochelle sleeping in that bed with Tobias, Tobias touching her, Tobias making love to her. A raw wound seemed to coil up inside him like a poisonous snake ready to strike. He knew exactly what it was, jealousy. He was so damn jealous at the thought of another man touching her that it tore into his gut like mighty fangs.

The mood was much too serious, so Rochelle attempted to lighten things a bit. "I imagine there'll be some job openings for guards when Tobias comes back from Columbia."

The two men in the front seat burst out laughing. "I have a feeling you're right," Joe agreed. "Mike, I wouldn't have missed this for anything," he ventured with a grin. "You certainly planned it all carefully. Frankly, I was afraid it wouldn't come off so well."

"When that bullet whizzed by within an inch of my skull, I feared the same thing," Michael said with dry humor, feeling Rochelle stiffen beside him.

"It came that close, huh?" Joe questioned, while his brows furrowed with concentration over the possible outcome. "Jesus, if you had been shot, the whole place might have become a battle ground. We might all have been killed."

"I think we were all pretty lucky when it came to dodging bullets. I thought I'd nearly taken one or two before I took out that last guard," Ramm told them, it being the first time he had opened his mouth since taking the wheel.

"Fellows, we can all give ourselves a pat on the back for a job well done," Michael told them.

“It’ll be dark soon. Why don’t we stop some place to eat?” Joe suggested.

“Mike, if we’re going to drive straight through, we’re going to be mighty tired when we get there,” Ramm speculated.

“Maybe we should get a room and grab a few hours sleep before we go on. I could sure use it,” Joe said, yawning at the thought of a comfortable bed.

“I think we all could use a rest now that we’re far enough away from Miami to breathe a bit easier. I have been thinking we should probably get a plane the rest of the way. We will have dinner and inquire where the nearest airport is, and then I will see about making flight arrangements—maybe charter a plane large enough to accommodate us all. Call Curly and let him know our plans.”

“Man, that would be fine with me,” Ramm suggested. “This traveling by car will get monotonous before we get home.”

They pulled off at the next exit ramp.

THE NEAREST AIRPORT was about forty miles ahead. Michael called to inquire about flight arrangements. Michael was put in touch with a local pilot who would be glad to transport them, but because the pilot had taken on an earlier reservation, there would be a two-night layover.

They rented rooms at a nearby motel.

For the sake of appearances, Michael rented Rochelle her own room adjoining his. Afterwards, it crossed his mind he opted for separate rooms for reasons other than appearance. No matter how hard he tried, he could not get it from his mind that Rochelle was with Tobias the past several weeks, sleeping in his bed, having him make love to her. Visualizing Tobias touching her in those intimate places, and making love to Rochelle, was a mental picture that ate at him with such fervor he couldn’t let go of it. He was so damn

jealous it was messing up his mind badly.

Jealousy was a new emotion for him, and he knew of no easy way to control it. In addition to that, as if jealousy were not already enough venom in his blood, anger at Tobias Chandler came in the form of resentment, outrage, and hostility. Unable to inflict his wrath on Tobias, Rochelle became a handy target. He was neither ignorant nor a fool, and he knew she was not responsible for what Tobias did to her. It was not her fault. If she had had her way, she never would have gone back with Tobias. Nevertheless, the fact of the matter was, she had gone with him and had participated in sex with him.

Michael actually found himself shuddering when he thought of Tobias making love to Rochelle, and oddly, he wanted to shove her away from him, to heap on her the misery he was experiencing. As insane as such emotions made him, he was not sure how to go about getting this venom from his system. Rochelle did not deserve his attitude.

Yet, the jealousy lodged in his brain like a leech he was unable to shake off.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Michael dreaded the two long nights ahead of them while waiting for their flight back to Montana. With separate bedrooms and him feeling the way he did, he knew he was bound to create problems neither he nor Rochelle needed. He wanted her, but jealous anger aroused such conflicting feelings he did not have the inclination to seek her out, thus, causing him to curse his damn stupidity.

To hurt her with what he was feeling would not be fair. Yet, his jealousy was so replete, he felt helpless to deal with it. He kept asking himself how a woman could lie beneath a man and not respond. If she responded, wasn't she participating? Pondering the reasoning of an *if this, then that* mentality, he built a strong case against Rochelle. As uncharacteristic as it was of him to feel jealousy, it now crippled his objectivity. He loved Rochelle and resented her at once. He knew his insidious thinking was unwarranted, knew Rochelle wasn't responsible for anything Tobias did to her; but it failed to restore normal thought to his screwed up mind.

Jealousy! It was the most bitter and useless of all emotions. Michael realized it was like a sick disease; yet, he failed to find an antidote against its potency.

He lay upon his bed, stripped down to briefs after showering, one ankle thrown over the other, staring up at the ceiling. She was in the next room with an adjoining door between them. For the past thirty minutes, he had considered numerous approaches to that door and her room, and none of them made more sense than the true reason of simply wanting to be with her. Finally, finding the bed too confining, he pulled on his trousers, and walked toward the door between their two rooms. He raised a fist, about to knock, when he stopped himself.

Damn it, he thought. What is wrong with me? He had spent a fortune hiring men to aid him in her rescue, had risked all their lives to that end, and now he did not have the nerve to knock on her damn door. He fell back on the bed and stared at the ceiling some more, mentally cursing himself.

Rochelle finished her shower, toweled dry, and put her clothing back on, expecting Michael to join her. She took a brush from her purse and brushed her hair until it shone with a lustrous splendor of

wild curls and shimmering satiny waves. She paced the floor a few times, waiting for Michael. She went to stand at the adjoining door, then put her ear against it, thinking she heard someone breathing on the other side. It must have been her imagination, she decided, and turned from the door, a nagging emptiness gnawing inside her.

The longer she waited for him, the more uneasy her doubts became. The two of them had not said a great deal to each other on the trip from Miami. She credited it to the fact that they were not alone; yet, she instinctively felt something was bothering Michael.

Finally, deciding Michael must have fallen asleep, she stripped off her clothing down to her bra and panties, and fell exhausted upon the bed, feeling suddenly alone and unwanted. She yearned to have Michael near her.

ROCHELLE WAS DOZING FITFULLY when the soft knock sounded on the adjoining door. It was so soft she was not sure she had even heard it. Then it came again, and she rose sharply to a sitting position, throwing her feet off the side of the bed. She tiptoed to the door and listened. “Yes?” she whispered so softly she could barely hear her own voice.

“Chelle, it’s me, Michael. Open the door.”

She unlocked the door on her side and pulled it open.

“Honey, I’m sorry if I woke you. I had to see you.” He gazed at her, the sweet smell from a recent shower emanating from her person. Here she was, in body, spirit, and mind, the love of his life, turning his stomach sour with the bitter bile of jealousy.

“Oh, Michael,” she murmured dismally, “I thought... I just thought...”

“What did you think?” he whispered softly, reaching out to touch and caress her cheek.

“I thought you didn’t want to be with me.”

He laughed with irony. “Not want to be with you! I’ve traveled nearly three thousand miles to find you again, and you think I don’t want to be with you?” He reached out his arms.

“I’m sorry, Michael, for doubting you. It’s just that I’m…” Rochelle needed no further coaxing. She went into his arms, her breasts pressing against his naked chest, their hearts pounding like hammers against each other.

Michael’s hands glazed over the smooth softness of her back, undoing her bra, pulling it off her shoulders and tossing it aside. His hand crawled up beneath the mane of hair to the nape of her neck. Slanting his mouth over hers, the tip of his tongue flicked across her lips in a fierce melding of need. His lips burned and enticed, their fiery insistence warming Rochelle to the core of her womanhood. It was the reunion she wanted, had expected.

God, it had been too long, Michael thought now as desire rose and his deft hands scorched every inch of Rochelle’s desirable body with his heated caresses. Backing her toward the bed, he strung a path of hot kisses down to the hollow of her throat.

Then he lowered her to the bed, his powerful muscles flexing with strength as he supported her weight. Brushing her face with kisses, his lips made a trail down her tingling flesh to taste the ripeness of taut nipples that seemed to quiver beneath the plundering of his tongue. Covering a nipple with his mouth, he sucked on the small orb, the globes of her breasts rising and falling in passionate surrender. He was lost to something more demanding than jealousy—the gathering of stormy passion in his needy body.

Michael wanted more than anything to give Rochelle as much pleasure as she was giving him, but as he kissed and fondled her, removing her bikini panties, his hands and fingers claiming the sensitive areas photographed in his memory, his manhood throbbed out of control with need. He touched her wet moistness, content with

her readiness, and he hovered above her, his manhood brushing the fertile path of her femininity, then sinking deep inside her moist warmth.

In an answering response, Rochelle slid her long slender fingers over the rippling muscles of his shoulder and back, down to his firm buns that hovered above her. She touched her tongue to his ear, the tip fondling and teasing the tiny hollows inside, her teeth nibbling gently at the lobe.

With a groan that verged on pure pain, Michael silently extolled the joy of his pleasure, moving with purposefulness to deliver similar joy to the woman he loved. He moved slowly at first, in and out, deeper and deeper, until her hips came up to meet him and claim all of him.

“God, how I’ve needed you,” he declared, smothering her face with kisses as his passion rose to a precipice with hers. Then they both plunged over the edge in a flaming whirlpool of quivering, hot-white fire.

In the aftermath of their frenzied lovemaking, Michael raised himself on his arms, staring at her delicate face through the shadows of the pale light penciling in from around the outer edges of the draperies. Her face, embedded into his memory for all time, was the face of the woman he loved.

Rochelle reached up, touching her hand to the beads of perspiration on his face, straining to see his shadowed features. She traced the outline of his lips, and planted a tender kiss there. “I love you, Michael.”

“I know,” he said huskily, bending to feather a kiss against her lips. She became silent with expectancy, and Michael was certain she waited for him to declare his love for her. Sadly, now that his attention was less focused, the hateful jealousy came flooding back

leaving him voiceless. He rolled to one side, keeping her coupled with him, their hips and thighs joined.

Rochelle wanted to hear him say it, wanted to hear him admit his love for her. He wrote it in his letters, had even mumbled the words the afternoon they had made love before Tobias abducted her back to Miami. Neither of those times, however, sufficed. She wanted to hear it now, needed the sense of security the three little words could give her.

Her heart felt suddenly heavy with regret that Michael failed to say the one thing capable of clearing her disturbing doubts. Even while he held her, his hands glazing gentle caresses over her back and shoulders, there was darkness in his mood that she sensed and felt. It sorely bothered her that even during intimacy he put a barrier between them.

Michael was not aware Rochelle might read something into his quietness. Enraptured by the surrounding warmth of her womanhood, he savored the passionate intensity in the aftermath of their lovemaking. Lying sated with her still in his arms, he should have been the happiest man alive, especially after successfully rescuing her from Tobias. Nonetheless, niggling thoughts of Tobias's intimacy with Rochelle destroyed his peace of mind as nothing else could. How could he come to terms with the fact of sharing her with another?

Feeling a mixture of anger, repentance and guilt, his hand slid over her breast and along her abdomen to her navel. His hand froze. In his mind's eye, he could see Tobias doing the same thing. His head reeled out of control, his breathing becoming short and labored. His jaw clamped tightly shut until he could hear his teeth grinding together. He was actually experiencing an anxiety attack, and knew he had to get the hell out of there and back to his room.

“Michael, what is it?” Rochelle implored in a troubled tone. She sensed his distress, felt it in the tense stiffness of his neck and shoulders.

“It’s nothing, honey. I’d better go back to my room.” He swung his legs over the side of the bed. “I wouldn’t want the boys to find me here in the morning.”

“No,” she cried, holding his arm, wanting him to stay with her. “Don’t leave me, Michael.” It was a heartfelt plea.

“I have to go,” he said too quickly, breaking away from her. “The guys might be trying to reach me in my room.”

He hastened to his room, closing the adjoining door. Leaning back against it, he inhaled deeply to fill his starving lungs with air. For a couple of minutes his chest felt so tight he was certain he was having a heart attack, but after a few minutes, he was just as certain it was a bad case of nerves reciprocating to an overdose of anxiety.

Michael cursed the demons inside him. His anger had shifted from Tobias to Rochelle. Now he had an inkling of how men’s minds worked when they turned abusive toward their spouses or girlfriends. He knew he would never stoop so low as to turn abusive, at least not physically, but there were other types of abuse, and he knew Rochelle was feeling the affects of it. He also knew he had to get control. The problem was that his brain did not want to cooperate.

Rochelle sat up in bed and reached to turn on the light. Doubts unfurled and multiplied. He did not love her! The thought pounded like tiny hammers against her skull. He could not possibly love her, or else he would not have made love to her and then walked out while she pleaded for him to stay. He traveled nearly three thousand miles to get her. When had he decided it was all a big mistake?

Whatever Michael’s problem, it started prior to him coming to her room. The fact it took him so long confirmed that suspicion.

Still, it had not deterred him from wanting her body! That angered her.

Suddenly she felt dirty and unclean the way Tobias had always made her feel. Michael's lovemaking had been no more than an interlude, a moment of pleasure quickly forgotten when he was finished with her. Nothing he might have done could have made her feel less despicable than having made love to her and then hurrying from her bed as if he could not wait to get the hell away. A number of feelings trespassed across her mind: sadness, shock, humiliation, and finally, an ache so agonizing it was like a sharp knife slicing away at her peace of mind.

Dragging herself from the bed, she went to the bathroom, smelling the faint manly scent of him still on her where his perspiration dampened her body. Turning the shower taps on, she adjusted the temperature, and stepped into the stall, feeling lousy and terribly alone.

Deserted.

MICHAEL HAD NO IDEA what time he finally fell asleep. When he did, he had damnable dreams where he actually watched Tobias making love to Rochelle. It was too much for his fragile nerves to handle, shooting his disposition all to hell. When daylight came, he was exhausted, and as grouchy as a hungry black bear. He did not want to see her, not in this frame of mind, so when Joe buzzed his phone and suggested they go have breakfast, Michael had other plans.

"Take Rochelle with you, Joe. I'll catch up with you after I shower."

Joe was silent a moment. "You sure, Mike? I'd think she'd want to wait for you." He knew Mike had been with her last night, at least for a while. He and Curly both had called his room to see if he

wanted to go out for a drink with them. When he didn't answer, they laughed at their ill timing and went out without him.

"I'm sure," Michael replied too sharply, and Joe backed off immediately.

"We'll be in the motel dining room," Joe told him and hung up.

"What was that all about?" Curly asked as he sat in a chair in the room he and Joe shared.

"I don't know. I think the little lady must have turned him down last night. He is in some hellishly sour mood this morning, and I sure would not expect that if she had made him happy last night. I guess there's trouble in paradise already."

"Maybe he didn't get enough sleep," Curly suggested.

"We both know that sleep is the last thing you care about when you're in bed with a beautiful woman. I think he slept in his own bed, else he wouldn't have answered the phone yawning like he just woke up."

"Well, when we knock on her door, maybe she'll be in a better mood than he is," Curly speculated with a smile.

ROCHELLE SLEPT SPORADICALLY during the late morning hours before dawn. She woke with the first signs of daylight penciling through at the outer edges of the drapes. She was tired, weary, and emotionally drained. She dragged herself from bed, and took another quick shower to wake herself before dressing. She had no idea what the agenda was for the day, so she turned on the television and sat watching the early morning news, not really seeing it at all. Instead, her mind played a game of *you should*, as she thought about how she was going to handle coming face to face with Michael this morning.

If she expected a knock on the adjoining door between her and Michael's room, she was sadly disillusioned when the knock came

on the front door. Assuming a cheerful pose, she opened it to see the entire crew of five men outside her door. All her well rehearsed posturing took a shock. Her eyes widened, and she looked like she was about to be abducted again.

“Good morning,” Joe said. “You look rested.”

“Good morning,” she replied, looking from one to the other, and not feeling at all rested.

“Ms. Chandler...” Curly began.

“Please don’t call me that. My name is Rochelle.”

“Rochelle, Mike said to take you to breakfast. He’s running late,” Curly said with an impish look on his face.

Rochelle’s heart took another dip, but she was not about to wear her feelings on her sleeve. She marched right along beside Joe while the other four men flanked them on both sides.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Rochelle refused to go to lunch or dinner that day. Joe brought food to her, and she thanked him, hardly eating more than a few bites to sustain her energy. The night came and went, and she was exhausted from tossing and turning all night.

When Curly and Joe knocked on her door, she opened it, looking like she had waged war with hell. When the men invited her to breakfast, she refused without any reason. Having encountered Michael’s disposition as he stalked off to the restaurant, they decided she did not need a reason. Paradise was in one big hell of a mess.

Joe took it upon himself to have something sent to Rochelle’s room. A heavy mood like a dark cloud descended upon them all, and

the adrenaline charged excitement stimulated by the rescue was behind them. They were ready to get home.

Michael looked like he had fought the same battle Rochelle had. He had not bothered to shave, and his eyes were red and bloodshot like he was the devil's own emissary. Not one among them was sorry that they would be flying off to Montana that day and would have this experience behind them.

Rochelle sat in her room, distractedly pushing her fork about the food sent to her room. She took a bite distastefully. Her emotions were too tight and tense to allow an appetite. She pushed the dish aside, and drank the coffee, refilling her cup from the little carafe that held two extra cups. She could not help but feel like a death ship washed ashore on a lonely island. Behind her was imprisonment, and ahead of her was cold emptiness. She was certain that whatever she and Michael once shared was now finished.

She continued sitting in her motel room, not a penny to her name, and no clothing but what she wore, not knowing what she would do if Michael decided to leave her there. While the thought of being left behind might sound preposterous to anyone else, to Rochelle, who had suffered too numerous abuses to count, she expected nearly anything anymore. Few things in life surprised her. She didn't know what she would do, did not even care any longer.

She stretched out on the bed, wishing she could take a nap when the knock sounded on the adjoining door. She continued lying there, hoping he would just go away and leave her alone, leave her in peace—or misery—whatever it was drawing the life from her. The knock became more persistent, and still she ignored it. She did not want to see him again, did not want to be reminded of how much she hurt from seeing his disapproving face and feeling his rejection.

Then like a giant shadow invading her room and thoughts, the door between the two rooms opened and Michael entered, his unshaven chin reminding her of Tobias's scary dark features.

"Chelle..." was all he said, standing there staring at her.

"What do you want, Michael?" she asked, too emotionally drained to pretend cordiality.

"I want you to try to understand. I don't know what in the hell is happening to me. God, I cannot even stand myself. I know I'm a son of a bitch, but I swear to you, I'm trying like hell to get control."

"Get control of what, Michael?" she asked dryly. "How can I understand when I don't know what's wrong?"

"I've got a head problem, Chelle, But, I'm working on it, trying to put it behind me."

The space between Rochelle's eyes narrowed. "Michael, you're not making sense," she said dispassionately. "I don't understand, and I'm tired of guessing. It is as though you want me, but don't want me. I don't know you anymore. I don't know who you are, or what you want, but I have decided you don't want me. Your attitude toward me is so despicable that I prefer not to be in your company."

He paced a few steps. "I'm trying to handle this, Chelle. Is it too much to ask for a little patience on your part?"

"Patience, Michael? You want me to be patient while you treat me with contempt. With the hell I went through with Tobias, do you think I want another man who treats me as badly as he did?"

"Don't compare me to that son of a bitch! If not for him..."

She paused, searching his face, letting his words sink in. "If not for him, then what?"

"Oh, to hell with it," he snorted, and stalked back through the adjoining door to his room. Before he closed it, he shot her a blazing look and stated plaintively, "We're leaving soon for the airport in case you're interested."

Like a zombie, Rochelle rolled off the bed, went to the bathroom, brushed her hair, repaired her makeup, and walked out of the room into a sunless morning filled with dark clouds that threatened rain. She saw the five men waiting outside, standing by the two cars looking at her, and then turning their attention to Michael as he stepped from his room.

She knew she was supposed to smile, to be the super human person who could smile when there was nothing in the world to smile about, to be like a hostess greeting her guests; but somehow, for the moment, it all escaped her, and she could only be what she felt, alone, lonely, and discarded. She mastered a distant stare as she entered the car. Michael slid in beside her, and the two of them were like two lifeless statues, once human, but now turned to stone.

THEY BOARDED THE PLANE, a quiet group, for sure. Neither of them said anything, and Rochelle turned her head to the window, watching the banks of white clouds swallow the plane when it became airborne.

“Chelle,” Michael said, reaching for her hand.

She snatched it away and pretended he wasn’t there, continuing to stare out the window.

“Please don’t tune me out. I’m trying to get past this.”

He spoke in a whisper to prevent the others from hearing.

She turned and locked gazes with him. “What is it you’re trying to get past, Michael?”

“I’m trying to put some meaning behind all these prickly feelings I’ve been having. This is not about you. It’s about me,” he spoke quietly.

“I see. You are having prickly feelings. Well, I am sorry to hear about your prickly feelings, Michael. I sympathize with your distress.”

“You just don’t understand.”

They both whispered despite the continual buzz of the plane engine that scrambled what they and the others were saying. Michael’s tone was solemn with regret, while Rochelle’s was angry, bitter, and contrary.

“You’re right. I do not understand. I do not understand why you came nearly three thousand miles to rescue me from a horrible marriage when you obviously cannot decide why you did it. I do not understand how you could declare love for me in your letters, but lose your nerve when you are face to face with me. I do not understand how you can make love to me in a motel room and then run away as though I were no more than a mere convenience. There’s much I don’t understand, Michael, and you haven’t attempted to enlighten me.”

“Chelle, I know you don’t deserve this. I’m really screwed up, and every time I try to sort things out, I get more screwed up.”

“Is there some hidden message in all that mishmash of words, Michael? I don’t know what you are talking about, and frankly, I am too upset to play word games. If you have something to say, just come right out and say it, else do us both a favor and let it drop altogether.”

“To hell with it!” he cursed. Then in a raised voice, he continued. “You have no idea what I’ve been through since that son of a bitch took you away.”

“And you have no idea what I’ve been through, Michael. You have no idea at all what my life with Tobias has been like. You have no idea how much I yearned to die every time I thought I would never see you again.”

Clearing her throat, she continued. “I was a fool. Tobias taught me the lesson of all lessons. He taught me how to distrust, and I was the biggest fool of all for trusting you.”

A low groan escaped his lips. He glanced around to see if anyone had heard, then he shook his head in frustration. “You know I love you, else why would I risk all our lives to come get you?”

She was thoughtful, but still defensive. “Love is supposed to make people happy, Michael, not tear them apart. How can you love me and treat me like a stranger? I have lived with that sort of contempt for five long years, and I cannot do it anymore. To answer your question, I’m beginning to wonder exactly why you did come and get me.”

“What is it you want of me, Chelle? What in the hell do you expect?”

“The fact that you even have to ask that question is answer enough that you and I made a terrible mistake. Don’t trouble yourself any further. I will make no demands upon you. I just want to live in peace without having to fear everyday that life is just one more miserable burden to have to face.”

“You still don’t understand, do you? You have no idea the hell I have gone through thinking of you in his arms, him kissing you, him touching you, him making love to you. How can you sleep with any man and not respond? How can you make yourself like a cold piece of ice and not feel some desire or need strong enough to cause you to participate, to make you seek fulfillment for yourself? And how can you expect me to believe you were non-responsive?”

“God, Michael,” she said, her lips curling up into a venomous contortion of disgust. “How can you even conceive such a thing? If you had any idea the hell Tobias has put me through in his bed, you’d be crawling on your knees with remorse and apology.”

“Then tell me, assure me that what I’m thinking is rubbish. Help me overcome this green sickness, Chelle, so we can get back to where we were before he came for you.”

She gritted her teeth. “How dare you to even ask me to bear the responsibility for your sick thoughts! Just leave me alone. Go back to Caroline. She’s better able to give without receiving than I am. I won’t be the scapegoat for your jealousy, not after the hell I’ve lived through with Tobias.”

She turned away from him and refused to acknowledge his presence. Watching the white, fluffy banks of clouds sliding past her window made her drowsy and sleepy, and finally she closed her eyes and gave in to the tiredness that was more emotional than physical.

Michael watched her golden-red curls tumbling over her shoulders in a soft array of warm color. He reached and pushed a satiny tendril from her cheek, and watched as she stirred slightly beneath his touch. Her gorgeous complexion looked like a mixture of cream and honey, and without thinking, he bent and dusted a tiny kiss upon her brow.

It seemed everyone on the plane was sleeping now. A silence descended over all, and only the loudness of his thoughts provided company for Michael.

A sudden loud burst of coughing behind them brought Rochelle struggling up from sleep. Sitting up straight, she looked about to get her bearings, and then rubbed her eyes with her fists.

She turned toward Michael, wanting to ask him how long the flight would take them. “Michael...” she began, and watched with shock as he sloughed her off with a dismissive wave of his hand.

“Just let it go,” he said, thinking she was about to continue the conversation where they left off. “Just leave me alone,” he added quietly, his face pale and drawn against an inky dark beard.

She turned away from him, seeing the ghosts of torment that could tear them apart for all time. Twice in less than two days, he turned away from her. *Just leave me alone*, he said. She could feel

the breach growing wider just as surely as if a raging river had torn a bridge from its moorings leaving an impassable gap.

Tucking her legs beneath her and turning as far away from him as she could, she nursed her concerns by hiding her face against a pillow.

AFTER THEIR PLANE LANDED and they were in the terminal, Michael turned to the five men, shaking each of their hands. “Fellows, you’re on your own now. See me at the bank tomorrow afternoon.”

Then shaking hands with each of them as Michael had done, Rochelle thanked them. “Thanks for everything,” was all she said, and the men nodded their heads in acknowledgment.

Following a few exchanges of idle repartee with them, Michael turned to go. He hustled Rochelle to a waiting cab. He opened the door and bid her enter, crawling in behind her, quickly giving the driver their destination. Their ride was in silence.

When they arrived in front of the senior Matheson’s home, Rochelle allowed Michael to help her from the cab. Asking the cab driver to wait, he walked her to the door, opened it and handed her the key while he flicked on lights in the foyer and outside on the wide stoop. Streetlights lit the sidewalk and driveway where the taxi waited.

Michael guided Rochelle inside to the security panel in the foyer where he pushed some buttons to stop its beeping. He jotted down the code for disarming it, and the setup code just in case she might have forgotten it, and gave it to her.

“Keep the alarm on at all times, Rochelle, and keep the doors locked.” Turning on his heels, he stalked away quickly, leaving Rochelle standing at the door looking after him. Before the car was out of sight, she saw him glance back once at her, his face contorted

by the reflections of the streetlights on the glass, and then he turned his head and looked straight ahead as the cab sped away.

Rochelle stumbled blindly inside. The huge house felt like a mausoleum filled with ghosts. It haunted her memories against happier times spent there before Tobias showed up to destroy the peaceful lifestyle she had attained.

From the foot of the stairs in the foyer she looked through the open double doors to the dining room. Walking inside the room, she touched the light switch. Her attention sped to the place where Michael had fallen the night Tobias shot him. She walked to the spot, kneeling where she had seen him fall, rubbing her hand across the carpet tenderly where pale stains of blood remained even after the cleaning Tillie must have done. She pushed herself to her knees, recalling how happy they were on that night that now seemed a lifetime ago. *Things happen, and people change*, she thought.

Obviously, Michael had changed a great deal.

With slow deliberation, she turned the stairway light on and started up the stairs. Her life suddenly felt as empty as this huge old house. She could not stay here. She knew she couldn't. Without Michael in her life, the house held too many memories, both good and bad, and she just didn't have the strength to handle it.

At the top of the stairs, she turned down the hallway to her bedroom, flooding the room with light at the flick of a switch. Nothing was disturbed. Everything was just as she had left it, even her purse on the bureau. She opened it, found her car keys and house key. There was money in her wallet. Michael had brought her checkbook from downstairs where she had been balancing it on the night Tobias came. He must have put it in her purse for safekeeping; or Tillie had.

Tossing off her clothing, she flung the wrinkled mess aside and went to the shower. She spent a good thirty minutes letting the water

flow over her in splintery streams. She wanted to cry, but felt too numb to do so. An emptiness invaded her, much like she'd always felt with Tobias, and remembering back to that first day she met Michael, she now wished she had never gotten involved with him. The pain of losing him was too big a price to pay.

When she stepped from the shower, the soft towel felt good against her skin. She slid on a terry cloth robe. Glancing at the clock, she was tempted to just lie down and try to sleep, but her mind was working so frantically that sleep would be hours away. As she made her way back downstairs, the phone began ringing loudly while, at the same time, the doorbell chimed impatiently. She was nearer the door than the phone, so she called out, "Who's there?"

"Sweetpea, it's me, Mabel. Let me in."

Rochelle quickly turned off the alarm, and opened the door. "Oh, Mabel," she said, throwing herself into Mabel's plump arms. "I'm so glad to see you."

"There, there, now," Mabel said, patting her back. "Maybe you should answer your phone."

Rochelle turned just as it stopped ringing. Then with a shrug, she asked Mabel, "How did you know I was back?"

"Mikey called and told me."

"I can't stay here, Mabel."

"Can't or don't want to?"

"I don't want to stay here anymore. I'm going to the motel."

"I tell you what, Sweetpea, go pack your bag and come home with me. Tillie stayed with me for a while, but she is living at her sister's house. I have an empty bedroom you can use and tomorrow you can decide what you want to do."

Rochelle nodded her head, ran back up the stairs to dress and pack a bag. She was back downstairs in a matter of minutes.

Turning all the lights out, except the foyer and the outside lights, she set the alarm and left with Mabel just as the phone started ringing again.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Michael must have let the phone rang twenty times before he hung up. The first time he called, he suspected she might be in the shower, but there was absolutely no way she could still be in the shower after all this time. Just to be sure, he waited another fifteen minutes and called again. The phone kept ringing, and he slammed the receiver down with enough impact to jar a figurine off the table.

“Damn it, Rochelle! What in the hell are you trying to do to my mind?”

Even as he cursed her, he cursed himself for leaving her in that damn empty house. His intentions earlier that day had been to have her pack a bag and come home with him, but his anger blew out of control and prevented that. He knew she was hurt when he had walked away and left her, just as she was hurt that night at the motel when he walked out of her room. Anger, self-deprecation, and guilt rode on his back, and as much as he wanted to make things right between him and Rochelle, his mind seemed constipated with the green sickness.

While he was showering, his intention had been to hit the sack after he called her. Now, sleep would be next to impossible until he knew where she was and that she was okay. He felt entirely exhausted, the long trip depleting his energy, and his damn arm and shoulder were aching where that bastard’s bullet blasted through it.

He slid on jeans, a pull over shirt, and stuck his feet in socks

and sneakers. He left the house, backing his car from the garage. While he drove to his birthplace, fear began mounting in his gut like a time-bomb ready to go off. He silently reprimanded himself for not considering that Tobias might have some of his men fly straight here. They would have had plenty of time to arrive ahead of him and Rochelle since his party spent two nights in a motel.

“Damn!” He cursed his ignorance and foolhardy jealousy. He drove like a maniac until he arrived at the house, pulling up in the driveway, and darting from the car to the house. Pushing the doorbell several times, he looked through the glass panel in the door to see the foyer light still on. Nothing appeared disturbed. He pulled the extra key from his pocket and inserted it in the lock, went inside, then pushed in the code to stop the alarm’s beeping.

Racing up the stairs, he began calling her name. He came to a sliding stop in her bedroom and flicked on the light. The comforter covered the bed, undisturbed. He saw the soiled clothes she had been wearing, tossed in a pile on a chair. Her terry cloth robe hung on the bathroom door and felt moist from her shower. Her purse that had been on the bureau was now missing. Remembering her car, he tore out in a run back down the stairs and through the kitchen where a porte-cochere joined the house to the garage.

Her car was still inside, the hood cool. “Damn it, Rochelle, where are you?” he asked aloud, his voice taking on a desperate quality. Had he risked the lives of himself and five men to bring her here, only to allow Tobias to walk in and take her away again?

He made his way back through the house, and started turning out lights when the phone began ringing shrilly. He snatched it up before the first ring ended, lifting it to his ear with marked impatience, wanting it to be Rochelle.

“Mikey, what are you doing there?” Mabel asked. “I’ve been trying to call you at your house. Sweetpea is here with me. She

thought you might be worried if you tried to call and she didn't answer."

"Might be worried!" he yelled into the phone. "What in the hell is she doing with you?" Relief flooded through him, it fueled by adrenaline that turned to boiling anger.

"Calm down, Mikey. I can tell you are half out of your mind, but she is all right and she is right here with me. Do you want to talk to her?"

"Hell no, I don't want to talk to her. Just tell her to get herself ready and I'll pick her up in ten minutes."

"Now wait a minute, Mikey..." Mabel started, but the phone went dead in her hand.

Mabel looked at Rochelle in bewilderment. "He's not just upset, he's sort of out of his mind, maybe even a little crazy. He said he will pick you up in ten minutes."

Rochelle, just a few minutes ago, told Mabel how Michael and his team had rescued her from Tobias's home. She also told Mabel how Michael dropped her off at the Matheson house and rode off in the taxi. After trying not to cry, and barely managing to keep her composure, she now shook her head, her auburn-gold hair flouncing about her shoulders defiantly. "I won't go with him. He cannot keep treating me this way. I do not want to see him. Just tell him to go away and leave me alone."

Mabel looked a bit sheepish and helpless. "Now, Sweetpea, if you had heard him, you would know he won't leave here without you. You might as well get your bag and be ready because I have a feeling he'll carry you out if you refuse to go with him."

"Like hell, he will! I'm sick of men dominating my life."

"I think I might be inclined to agree with you."

"I won't go with him. Mabel..." The imploring words, she was about to voice, were cut short by the ring of the doorbell. Then the

door sounded like someone trying to break in as Michael's fist pounded against it.

Mabel came to her feet, shaking her head back and forth, expelling a long bewildered sigh. She pulled the door open, barely missing the crash of Michael's fist as he issued another pounding stroke toward the door. Fortunately, she stepped back just in time to avoid it. Before Mabel could say anything, he pushed past her, and came to a stop just inside the living room where he spotted Rochelle sitting.

"Let's go!" he commanded. His face was cast in bronze, portraying cold, angry determination.

Rochelle squared her shoulders and lifted her chin. "No, I'm not going with you."

"Rochelle, you have pushed my patience beyond limits. I'm fed up with your foolishness."

She pounced on her feet.

"My foolishness!" she screamed, her eyes glaring at him in disbelief. "Damn you, Michael! Who was it that dropped me off like a piece of baggage? You cannot treat me this way. I will not let you. I've lived in hell for five years and I won't let you put me through it again."

All the anger seemed to puff out of him in one long shuddering breath, his shoulders slumping dejectedly, and he knew he was to blame for all of this.

Grasping the back of a chair, he tried to appeal to her. "Look, let's understand each other. You may think you are safe now, but Chandler will not let this pass. I don't know any damn man who would look the other way while strangers come into his home and abduct his wife. In brief, the son of a bitch will come after you again, and that means you have to take some precautions. All I'm

asking is that you come home with me until we see how all this is going to play out.”

“If you’re so concerned about me and what Tobias will do, why did you go off and leave me as you did? I knew you were upset, and I hoped you might come in so we could talk about it. Instead, you dumped me and took off as if you could not wait to get rid of me. I have feelings, too, Michael, in case you haven’t noticed.”

Mabel stood quietly in the background watching an emotional drama unfurl while the resolution slowly began spinning toward a peaceful draw.

“I know you have feelings, honey, and I respect them. I am sorry for the way I have acted. It isn’t my choice to feel this way. I don’t know what the hell’s wrong with my head.”

“It wasn’t just this evening, Michael, but that first night, too. Do you have any idea how you made me feel, walking out on me like you did. The fact that you admit you have a screwed up head is reason enough why I am not going to go with you. I will never put myself in the position again of letting a man mistreat me and dominate my life. Neither will I take responsibility for someone’s jealous rages. I’ve done nothing wrong, and I won’t defend myself to you.”

“I guess I’ve made a terrible mess of everything,” he said contritely.

“Yes, you have, Michael. I refuse to go with you. I don’t want to be with you until you your demons under control.”

“Rochelle, I admit I’ve been a terrible idiot, but I’m asking you to please come with me.”

Mabel could see that was her exit cue, so she turned and went up the stairs.

“I can’t, Michael.”

“Can’t or won’t?” he snapped, beginning to pace. “Don’t do this

to us, Chelle. I am asking you now to come with me. Don't do this to us."

"If that's an ultimatum, Michael, then I refuse. I would also like to remind you that I am not doing anything to us. You did it yourself." She turned her back on him. "Please go," she said persuasively.

His hands and arms fell like dead weights, and his shoulders seemed to bend like an aging man as he stared at her for a lengthy interval. "I hope you can be happy with the decision you've made," he said with deadly calm before dispatching himself out the front door.

The slamming of the door marked a final sound that echoed with harsh reality in Rochelle's ears.

TOBIAS WAS WALKING THE FLOOR in his hotel room in Columbia, a drink in one hand, the phone in the other pressed to his ear. "Has he returned yet?" Tobias barked into the phone. He listened impatiently, pacing forward a couple of steps, and then turning about to pace over the same space. "I have to leave here. There's been a major problem at home I have to deal with," he told the man on the other end of the line.

He listened some more, and cursed agitatedly. "I know he told me to wait here, but just how damn long does he expect me to wait? I have obligations of my own."

The voice at the other end became so loud that Tobias moved the phone away from his ear. "You stupid son of a bitch, you'd best cool it! Your fucking ass is already in hot water over the Monroe Tatum situation. If you fail to get the bastard off, they will make a deal with him and fry your ass along with our entire organization in Miami. So I am telling you for the last time; Sanchez will be back

tomorrow. Go out and find a broad to occupy your time. You have nothing else to do but wait.”

The phone went dead in Tobias’s ear, and he slammed his phone down with a loud clang, strolling across the floor to begin pacing again.

There had been no reason for Sanchez to call him to Columbia four days before seeing him. It was the son of a bitch’s way of letting him know who was in charge. Tobias had been pacing the whole four days, not patient at waiting. After Dave called him with the message someone had abducted Rochelle, Tobias had been antsy as hell to get back to Miami.

The bitch had pushed him too far this time. He promised to bury her if she ever tried to run again, and he would keep his promise when he found her this next time—and he would find her! Gritting his teeth, clamping his jaws shut, and balling his fists, he could only visualize the pleasure he would receive when he put a gun to her head and watched her eyes as he blew half her skull away.

He opened the door to his room and stomped out in the hall, heading for the elevator. Downstairs, his eyes automatically scanned the lobby before he headed for the bar. He looked over the patrons, seeing a dark haired woman at the bar alone. He walked over and sat on the stool next to her.

“Scotch and soda, and give the lady what she wants,” he said, motioning toward the woman’s drink. The solid gold watch upon his wrist caught the woman’s eye, as did the large diamond on his finger. He still hadn’t bothered to shave, at least, nothing more than the trimming the barber did, and the dark growth mirrored how he felt, angry and dangerous.

The woman nodded her thanks for the drink, and sent him a grateful smile, then reaching up pinched her fingers around a tuft of beard and said, “Nice.” In less than five minutes, Tobias sloshed

down his drink, took her hand, and marched her to the elevators, and up to his room.

He spent the rest of the night, off and on, pretending the woman was Rochelle, and banging the hell out of her. The next morning he slapped a couple of hundred dollar bills against her palm and pushed her out the door.

He picked up the phone to see if Sanchez had returned.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Rochelle returned to the Matheson house the following day. With nothing else to occupy her time, she got busy vacuuming the carpets and dusting the furniture. She left the house only once when she went to purchase groceries. The rest of the time she kept busy, a sense of high expectancy that Michael might surely call and have his problems worked out and his head on straight again. No such call came, however, and as the hours sped away into another day, she started believing Michael would never call again. *Don't do this to us*, he had said. When he walked out, his attitude sent a strong message of finality.

Maybe it is best, she thought. Tobias would eventually come for her, and this time she was certain he would follow through on his threat. If Michael were around, his life would be in jeopardy, too. She did not want him involved, did not want any risks that might get him killed. If Tobias killed her, then so be it. At least she would be out of her misery and would never have to suffer his abuses again.

She thought of packing up her things, putting them in her vehicle and driving away to wherever the main highway took her. That thought kept playing across her mind with some frequency as

she cleaned. However, running away and maybe having to run for the rest of her life was too depressing for further consideration.

Finally, she made a decision.

She would remain where she was, and when Tobias came for her, she would force him to end it once-and-for all. Life had lost its resiliency for bouncing back. There was nothing to bounce back to anymore. She just wanted her life with Tobias over with, and be spared further hell from him. She wanted it over with permanently.

“Its better this way,” she mumbled aloud, feeling a kind of numbness, as though the universe had passed her by and she was a moving corpse.

When she finished cleaning the downstairs, she took the vacuum cleaner and dusting cloths upstairs, starting first in her bedroom, and then moving to the bath where she scrubbed the shower tiles and polished the glass doors. She had never done much cleaning previously, except when she was a teenager living at home with her parents where it was her duty to clean her own room. She had never had a desire to do cleaning, until now, when she was delighted to have something to occupy the endless hours while she waited.

Waiting! That had suddenly become the future of her life, waiting for Tobias.

As the morning moved on and the phone only rang once—it was Mabel calling—she accepted the fact that Michael was not going to call. Her depression grew until she no longer cared about anything. “Come on, Tobias,” she murmured aloud to herself. “Come on and get it over with.”

When she indicated her thoughts to Mabel, she got the scolding of her life.

“Like hell you say! I have heard of fools in my life, but you are the biggest one I have ever known. If the man had done to me what

he did to you, I would find a damn gun and do my best to blow his ugly head apart. I thought you had more guts than that, Sweetpea. No wonder Michael walked away from you. He deserves better than that after risking his life to get you back. All your friends deserve better.” She hung up before Rochelle could answer, literally shaking with anger.

At first, Mabel’s angry tirade only depressed Rochelle more. She thought about leaving the security alarm off, and the door unlocked to make it easy for Tobias to just walk in and do the deed quickly. However, she kept thinking about what Mabel said, and how Tobias ruined her life. He likely killed her parents, had shot Michael, and made her life one hell on earth. Feeling sorry for herself for the wasted years, she broke down and cried. Finally, she was like a dried up reservoir. Not even the deep loneliness for Michael could bring more tears. She was tired of crying.

She was tired of living, too.

The memory of her parents’ deaths and Michael’s gunshot wound went her into a state of guilt. She thought about what Mabel said, and felt more guilt. Would her parents be proud of her standing like a passive victim while Tobias killed her? She knew they would not, and she knew she did not want to die like that. If she was going to die, she wanted to do it fighting. Tobias could kill her, and very likely would, but she would not make it easy on him. Mabel was right. The people who had befriended her deserved better.

She kept the security alarm set at all times, and all the doors and windows locked. She took the gun from a drawer where she had hid it beneath clothing, and placed it beneath her pillow in the event Tobias somehow got in and surprised her while she slept. Once or twice, she worried over whether or not she would be able to use the gun if the need arose. Remembering Michael on the floor with blood

swimming beneath him angered and gave her bravado, making her believe she could do it. She had to; it was either him or her.

If Tobias killed her, that would be that. On the other hand, if he decided to take her back with him, she knew living with him again was beyond her endurance. She would never let that happen again, not even if it meant turning the gun on her self.

“Rochelle, she said aloud to herself, “You have three choices: kill Tobias, let him kill you, or kill yourself.”

He was stronger than she was, and the chance of her getting the upper hand would be a miracle.

While she cleaned, numerous scenarios ran through her mind of how she would handle the situation when Tobias finally arrived. Perhaps she could hide behind a chair downstairs and wait for him with the gun ready in her hand. Maybe she could just lie beneath the sheet on the bed and pretend to be asleep while the gun pointed toward the door. There were other pre-conceived ideas, but she realized such planning was useless considering Tobias’s actions would dictate the outcome of the entire fracas.

The gun beneath her pillow was always at the foundation of her thoughts. Would it serve to protect her? Would she be able to use it to protect herself? She thought about the quiet little bedroom community surrounding her, it’s populace of people going about their work and daily lives with no thought of the perilous situation Rochelle felt certain would happen beneath their very noses. These gentle people with their simple lives would never come close to the kind of hell she had known, was still anticipating with dread. The life she lived with Tobias would seem like fiction to them, a storybook tale such as would never touch their lives or the family and friends about them. She was different. Tobias had made her different.

After cleaning the shower, toilet, and sink, she took a damp towel and began wiping the tiled floor to remove any film of dust that had gathered in her absence. She was wiping behind the toilet when a tile suddenly moved beneath the towel. She inspected it, seeing that the grout around its edges had broken loose. Carefully, she slid it back in place, thinking she should call someone to repair it. She added that to her list of things to do.

She worked right on through noon, not bothering to take time for lunch since she wasn't hungry. She was just finishing vacuuming the last bedroom when the phone rang and Mabel greeted her in a repenting tone.

"Sweetpea, I'm sorry I blew my top, but I hope you realize how precious life is."

Rochelle's emotions were never more sensitive, or tender, but she was determined there would be no further tears, and she fought them valiantly. "I know, Mabel. Thanks for setting me straight. If I must, then I will fight until there's no fight left in me. I won't make it easy for him."

"Have you considered getting out of that house, perhaps going somewhere else?"

"I thought about it, was even tempted to do so after I realized Michael and me were finished. However, wherever I go, he will keep looking until he finds me. I don't want to spend my life running. I will take every precaution and do whatever I have to do, but I've decided not to run anymore. I want a normal life, Mabel, and I'll never have that if I start running again."

"Why don't you go to my house? You know you can stay there."

"No, you don't know Tobias. He would eventually find me no matter where I go. I would never put your life in any danger like

that. I might as well stay here and face it. Otherwise, this problem with Tobias is never going away.”

“Sweetpea, I don’t know what to say.” Mabel’s voice broke, and she was unable to hide the emotion she was feeling. To detract from her distraught state, she said the first thing that popped in her mind. “What have you been doing all day?”

“I’ve been cleaning all day. I’m just finishing up.”

“Have you had lunch?” Mabel asked, glancing at her watch.

“Nope, I wanted to finish cleaning first. If your store clerk is there, you can come have lunch with me. I’ll make you a ham sandwich, and we can cut the apple pie I bought.”

“Sounds good to me,” Mabel replied, not caring all that much for the sandwich or the pie, but she felt a need to see Rochelle, especially after knowing that Michael’s stubborn pride wouldn’t allow him to do so.

Michael habitually had stopped by Mabel’s shop for the past three mornings, but not once had he mentioned Rochelle’s name. Mabel knew his visits were quests to see if she would volunteer anything. She didn’t. His lofty attitude needed taking down a notch or two. Mabel made up her mind he could find out about Rochelle first hand, or not find out anything at all; at least not from her.

Rochelle had their lunch ready when Mabel arrived. Mabel was very fond of Rochelle, and had some idea of the suffering she had gone through. Knowing how depressed she was, Mabel tried to be cheerful, sharing tidbits of gossip or witticisms she had heard. Rochelle laughed at Mabel’s tales, but the laughter never reached her eyes. Her beautiful, brilliant green eyes were big dull pools of strain.

“So you’ve been cleaning?” Mabel said, looking around at how neat everything looked. “You know Tillie would be glad to help you a few hours every week.”

“I needed something to do. I think I would go a bit crazy if I didn’t find something to occupy my time and mind. It keeps me from thinking about Tobias so much. I know he will come for me. It’s just a matter of time.”

“Honey, the man has to be stopped. You need something to protect yourself, maybe a gun.”

Rochelle let the subject slide. She decided it was best that no one knew about the gun she kept. It would only cause unnecessary concern. “Maybe the alarm will warn me soon enough to call the police,” she replied.

Not comfortable with this discussion, she changed it. “Do you know someone who can repair a loose bathroom tile?”

“Michael can,” Mabel said, arching a brow.

“No, not him, I would never ask him, not now.” They finished the sandwich and pie, so Rochelle stood up and took the dishes to the sink.

“Where is this tile? I am surprised Michael hasn’t already repaired it. While you were gone, he just about lived over here when he was away from the bank. He was always banging on something, repairing this or that. I don’t know how he missed a loose tile.”

“It’s in a rather inconspicuous spot behind the toilet. I would never have noticed it if I hadn’t been wiping the floor with a towel.”

“Let’s take a look at it,” Mabel said, not all that interested in a loose bathroom tile, but it gave them something to do.

Rochelle led the way upstairs to her bedroom. Mabel stopped just inside the door, her eyes scanning the interior. “I can’t believe you sleep in this room,” she said.

Rochelle moved on toward the bathroom. “It was either that or live day after day believing ghosts roamed around in here behind a closed door at night. It was the only way I could prove to myself that there was nothing in here to be afraid of.”

“Well,” Mabel sighed disbelievingly with raised brows, “that’s about the most original idea I’ve ever heard.”

Rochelle knelt on the floor next to the toilet. Reaching behind it, she touched the tile, feeling it move beneath her fingers. “It has come loose completely,” she said lifting it and handing it to Mabel.

“What’s that?” Mabel asked sharply, her eyes glued to the place from which Rochelle removed the tile.

“What’s what?” Rochelle asked, seeing where her eyes were staring. She bent down lower and stretched her neck, trying to gain a better view of the floor on the backside of the toilet. “Why there’s a hole there, and something’s in it,” Rochelle cried, her hand already reaching to grasp whatever it was in the hole.

“No!” Mabel shouted. “Don’t touch it.” She had no idea why she didn’t want Rochelle to touch it, but she did have an aversion to reaching into dark holes. “Can you see what it is?”

“The toilet throws a shadow on it. I can’t tell. There’s a flashlight on my dresser.”

Mabel ran for the flashlight and was back in a couple of seconds. “Just don’t put your hand down there. It could contain a snake, a rat, or just about anything.”

Just about anything is what the hole contained. Beneath the tile, someone had cut out the flooring to form a pocket between the floor joists. Inside was a small brown book that looked like a diary, and on top of it was a gun. Rochelle raised her head, looking at Mabel in deep puzzlement.

“It’s a gun. Why would someone put a gun in a place like this?”

“Oh my God!” Mabel exclaimed, drawing Rochelle up from the floor and pulling her toward the bedroom. Her face turned terribly white and she looked like she might actually pass out.

“Mabel, you look like you’ve seen a ghost. Here, sit down in this chair. Tell me what’s wrong.”

“I have seen a ghost. I would be willing to bet that is the gun used to kill Michael’s father and stepmother. The police never did find it, and that is why they were unable to discover who did it. They charged Michael but all they had was circumstantial evidence and not enough proof. Do you know this gun may very well contain the fingerprints of the person who shot the Mathesons?”

Rochelle also went pale. “What will we do, Mabel?”

She looked at Rochelle, thinking. “We have to call the police.”

“But, Mabel...”

“I know what you’re thinking. It wasn’t Mikey. I would never believe it was Mikey, not in a hundred years. No one else in town believes it either.”

“But what if you’re wrong?” Rochelle asked in a shaky voice. She knew anyone was capable of murder if given enough provocation, real or imagined. She had wished a million times that Tobias was dead, had thought numerous times about the gun in his bedside stand, considering how easy it would be to shoot him. Hadn’t she literally made up her mind to do just that if he came for her? She was determined to kill him if necessary to avoid going back to Miami with him.

“Sweetpea, if you know him well enough to love him, then you know he couldn’t have hurt his father and Tina.”

“Mabel, let’s just think this through. My God, this is startling evidence that can put someone away for the rest of their life; maybe even send them to their death. I know as well as anyone that a person is capable of killing another. I have thought about it hundreds of times myself. I don’t think it would be hard to do if a person is pressed enough.”

“It wasn’t Mikey. I can understand you wanting to kill Tobias, but Michael loved his father. He would never have done anything to hurt him. I know that, as well as I know my own name. Anyway, he

has already been tried and found not guilty. They can't try him again, but something like this could ruin him." Strong, generous hearted Mabel burst into tears at the damnable thought Rochelle suggested. "Dear God, it can't be him," she muttered more to herself than to Rochelle.

"Then if you are that sure, call the police. Let's get it over and done with, but I pray to God you're right."

"I know Mikey didn't do it. I'd bet my life on it." She went to the phone, and even as sure as she felt, there was still that seed of doubt that caused her to lift the phone reluctantly. She pushed the buttons, listening until someone answered. "This is Mabel Driscoll. I need to talk to Detective Benjamin Norton."

Rochelle was literally shaking all over, tension tightening in her neck and shoulders over the possibility of what they might learn.

"Detective Norton, I'm out at the Matheson house. I think there is something here you'll be interested in seeing. We've found the gun." Mabel could hear a sharp intake of air, and a breathy excitement over the news.

"Who else is with you?" he asked.

"Rochelle Chandler, the lady renting the house from Michael."

"Don't touch anything. I'll be right there," he said, hanging up the phone.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Mabel slowly put the phone back on the hook, the seed of doubt still intruding upon the firm belief that Michael was innocent. He had to be innocent, she thought. Otherwise, it would be none other than herself who was bringing disaster to his doorstep.

The thought suddenly occurred to her that perhaps she should have called him first. *Should! Should! Should!* The word played viciously across her mind. Yes, that is what she should have done, but the thought never occurred to her prior to calling the police.

Mabel turned her back, and started downstairs to meet the detective. Rochelle took her gun from beneath the pillow, put it in a bottom drawer beneath some clothing, and then she sat down in a chair to wait, praying all the while that Mabel was right about Michael.

In a few minutes, police cars blazed a siren-screaming trail across town to the Matheson house. As expected, and as in most situations requiring the police, people began to gather out front, wondering what shattering event had befallen the Matheson house this time. The intrigue of the house intensified after Tobias had shot Michael, and after Rochelle's abduction. Now it would offer another reason for curious spectators.

Mrs. Newland, the neighbor who lived across the street from the Matheson house, picked up her phone and dialed the bank. "I need to speak to Mr. Matheson, please. Tell him this is Mrs. Newland." She waited until Michael's voice came over the line.

"Michael, I don't know what's happening, but the street is filled with police cars in front of your father's house."

Michael was temporarily stunned as if someone had slammed a boulder across his skull. When he could force words from his mouth, he said, "Thank you, Mrs. Newland. I'll be right there."

He hung up the phone and ran from the bank to his car, all the bank employees and the customers turning to stare at his disappearing back.

In his car, Michael could only conclude the inevitable. Tobias had come for Rochelle. Maybe he had hurt her, even killed her. His heart fell like a ball of lead in his chest as he broke every speed limit

getting to the house. He cursed himself continually for not taking greater precautions to protect her. He should have known Tobias would come after her. God, what was wrong with him that he could leave her there alone, unprotected?

The street in front of the house flaunted several police cars, and farther down, civilian cars clogged the other parking spaces for at least two blocks away. Pedestrians were busy quizzing everyone else to determine what had happened.

Michael pulled into Mrs. Newland's driveway, and then sprinted across the street, his feet slowing almost reluctantly just before he got to the front door, frightened out of his mind at what he was going to encounter.

A couple of police officers were on the lawn, and another stood guard at the door. Michael started past the one at the door. "Mike, you can't go in there," Kendrick Evans yelled, trying to hold him back.

"Like hell I can't. Get out of my way, Kendrick," he shouted and pushed past him. Inside on the foyer, he stopped when he heard voices in the living room. He saw Mabel and rushed to her. "Where is she, Mabel?" he demanded anxiously.

"She's upstairs, Mikey," Mabel answered solemnly. Then realizing Michael thought something had happened to Rochelle, she tried to stop him. "Mikey, she's okay," she called after him, but he was already up the stairs, not hearing Mabel.

Reaching the door to her bedroom Michael stopped just inside the door, a blast of air expelled noisily from his lungs when he saw her sitting in the chair. "Chelle..." he said, stalking across the room to her. Detective Norton kneeled in front of her asking questions.

Rochelle came to her feet, nearly knocking Detective Norton backwards. "Michael?"

“Are you all right?” he asked, putting his arms about her. “What has happened here?” he demanded of Norton.

“I’m all right, Michael. Nothing has happened. I found a gun, and Mabel thought we should call the police.”

“A gun? What gun?” he asked, unable to focus on anything other than the fact that Rochelle was all right. Light-headed exhilaration flooded and drowned his fear when he realized she was safe. He would never have forgiven himself if something had happened to her.

“Take it easy, Mike,” Detective Norton said. There is a gun in a hole behind the toilet. We need to get pictures before we remove it. We think this is the gun that killed your father and stepmother.”

“Jesus, why in the hell didn’t someone call me? I thought something had happened to Rochelle.” He still held Rochelle in his arms, so tightly she could barely breathe, his fingers tangled in the auburn-gold curls at the nape of her neck, pressing all of her against him.

“Let’s all go downstairs to the living room so the guys can do their job here,” Detective Norton said, taking charge.

“Where is this gun you found?” Michael asked Rochelle.

“It’s in the bathroom behind the toilet in a hole beneath a tile,” Rochelle explained.

“You’re kidding!” Michael was looking at Norton. “Your department turned this damn place upside down looking for a gun and it was here all the time.” He stepped over to the bathroom door to get a peek. He shook his head.

“Come on, Mike. We have to clear out the room so my team can get in here and do their job,” Norton said.

“We’re right behind you,” Michael said, hanging back until Norton was out of the room. “Chelle, we have to talk,” he said in a hoarse, agitated whisper

He was suddenly serious, his expression so coldly severe that Rochelle's heart lurched up to her throat. She swallowed, and tried to force the lump down again, everything inside her screaming against the possibility of what Michael might tell her about the gun. He was agitated, nervous, and he was obviously planning to tell her something she did not want to hear. He escorted her down the stairs, a frown marring the smooth texture of his forehead.

When Mabel saw him this time, fear mocked her belief of his innocence. Something about his look was markedly suspicious, like dejected resignation to the obvious. His arm stayed around Rochelle as if joined by flesh, and when he sat down on the sofa, he pulled her down with him, still not willing to remove his arm from about her.

"Mike, this could mark the end of our investigation. We'll send the gun and the diary to the lab for fingerprinting, and hopefully we'll get what we need," Norton said after taking a comfortable seat on the sofa.

"What diary?" He looked extremely puzzled. "I'm not aware of any diary."

Mabel looked at him pityingly, and wondered if he was thinking what she was. If it turned out his name appeared derogatorily in that diary, it could pose damaging evidence easily capable of destroying his life. Even if the court couldn't try him again, the newspapers would run story after story until Michael wouldn't be able to find a hole deep enough to hide in to escape their constant invasion of his life.

"The diary belonged to Mrs. Matheson. No one has read it yet because we didn't want to take a chance on smudging the fingerprints. We should know something in a day or two." Detective Norton was extremely happy about the find. Locating the gun and

diary was the break they needed. “Mike, are you all right?” he asked, upon seeing that Michael was as pale as a ghost.

“I’m fine,” he said. “I just hope the next time there’s another disaster in this damn house someone will have the good sense to call me.”

Mabel and Rochelle both sighed and hoped Michael’s odd demeanor had more to do with his fear for Rochelle, than with the finding of the gun and diary.

Norton asked Rochelle some more questions about how she discovered the hole beneath the tile. Then he asked Michael if he knew the hole was there?

“Hell no, I didn’t know it was there!” he exclaimed, sending Norton a look of disbelief. “Whoever searched the house after the deaths of my dad and stepmother was damn well incompetent. The evidence was right here all the time, which could have saved me all the hell you guys and the court put me through.”

Norton looked guilty. “I’m sorry about that, Michael. Those things happen.”

“Yeah, well it damn well shouldn’t happen if your department did its job.”

The crime scene people finished upstairs and were getting ready to leave. Norton stood. “I think we have everything we need here. We will clear out now and let you folks get back to what you were doing. It was nice meeting you, Mrs. Chandler.”

Within a few minutes the police cars vanished, the street cleared, and only a few stray neighbors remained on the sidewalk, still hoping for some news on what had occurred inside the house.

Michael finally withdrew his arm from around Rochelle and stood up. He reached out, and took Mabel’s hand, pulling her to her feet. “Mabel, I need to talk to Rochelle, if you don’t mind.”

“I don’t mind, Mikey. Is everything all right with you?” she inquired on the way to the door, remembering to grab her purse from a nearby table.

“Yes, it is now, but I think I almost had a heart attack when Mrs. Newland across the street called and told me the police were here. Mabel, you should have called me. I was out of my mind,” he said softly.

“I’m sorry, Mikey.” She glanced back toward the living room where Rochelle waited. “Go easy with her. We talked the other night and from the little she told me, that husband has put her through hellfire.”

Michael nodded his head, kissed her cheek, and closed the door behind her.

Rochelle watched Michael walk back through the living room, his dark blue suit fitting him with tailored perfection. On the surface, he looked so professional, so in control and authoritative, so like a man who knew what he wanted; but did he really? Did anyone ever really know what he or she truly wanted?

She could tell he had spent some time in the sun while she was away. His face was much darker and his dark hair seemed slightly lighter as though sun-bleached. He was clean-shaven looking like an executive in his business suit. His straight nose, his square chin and strong jaws painted a picture of a flawlessly handsome man. Power and gentleness were the characteristics Rochelle saw in him just then, a rare combination.

She recalled the times he held her, touched her, made love to her, their bodies pressed together as one, his lips enticing and firing her blood with passion and yearning. His hands, that wore a roughness from the carpentry he did, were a dark tan with black glinting hairs along the knuckles.

His long slender fingers raked through his hair as he came toward her, lowering himself on the sofa beside her. At first, she had feared his tormented expression had something to do with the gun found in the bathroom. Now she knew it was not. Just looking at him, she knew what he would suggest, and she was certain what her answer would be.

He sat quietly beside her several seconds before he spoke. Finally, he said, “Rochelle, I don’t want you to stay here any longer.”

Misunderstanding his meaning, she jerked her head up and looked at him, her expression a mixture of hurt and defiance. “You gave me a verbal agreement, Michael. My rent was paid for six months with the promise you would sell if I still wanted to buy,” she reminded him tersely.

He shook his head. “It isn’t that I don’t want you here. I am afraid for you to stay here. This will be the first place Tobias will come to. Leaving you here alone is too risky. I could only think the worst had happened when I received that phone call from the neighbor across the street. I would never forgive myself if something happened to you after my having brought you here.” His eyes bore into hers beseechingly, needing her to understand his position, his feelings.

Silence fell upon his words a few seconds, and when Rochelle glanced toward him, he looked as if he would actually laugh—but his eyes weren’t marked by amusement. It was irony.

“Do you know,” he began, “I should be shouting with joy that the gun was found and now the police can find who murdered my father and Tina. However, after being worried out of my mind that something had happened to you, I could care less about the damn gun. I only care about you, Chelle, and feel responsible for you.”

He cared about her. He had held her in his arms, made love to her, and whispered declarations of love on that awful day Tobias had abducted her. Since then, there had been nothing but jealousy and anger. Now, he had never seemed farther beyond her reach. He was a stranger, concerned only with a strong need to protect—more than likely just to spare his guilt, Rochelle thought accusingly.

“Is that how you feel, Michael? Is it just responsibility you feel?” she asked gently, a deep sadness at all they had known and lost.

“Of course, I feel responsibility. Do you think I want anything to happen to you?” He was honestly frustrated at her efforts to discourage his every attempt to communicate with her.

Rochelle could still see the anger despite all his other feelings. He still blamed her for having slept with Tobias, and that disturbed her beyond anything he could have said or done. “Then let me relieve your mind. I absolve you of all responsibility for me. There is no need for you to worry any longer. From here on out just consider me no more than someone renting your house. That is all that is between us anyway.”

His jaw clamped down solidly and the pulse at his throat began throbbing furiously. He fought for control, vetoing the desire to sling her over his shoulder and march out with her. “Rochelle, I don’t want to argue. I just want to know you are safe. Mabel would be glad to have you stay with her.”

“I’m not leaving here, Michael. You cannot make me. We have a deal.”

He jumped up and began pacing the floor. “Then let’s go to the police, explain your situation, and ask them to keep an eye on the house.”

If he had put his arms about her just once the way he did upstairs when he came racing up there filled with fear for her, he

could have gotten her to do about anything he wanted, Rochelle thought. Unfortunately, though, he didn't put his arms about her. There was no affection at all in his expression. His look was one of sheer impatience and growing irritation.

She pushed herself from the sofa, her shoulders squared, her head held tall, and she never looked more in control, nor felt more disheartened and alone. "There's no reason to go to the police. They would drive by every two hours, and anything could happen in between that length of time. The next time Tobias comes for me, I will deal with him. I won't risk your life again like before. And I promise you I will never go back with him again."

"What is that supposed to mean?" he demanded tiredly, the thought crossing his mind again that he'd like to pick her up and carry her somewhere to safety.

"It means I will deal with Tobias." She was making a brave stand against Michael, but she hoped he would go. Her strength was weakening. She didn't know how much longer she could defy him.

Pushing his coat back on his hips, he pushed his hands deep into his pockets. "Rochelle, what is it you want of me?"

"What kind of question is that? You asked me that on the plane, you know. Why are you asking it again? I don't want anything from you, Michael. I owe you a great deal of thanks for all you've done for me, but there's nothing else I expect, and nothing more you can do."

"That is not exactly what I was referring to."

"Then I don't know what it is you're talking about." She turned her back on him. "Now if you'll excuse me, I do have something I have to take care of."

"Damn you!" Michael cursed, grabbing her arm and swinging her around to face him. "Why won't you listen? You know that by staying here you are only setting yourself up for that son of a bitch."

All I'm asking is for you to stay with Mabel a couple of weeks until we see what Tobias has in mind?"

"Michael, you're hurting my arm," Rochelle cried, trying to wrench free of his grasp.

He released his hold, and let her arm drop, looking terribly exasperated. "Won't you please do what I ask?"

"I can't, Michael. I am through running from Tobias. I do not want to run anymore. I do not want to hide anymore, and I do not want to live with Tobias anymore. Neither will I put Mabel in jeopardy the way you were when Tobias shot you. I have to handle this in my own way."

He looked at her in dismay, his face pale with rage and anxiety. A grim tautness settled across his features, offsetting a ravaged harshness in his eyes. Without another word, he spun about and headed for the front door, slamming it loudly behind him.

Rochelle stood there for several minutes, her small nostrils flaring with as much anger as Michael must feel. When she calmed herself, she set the alarm and went upstairs, put the gun beneath her pillow again, and then called Remy.

"Rochelle, where are you? I kept calling the house. The guards, or whoever they were, kept telling me you couldn't come to the phone. I had no idea what had happened to you. Are you all right?"

"I'm fine, Remy, and thank you for all you've done. I'm in Montana."

"I'm so happy you called. I'm also glad you're away from Miami right now. Things are really going crazy here. There have been numerous arrests of people associated with Mr. Chandler. The papers are full of it. Word is the State Attorney's Office is offering deals for those arrested to turn state's evidence against your husband. They haven't arrested him, but newscasts say that an arrest is imminent."

“Do you know if he’s back in the city?”

“I don’t think he is. I recall reading something in the paper about him being out of the country. But how are things with you?”

“I’m okay. Remy, you’ve been a good friend, and I want you to know how much I appreciate all you’ve done.”

“It was nothing. Give me your phone number and address and I’ll call you with anything I learn or send you newspaper clippings.”

Rochelle gave her the number and address. “If you learn that Tobias is back from Columbia, will you please call right away?”

“You know I will, and do keep in touch with me.”

Rochelle went to bed with a novel, a habit that often put her soundly to sleep after an hour or so. That was not the case this night. She tired of the novel and put it aside and then lay staring up at the ceiling, wondering if Tobias would come for her this night. With a gesture that had become habitual, she reached beneath her pillow to touch the cold metal of the gun. She was surprised at her state of calm. She was anxious to have it over with, but she miraculously felt devoid of fear. She no longer feared what Tobias might do to her. If he killed her, it would finally release her from any further threat of him. To be free was the ultimate goal she sought, one way or another.

The night crept on with endless slowness. Every noise and creak keened Rochelle’s ears, and she listened for the next creak or a foot grating on the stair steps. Near midnight, she turned out the light, and tried to sleep. She dozed fitfully, woke, looked at the clock, then dozed some more, a routine she would follow for another hour until she eventually drifted into deep sleep.

About two o’clock, the phone rang shrilly. Rochelle opened her heavy lids, feeling drugged by lingering drowsiness. She picked up the phone.

“Hello,” she murmured groggily. There was no answer, only breathing on the other end. Her eyes opened wider. She listened attentively. “Hello, who’s there?” she snapped irritably. Still no answer, and after a minute, the phone went dead.

Rochelle put the handset back down, turned on the light, and sat on the edge of the bed, her toes digging into the carpet. The ringing of the phone left a startling effect upon her nerves after awakening from a sound sleep. The butterflies in her stomach woke, and fear was no longer an illusive bird in flight. It was perilous terror incited by threatened danger. She felt her hands trembling, and when she held them out in front of her she became aware that not only were her hands shaking, but so was her whole body. For assurance, she reached beneath the pillow again and touched hard, cold steel.

Her mouth felt dry like cotton, so she slid off the bed and went to the bathroom where she filled a glass with water and drank thirstily. Tired and still groggy with sleep, she went back to bed and turned out the light, mindful now that the call could have been Tobias’s way of ascertaining her whereabouts. Determined to stay awake, she kept her eyes open in the darkened room, never aware when her lids drooped sluggishly and closed. She slept soundly.

She woke with a start the next morning as light crept into the windows, lighting up the room. She felt terrible as if she nursed a drunken hangover. A dull headache capped her head. After going to the bathroom and taking a couple of aspirin, she went back to bed, intending to sleep for another couple of hours. The ringing of the doorbell downstairs stopped that. Adrenaline shot through her like a bullet, and her heart began pounding wildly.

Tossing her legs off the side of the bed, her feet touched the carpet and she pushed herself to a standing position, ever mindful that the next few minutes could mark her final days on earth. She donned a robe and with purposeful slowness, ambled downstairs.

The doorbell rang again while she turned off the alarm. She opened the door, expecting to see Tobias standing before her. The need to get it over with quickly was an urgent thought now. She had resigned herself to the inevitable.

“Damn it, Rochelle, you didn’t even bother asking who was out here! Don’t you believe in taking at least some precautions?”

“I knew it wasn’t Tobias, Michael,” she lied. “He would never show up in broad daylight. That’s not his style. What do you want?”

“You look like hell,” he growled. He shoved his hands inside his pockets, unaware that he looked like hell, too. There was a white line about his mouth, and his face seemed stretched tightly with gaunt, pale skin.

“Thanks, I feel about like that, too.” Her heart had slowed down to a marching beat, and she clasped her hands together to hide the trembling.

“May I come in?” he asked, pushing past her. “Didn’t you sleep last night?”

Rochelle stood by the door, turning as she watched Michael move past her toward the entrance off the foyer to the living room. “Won’t you come in, Michael?” she remarked sarcastically. She shoved the door closed.

“I’m in, thank you,” he shot back at her. He looked at her disheveled and tangled mane of auburn-gold hair that lent an impression of wildness to her soft facial features. Even drugged by sleep, with her hair in disarray, she was still the most beautiful woman he had ever seen, and every bridled bit of desire inside of him longed to take her in his arms and smother her face with kisses.

Pride would not allow that. They were at a standoff, and neither was prepared to bridge the gap. With every encounter, he saw her slipping farther away from him, and he still refused to make it right.

He had tried, over at Mabel's, but she had thwarted his efforts. Now, he decided, it was up to her.

“Michael, what do you want?” she asked softly, the desire to do battle quickly disintegrating as she dropped onto the sofa in the living room, totally drained of energy. Now that the surge of adrenaline started dissipating, the grogginess from disturbed sleep weighed heavily upon her. She lifted her bare feet and propped them on the coffee table, her robe falling away from her long shapely legs to expose smooth creamy flesh halfway up her thighs.

Michael's eyes danced over her hungrily, and he purposely looked away, not willing to lose his easily betrayed control when he was in her presence. “I only wanted to see if you were all right. Now that I've seen you are, I suppose I'd better go.” He started toward the door.

“By the way,” he said stopping and turning toward her again. “I spoke to the police chief, and he'll have an unmarked car come by on the hour. If you have a problem, turn on the outside light.”

God, he hated the way his voice sounded when he spoke to her. He was angry, and every word he said echoed that anger. He sounded like an irate, disillusioned and cuckolded lover, and he knew she really did not deserve that kind of treatment. Yet, for the life of him, he could not seem to put his rebellious feelings aside even when he yearned just to take her in his arms and hold her. He went out the door, not bothering to look back or say goodbye.

Completely exhausted from her restless night, and more discouraged than ever with Michael, Rochelle went straight upstairs to bed.

Chapter Forty

It was nearly noon. Rochelle finally slept soundly after tossing and turning with great agitation. Now, her mind played dream scenes of flowing water, green lily pads floating on top, and ducks swimming about; the most pleasant dream she could remember having in months. In her dream, her long red hair caught the wind and blew across her mouth. She pushed it aside, but the sensation of the hair continuing to be across her mouth made her struggle awake.

The hot stinging bite of a hand slashing across her cheek startled her and her eyes flew open. An electrical shock raced through her. Her lids stretched in fright at the discovery of the diabolical face hovering above her, a face corrupted and twisted with hate and vengeance.

The black beard covering his lower face and jaws left him looking more threatening and dangerous than ever. He smelled sweaty as though he had not bathed in days, and his wrinkled clothing gave further evidence to that fact. Likely avoiding Miami like the plague after learning about the warrant for his arrest; he came straight to Montana from his Colombia trip. Being a hunted man, he knew he had nothing to lose. Killing Rochelle would give him great pleasure, especially in view of the fact he was likely destined to spend the rest of his life in prison, at the least, with Monroe Tatum's testimony against him.

Rochelle had expected the security alarm to ring with his entrance, had counted on it to wake her, to give her time to take action in defending herself. Yet, the alarm had not gone off. How could he have gotten in without it waking her?

Then like lightning, her stupidity dawned upon her. Michael had gone out and she forgot to set the alarm. She hadn't even locked the front door. All Tobias had to do was walk right in.

“You dumb fucking bitch! Did you really think you could get

away from me?” His gray eyes, now looking nearly black with venom, drove into her like nails as he slammed a fist against her jaw. Rochelle was certain the sound she heard was shattering bone. Another crash of his fist caught her forehead and eye, and immediately her eyelid puffed up, blurring and impairing her vision.

Fear rose up in her like a giant hand clutching at her heart, it so strong she could taste it, could smell it.

“Where’s the mother fucker who brought you here?” Tobias demanded. “I should have killed that son of a bitch the first time I saw him. He won’t get a second chance. I will bury that bastard before I leave here today. Where can I find him?” he demanded, grabbing her hair and giving it a mighty jerk.

Rochelle screamed in pain, then breathing in shallow breaths, she made a poor attempt to reason with him. “Tobias, you’ve got to listen to me,” she implored.

“Shut your whoring goddamned mouth!” he roared, and his hand struck violently against her face. Blood poured from the corner of her mouth.

The pain shot through her with such force she was certain she might black out any minute. However, the instinct for survival kicked in, and she willed herself to remain conscious. Tobias had not come to take her with him this time. The warning signs of a man completely out of control were all apparent. He was in a rage that left the outcome of her life highly uncertain.

Suddenly, the thought hit her that she didn’t want to die. She wanted to live, wanted a chance to make amends with Michael; wanted to feel his arms holding her just one more time. Fear clung to her senses, and she considered the desperate choices she now faced: to kill Tobias, or let him kill her.

How could she overpower this man? How could she kill him before he could kill her? She forced her good eye to remain open,

and she saw him waving a gun in front of her face, touching it to her temple, his finger seeming to tighten upon the trigger. She was certain she was going to die.

She wanted to grab for the gun and try to shoot him, but she knew there was no way she could gain the gun and shoot Tobias before he took the first shot. To go for the gun would give away her only means of protection and she would be at his mercy then, would surely die without a solitary chance to defend herself. She had to think, had to figure a strategy, look for an opportunity.

With an effort, she began inching her hand upward trying to ease it beneath the pillow where her gun was, but then her nearly unconscious concentration became diverted by Tobias forcibly ripping her gown from her body, the fabric shredding in tattered remnants. His eyes scorched over her tense flesh, his desire rising with hungry insistence causing him to render to the ultimate brutality that could drive his need to maddening heights.

“Don’t do this, Tobias. Please don’t do this,” she implored, but his response was another hard crash of his palm against her face. Her nose ached like splinters sticking in it, and a stream of blood rolled down on her lips and flowed to the corners of her mouth, finally spilling down her chin. She kept her mouth closed, seeing that her pleas had a negative effect on Tobias and her voice only fueled his rage.

Tobias threw the tattered gown away from her. As he had done hundreds of times before, he ran his hand all over her flesh, cupping her breasts, watching her expression that was nearly grotesque now with her swollen face and eye. He wanted her, and he would take her this last time. Then it would be over.

The thought of killing her when he finished fucking her was an aphrodisiac that spurred him on with raging madness. He had come to a place in life where few things mattered. Knowing there was a

warrant out for his arrest in Miami left little reason to care about anything. The thought of spending the rest of his life in prison left no resistance to killing Rochelle. She disobeyed him when she ran away the first time. Now, she had betrayed him with the son of a bitch who invaded his home. Killing her was the only thing that would ease the rage boiling inside him.

With the gun aimed at her temple, he used his other hand to undo his belt. He pulled his pants down with his under shorts. He seemed to be purposely taking his time, enjoying the fear growing in her one good eye. The fear seemed to ooze out of that eye and wash across her face in waves, leaving her once beautiful features contorted and deformed. He wanted her to scream, needed to hear her scream, and he was determined to have that one last pleasure before he blew her away.

When he was naked except for his shirt and socks, he pushed his knee between her thighs, spreading them, taking time to memorize every line and curve of her creamy body. The bright patch of her woman's mound that had drawn his passions hundreds of times over the past years sent his manhood screaming for the enjoyment possible only with her.

As the gun scraped across her temple, Rochelle knew she was going to die, and if she had to die, there was one thing she had to know. Even though Tobias would probably hit her again, she had to ask. "Tobias, I know you're going to kill me, so all I ask is that you tell me just one thing before I die. Did you kill my parents?"

She turned her face as best she could away from him, squeezing her good eye closed as she waited for his blow; but mercifully, it didn't come. Instead, he threw back his head and let out a guffaw of laughter filled with so much venom that it shattered the silence of the room, bouncing off the walls in an awful echo. It was the sound of a mad man, someone totally out of his mind.

“You were always such a naïve and stupid little fool. You believed anything I wanted you to believe. Your father was the biggest fool of all though. He thought he could come up against me. I warned the son of a bitch. I told him to back off, but he went out and hired a private detective to build a dirt file on me. That son of a bitch died happy with an overdose. I didn’t mean for your mother to get it, but she just happened to be in the right place at the wrong time.”

It came as no shock to Rochelle. It is what she suspected. Yet, the reality of certainty churned hate inside her. “Why me, Tobias? Why did you want me when you obviously had a choice of many women?”

“You had something I wanted, baby, and it was between your legs. You were unassuming—at first—like a kid that didn’t need much to keep you happy, except shopping sprees. I liked fucking you, and that’s about all you were good for.”

“How can you be so corrupt and evil?” she moaned through the pain sheeting and throbbing across her entire face.

“You’re calling me evil, my little bitch? I gave you everything you wanted. I kept you in some of the most expensive clothes and jewels money can buy. I never heard you complain about those.”

“I had nothing else to do, Tobias, but shop. For five years, you made me a prisoner, and kept me locked away in that house. You didn’t allow me to go anywhere, unless I was with you or guarded by one of your men. I hated it—just like I hate you.” she spat out the last sentence, bloody saliva spraying Tobias’s face.

He stuck the gun to the side of her head and gritted his teeth. “Keep up your chatter baby, and I’ll pop you right now.”

“Just do what you’re going to do to me, Tobias, and get it over with. You will be doing me a favor. I simply ask that you make the first shot count. Don’t make me suffer.”

He laughed a taunting laugh that clearly demonstrated his power over her. “Don’t be in such a rush, baby. You have to make daddy happy just one more time.

He was holding his manhood in his hand, getting ready to stab her dry canal with it. She put her hands against his chest and pushed, wishing he would just kill her instead of putting her through this last degradation. Her resistance drew another fist against the side of her head that caused everything to go black all at once. Her good eye closed and her head lolled to one side and she could feel herself sliding into dark oblivion.

Seeing her eyes closed in defeat, resignation, and near unconsciousness, he slapped her again, not as hard this time, letting his hand swing lightly from side to side, just enough to jar her awake. “Don’t you pass out on me, you bitch. I want you to feel every bit of me in you, and I want it to be the last thing that will ever cross that brain of yours. Open your fucking eyes!”

Forcing her one good eye open with what little strength she still possessed, she stared, watching the rage on his face, the hate that was eating him alive and turning him into a wild animal intent upon consuming its prey.

Then with animalistic ferociousness, he plunged into her with such reckless and violent force that the scream he craved shot from her mouth in a blood-curdling gurgle. He sexually pounded her as never before, his violence driven by the need to make her pay while she was still alive to feel his retribution.

She laid there unable to move, choking on her screams, his weight pressing down upon her, and his brutal thrusts tearing her up inside.

Pumping in and out of her, he didn’t have long to wait for the rising heat that blinded him, sending his body shooting out raging wild fire and bursting tensions that tightened then released in his

groin and in his brain. At the instant of his release, his eyes shut tightly as he felt the rise of a shuddering climax crashing over him, followed by violent, satisfying jerks of passionate release.

Barely conscious now, but seeing this as the only chance she might ever have again, she made the most desperate choice of her life. It would be Tobias and not her. When his eyes closed during his climatic moment, when his seed was spewing deep inside her, Rochelle reached beneath her pillow and felt cold steel against her hand. She pulled the gun out, and in one motion, lifted it to Tobias temple and squeezed the trigger.

The noise deafened her.

Her last vision was of Tobias's eyes jarring open in that tiny fraction of a miniscule second between the sound of the explosion and just before the bullet plowed into his brain. Shock and incredulity froze forever in his eyes as his life shut down almost instantly.

Blood, bone, and brains exploded from his head, spraying down over Rochelle and the bed. Her hand fell limply by her side, and her good eye closed. Her face was a bloody mass of exploded and mangled tissue, and her limp fingers continued to curl about the gun.

She passed out beneath Tobias's weight, which was forcing the air from her lungs and nearly cutting off her airflow.

Finally, darkness seeped into the last moments of consciousness and closed in around her.

“THIS ONE’S STILL ALIVE,” shouted a medic.

“Oh my God!” Mabel cried from downstairs at the foot of the stairway from where she had heard the man's voice. “Please let it be Rochelle,” she prayed aloud fervently. She glanced toward the living room where Michael sat with his arms balanced upon his thighs, his

head bent and resting in the palms of his hands, his shoulders shaking in emotional agony.

When the paramedics first went upstairs, word trickled down that Rochelle and Tobias were both dead. When Michael tried to vault up the stairs, two police officers stopped him and forced him to remain downstairs.

Mabel was the one who found Rochelle and Tobias.

Michael had asked Mabel to stop by after lunch and check on Rochelle. When she rang the doorbell several times, panic rose in her throat. With her hand on the doorknob, she reluctantly turned it. Seeing it was unlocked, she pushed the door back, gazing inside.

“Rochelle?” she called out in a timid voice, not wanting to startle her. When no answer came, she called louder, her voice rising each time she called Rochelle’s name. Then with a speed unnatural for her buxom weight, she took the stairs two at a time until she stood in the door of Rochelle’s room.

The sight was so staggering, she crumpled to her feet, nearly passing out before she mustered enough control to go downstairs and call the police.

Dazed with shock, she sat in the living room until the police arrived, followed by the medics and an ambulance. The house was soon overflowing with uniformed figures. Finally, when she could think a little, she called Michael and shared the sad news with him that Rochelle was dead. After seeing her lifeless figure beneath Tobias’s dead weight, and all the blood on her and Tobias, any other conclusion seemed impossible.

“Get a stretcher up here! Hurry!” yelled a frenzied shout from upstairs. Then feet were running in mad unison to obey the command.

At the sound of heavy feet just outside the living room, Michael looked up in time to see the men hurrying upstairs with the gurney.

“Michael, I heard them say one of them was still alive,” Mabel cried and took one of his hands in hers. She had never seen him looking so distraught, so vacant and dead looking.

Mabel’s words registered in his dazed skull, causing him to glance sharply at her, a touch of hope sending a spark to his dull blue eyes. He came to his feet, hurrying out into the foyer, his eyes peeled upward at the landing. Sounds of movement and confusion came from upstairs. Michael kept his eyes trained, unblinking, bewildered perplexity shadowing his face, while delicate stirrings of hope fed the heartbeat in his chest. He continued to watch as the stretcher rolled down the hallway to the landing, and the medics carefully transported it down the stairs. The sheet-covered figure lying upon it was still and unmoving.

Then Michael saw her face beneath the oxygen mask. Swollen all out of proportion, the skin around one eye puffed up like a ball. Bruises forming on one entire side of her face, and a puffy cheek distorted any resemblance to Rochelle. Her broken lips swelled out of proportion, while cuts from Tobias ring were all over her face. A stream of blood ran from her nose down to her lips, sliding down from the corners of her mouth to her chin.

Michael’s body reacted with a violent shudder as he stepped back out of the way of the stretcher and the paramedics. He and Mabel both followed in their wake, their faces frozen in dismal shock. The thought kept ringing in their minds: *She’s alive. She’s alive.*

Michael managed to keep a semblance of control, despite the fact he felt like he was coming apart. He held back as the medics put Rochelle in the ambulance, turning and glancing toward the house. He was thinking about Tobias lying dead in the same bedroom where someone killed his father and Tina. He wanted to follow the

ambulance to the hospital, but he also wanted to learn exactly what happened up there in that room.

“Mabel, wait here. I’ll be right back,” he said and took off back into the house.

No policeman was on the stairs just then, so he ascended quickly, darting toward the bedroom before anyone could stop him. The sight that met his eyes staggered him. The medics had shoved Chandler on his back, and he was naked except for his shirt and socks. His penis and groin area were soaked in blood, and Michael knew it was probably Rochelle’s blood. Another puddle soaked into the bedding where her hips had been. Tobias’s temple was already becoming crusty with dried blood, and a white pulpy stuff that was likely brain tissue oozed from the wound. He held a gun in his right hand, and the thought hit Michael squarely that Tobias had meant to kill Rochelle this time. Another gun, bagged now, lay on the bedside stand, and while Michael had no idea where she had gotten it from, it had to be the weapon that killed Tobias.

“Michael, what the hell are you doing here?” Sheriff Rollins quaked, catching sight of him. “Get out of here. Fulbright, get out there and don’t let anyone else up those stairs.”

Michael had seen enough. Hanging his head, he made his way back down the stairs where Mabel still waited.

“The son of a bitch was having sex with her,” Michael said stormily to Mabel when they were in his car.

Mabel sent him a disbelieving, disapproving look, shaking her head. “Mikey, you can’t possibly still be jealous of him after what you’ve just witnessed. My God, give the girl some credit. You have no idea how much suffering she’s been through, and you damn sure didn’t help any with your puckish jealousy.”

“Lay off me, Mabel. I can’t take it right now. My opinion of myself is bad enough without having you lay yours on me, too.”

“Mikey, he has mentally, emotionally, and sexually abused her for years. He victimized her so long it is a wonder she is still sane. He was evil through and through, and I am glad the bastard is dead and won’t be able to hurt her anymore. Maybe, finally, she’ll have some peace and contentment in her life if she pulls through this.”

AT THE HOSPITAL, THE WAITING ROOM, where they sat for at least two hours, was quiet—almost reminiscent of a peaceful atmosphere. Michael was looking at his watch when a doctor stepped into the room. “Are there any family members for Mrs. Rochelle Chandler?”

“Yes, we are,” Mabel replied. She jumped to her feet in unison with Michael.

“She’s going to be alright. Although her face is in bad condition now, it will heal. There were no broken bones, which is a miracle. She lost a lot of blood and we’ve had to give her a transfusion.”

“How long will she be here, doctor?” Mabel asked. “And how long before we can see her?”

“She’s very weak from loss of blood. She is going to need some recuperation time. Perhaps you can drop by tomorrow and see how she’s doing.”

Chapter Forty-One

Rochelle floundered in and out of consciousness a couple of days, and then she began coming out of it. Because of her severely swollen lip, it was too painful to attempt to eat, so they gave her juices and soup through straws.

The physician sent a psychiatrist to her, but she refused to acknowledge his presence, turning her head away when he tried to speak with her. The police attempted to question her, but she stared into space without blinking an eye, and they soon gave up the effort, until such time she might be more responsive.

Although Michael was at the hospital several times daily, Mabel was the first one allowed by Rochelle's doctor to visit her. Not knowing what to expect, Mabel was sadly upset when informed by the doctor of Rochelle's mental state. According to him, Rochelle hadn't spoken a word to anyone in the four days since her arrival. She was still weak, unable to get out of bed on her own, but the doctor said she was mending nicely except for her mental condition.

Mabel expected a silent, unresponsive Rochelle when she entered her room. She was pleasantly surprised, however, when she neared Rochelle's bed, and Rochelle lifted her pale hand to Mabel in quiet supplication, an imploring look in her dull green eyes.

"I thought no one was coming to see me," she whispered, struggling with her words through swollen lips, only one side of her mouth able to move, and each word bringing a grimace of pain.

"The doctor wouldn't let anyone see you, Sweetpea. He thought it best that you have some time alone before you received visitors. If I had known you wanted me here, I would have been here every day.

"Is Michael all right?" Rochelle asked, trying not to move her lips too much because of the pain.

"He's fine, but he's worried sick about you. He wants to see you."

"Not like this. I don't want him to see me like this. Where is Tobias?"

"They're holding him at the morgue until you're well enough to decide—well—to make decisions about him."

“He had no family that I know of. At least he never mentioned any.”

“You don’t have to do anything just now except get well.” Mabel wanted to comfort her, but felt completely helpless. Rochelle was a pitifully scarred replica of what she had previously been. Her face was black, blue, and puffy with broken skin on her lip, nose, cheeks and forehead. It would take weeks before her face was back to normal, if ever.

“I guess it’s up to me to make arrangements. I hoped I would never have to go back to Miami again. Now, there is no other place to go. I can’t stay here. I will never be able to hold my head up and live in Windy Point again.”

“That isn’t true, honey. You have friends here. Many people have come to the hospital to inquire about you.”

“I need to talk to an attorney. Maybe you can recommend someone. I have to find out what will be involved before I can carry Tobias back to Miami. I also need to know when the doctor will release me.” Her words and syllables were broken, and the deadening effects of the medication soon carried her under again. She reached out and grasped Mabel’s hand before giving in to the enshrouding darkness of drug-induced sleep.

Rochelle remained in the hospital another six days before the doctor released her. The swelling in her face went down some, but most of her face was blue and purple with bruises. Her swollen eye was still puffy, and when she looked at herself in the mirror, she hated what she saw. Her face was a pitifully deformed replica of what it had been. Everyone assured her it would heal as good as new and she wouldn’t find a single trace of the damage Tobias inflicted. She silently disagreed vehemently, knowing the mental and emotional scars would be with her for the remainder of her life. She had experienced such horrible abuse over the past years from Tobias

she wasn't sure she would ever get over this last horror.

She finally consented to letting the police question her. Attorney Shearborne, referred by Mabel, was present. When she began telling her story, reliving that last span of time before she shot Tobias, it was nearly more than she could deal with.

The police absolved her of wrong, calling it justifiable homicide. It was a relief knowing the police wouldn't be carting her off to jail, but the sentence she served on herself would be the harshest of all. It made no difference that she kept reminding herself that Tobias would have killed her. The fact remained that she took a human life, and she could not shake it or the guilt from her thoughts. There were times her mind was so intent upon what she had done, she would find her finger curving, as if on the gun trigger, and squeezing, the event lived again-and-again like a movie reel that never ran out of film.

She called Bentley Harrison soon after her release from the hospital, asking him to set up arrangements in Miami for a funeral home to receive Tobias's body. He showed no surprise when she told him that Tobias was dead. Tobias was big news, and newspapers across the country carried the story of his death, it hitting all the Miami papers.

Rochelle learned the Miami police was also in touch with the investigative team in Windy Point. Bentley informed her that while many arrests were made of people attached to Tobias, they no longer had the option of receiving a deal by turning state's evidence against Tobias. Now, the authorities would charge them with crimes committed and they would eventually go to trial. All those charged froze up, refusing to mention Tobias's name at all as soon as they received word of his death, fearing they would incriminate themselves. Even to have been associated with him insured a worst fate than might otherwise be expected. Their attention turned now to

saving their own hides. Without witnesses, the state had nothing on Tobias, and his estate was in tact and safe from confiscation by the authorities over suspected drug involvement. Rochelle was now a doubly rich young woman.

MABEL TOOK ALL ROCHELLE'S clothes and personal items from the Matheson house. Rochelle came to stay with Mabel while handling flight arrangements for her and Tobias's body.

Michael attempted several times to see Rochelle, but she still refused. She resolved herself to the idea that she and Michael were finished, and seeing him again would only stir up old hurts and wounds she wanted to forget. Mabel begged her to see him before she left for Miami, but no amount of pleading would change her mind.

“He loves you, Sweetpea, and he's going out of his mind because you won't see him. If you knew how much he is hurting you wouldn't be so stubborn.”

“He'll hurt much less without me to complicate his life.” She spoke like a robot, her feelings dormant while she moved through the haze of trying to move forward.

“Honey, don't you feel anything at all for Michael? I thought you loved him. I was sure you loved him.”

“I'll always love him, Mabel, but I need time to try and get my head together.”

“Rochelle,” Mabel said, rarely using Rochelle's Christian name, “if you leave here without putting things right between you and Michael, you'll be making the biggest mistake of your life.”

She gave Mabel a cold stare. “No, the biggest mistake was marrying Tobias. My second biggest mistake was getting involved with Michael when circumstances forbade it. I can't undo that, but I can make sure he won't have to suffer anymore because of me.”

“Thank God that he can at least put his mind to rest over his father and Tina’s murder. The lab report came back on the gun discovered at the house. It contained Wayne’s fingerprints all over it, as did the diary, which definitely ties him to the murders. The police have not discovered his whereabouts yet, but they have put out an APB on him, and an arrest is imminent. Michael won’t say much about it, but I can tell he is extremely relieved to have that shadow no longer hanging over his head. What he went through when his father and stepmother were murdered was a traumatic experience. He knows a little of what you are going through now.”

“What was in the diary?”

“It belonged to Tina Matheson. Wayne must have made the hole beneath the tile so she could keep her diary there. After he shot and killed them, he feared the police might catch him with the gun on his person, so he stuffed it in the hole with the diary, never realizing Tina had recorded every sordid detail of their affair in it. I think he had intentions of eventually coming back and retrieving the gun but for whatever reason, he never got around to it. Since no one was living in the house immediately after the deaths of the Mathesons, I suppose Wayne thought the gun would be safely concealed.”

“I’m glad for Michael,” she said, too numb to show much enthusiasm.

Rochelle’s flight schedule was for the following morning, and there was one final thing she must do. Driving to the bank, she prayed Michael would not be there, that she would not have to suffer that last indignity of having to face him.

Shame was like a disease she carried around with her, and looking straight into the eyes of anyone other than Mabel, made it extremely difficult to hold her head up with any degree of dignity. The fact that her face was still a grievously discolored and damaged fruit, made Rochelle even more intimidated at having to see people.

Their stares unnerved her, causing her to feel like a bauble on display.

All eyes alighted upon her slender, expensively dressed figure the minute she stepped through the door of the bank. She was wearing a dark blue two-piece suit, the jacket with long sleeves and pearly blue buttons. She carried a small black patent leather handbag and wore matching pumps. Even with her bruised face, she portrayed a vision of attractive femininity and a regal-like grace that could still draw respect edged with envy. With her long wavy, curling mane of auburn-gold hair, she was an arresting sight, everything about her perfect, all except her slowly healing face.

With Michael's help, soon after she had settled in the Matheson house, he helped her invest a major portion of her money. Now, it grew with interest in large enough quantities she could live comfortably off just the interest. However, there was no need to since she had kept a goodly sum of liquid assets in her savings and checking accounts, as well as ready cash in her safety deposit box along with her diamond rings. Now, not expecting to be back in Windy Point anytime soon, maybe never, she was forced to go to the bank one last time to empty the safety deposit box. The checking and savings account could remain open so she could write checks as needed.

Going to the nearest teller where the vaulted safety deposit boxes were, she requested admittance, and the teller showed her into a small room after retrieving her box. She picked up her diamond rings and stared at them. She recalled when Tobias bought them. It was on the same day they were married. He stopped by the jewelry store and told her to pick what she liked. Like a little kid who chooses the "biggest piece" of candy, her attention drew to the biggest diamonds, and the ones giving off the brightest sparkle. She never saw the price, but when the clerk raised both brows over

rounded eyes and grinned, Rochelle could nearly imagine him busy counting his money from the sale.

The teller assisting Rochelle went back to her window and picked up the phone. “Mr. Matheson, I thought you’d like to know Mrs. Chandler is in the safety deposit vault.” She set the phone back on its hook.

Rochelle shook her head with a shudder and reminded herself she had to stop dwelling on memories. “Concentrate on what you have to do, Rochelle,” she whispered to herself, and started emptying the money from the safety deposit box and putting it in her handy old duffle bag.

Intent upon what she was doing, the door behind her opened without a sound. Rochelle stayed at her task several seconds before awareness of a presence gained her startled attention. Turning about, she saw him standing there, his proud face composed, reflecting none of the stormy emotions her presence evoked—only a deep, inexplicable regret.

“No, Michael,” she whispered, turning her face away from him to hide her shame and the deformity of her abused face.

“Chelle...” his voice caught in his throat and he seemed unable to continue. Instead of words, he put his hands on her arms and lifted her from the chair, turning her to face him.

Ashamed of her damaged face, instead of looking at him, her head bent down and she stared at the floor, the bruised side of her face turned away from him. “Please go, Michael. I can’t stand to have you witness my shame.”

“I love you, Chelle. I love you, and I have been a fool not to let you know how much. I made a terrible mistake when I let my feelings wreck what we had together. I should have mended the breach immediately, but I was too damn proud and stubborn. But I

want you to know now how terribly sorry I am that I caused you—caused us both—so much pain.”

She shook her head, unable to speak, the untapped tears of earlier now bursting forth like a fountain.

“You have nothing to be ashamed of,” he said, tilting her chin upward.

“Please don’t make this any harder than it already is, Michael,” she cried pitifully, her knees weakening and playing havoc with her upright posture as she grasped the table behind her for support.

Michael’s arms went around her. They were strong, loving, and protective arms. It was a moment of intense release as she gave in to the pleasantness his closeness afforded. She leaned against his chest.

“Honey, I don’t want to make it harder for you. I want to make it easier. Let me help you get through this?”

Rochelle appraised the words of his deep, sensual voice. How easy it would be to let Michael handle everything for her. The temptation held strong appeal. Yet, wasn’t that what she had been forced to do with Tobias all those years? He had handled everything, handled her whole life, ruling and dictating until she had no life.

“I have to do this on my own,” she replied to Michael’s offer, her voice stronger now, and more determined. Bentley Harrison will handle things in Miami.” Dabbing at the tears with the handkerchief Michael gave her, she regained control, but her hands trembled violently.

“What will you do when you’ve done all you need to do there?”

“I don’t know. Maybe travel some, try to find myself again.” Glancing up at the deeply etched lines of strain and fatigue on his face, a new flood of tears gushed forth as it occurred to her how much she would miss him.

“Michael...” she began, but bit back the rest of her words. What purpose was there in telling him how much she loved him, how much she would miss him?

He seemed to know what she had started to say. “Say it, Chelle. Don’t leave me hanging like this.”

Reaching up she touched his cheek, his square chin already darkened by the growing stubble and the lateness of the day. “Michael, you were—always will be—the most precious thing in my life, but too many things has happened now, and we can never go back to where we were. It’s too late for me, but it’s not for you.”

“Chelle, you’re going through hell right now. You have no idea what you want. I know you love me, and I love you. I won’t let you destroy what we have.”

“I’m sorry, Michael. It’s over. Let it go.”

Staring deeply into her green eyes, he searched her face before declaring, “I’m not letting you out of my life that easily.”

“Please, Michael, just go. I need to be alone.”

Gingerly, he touched his lips to hers, and then studied her face a moment. “Until we meet again...”

Turning, he marched out the door, closing it behind him without looking back.

Chapter Forty-Two

From an airport terminal window, Mabel stood with Rochelle and watched in numb shock as attendants loaded Tobias’s casket upon the plane. A few uniformed police officers stood by to keep order in case the press or onlookers crowded about. A solemn moment pervaded the atmosphere. Rochelle turned away after the first glance

at the casket, oddly the same color of bronze as in her dreams, it chosen by the local funeral home. A torrent of confused feelings tumbled one on top of the other, and strongest among them was the vision of the moment when her finger pressed the trigger. Tobias was dead, and she was free. Oddly, she had not even noticed until now how truly free she did feel. The old fears, nursed for nearly all the years she knew Tobias, had vanished. The tension was gone in her shoulders. The anxiety and dread had disappeared.

“Mabel, I’m going to miss you. You are a valued friend, and I hope our paths will cross again. Perhaps when I am settled and have my life together again you’ll take a vacation and come for a visit.”

“We never know what’s ahead of us, do we?” Mabel asked, thinking more on the past than the future. “I’ll miss you, too, Sweetpea. You have taken a special place in my heart. I do hope you will keep in touch and let me know how you fare.”

“I will, I promise. Keep the car and drive it. If I never come back, then it is yours. Please tell Michael...” tears rushed to her eyes, and she cleared her throat, swallowing the lump before she could finish her statement.

“Tell him, for what it’s worth, I will always hold him dear.”

When they announced passengers could begin boarding the plane, she hugged Mabel fiercely. Then turning without looking back she hastened to the loading chute, little realizing that in an unobservable area behind where she and Mabel stood a minute ago was Michael.

When Rochelle was out of sight, Mabel joined Michael. “Mikey, are you really going to let her walk out of your life like this?”

“It’s what she wants, Mabel. I don’t have much choice.” His face was pale, and his ravaged appearance denoted another night without sleep.

“She’s upset, confused, distraught, and assaulted by enormous emotions, but one thing is certain, she loves you. Even if she does not realize it, she needs someone now more than ever before. When the total shock of all that has happened wears off, I am afraid of what the outcome will be. Michael, what she has gone through, and still has to go through, is more than most women could endure.”

“Your concern is generous, Mabel, but she made her choice, and I wasn’t it.”

“Mikey, let’s go get a cup of coffee. I need to talk to you about some things. Maybe after you hear what I’ve got to say, you’ll understand why she left you.”

They found a coffee shop and ordered two cups.

“Mikey, do you have any idea what it feels like to feel dirty, soiled, unclean, and tarnished? Do you know what it is like to feel such humiliation and shame that you lose your nerve to face someone you love? She feels unworthy of you. She thinks she is not good enough for you. I have seen her shudder and cringe at the thought of people seeing her and Tobias upon that bed. That alone is enough to send her to a psychiatrist’s couch. I am telling you she is not entirely competent at this time to know what she wants. She is confused and disoriented.”

“Mabel, I know there must be a point to all this. There’s not a thing you can tell me that I haven’t gone over in my mind numerous times.”

“I am not trying to interfere in your life, Mikey, but you know yourself it was your jealousy that tore the two of you apart. It frightened her terribly after what she went through with Tobias. He abused her sexually, mentally, and physically, and it is a wonder she can function normally at all. She has been through hell, and it is not over yet. If you think what you suffered in jail was so bad, just

imagine yourself being brutally raped nearly every night of your life for years.”

Mabel watched Michael’s face contort in fury and anguish, and she could not know that he was recalling the gentle confession on the night he had first made love to Rochelle. *That has never happened to me before*, she had said, referring to the first climax she had ever experienced. *I never realized it could be like this.*

“Save your fury, Mikey,” Mabel retorted, misunderstanding his facial expression. “You’ll need it for the rest I have to tell you.”

“Mabel, no more,” his voice vibrated with fury and pain. “Good God, no more.” He cupped his face in his hands, his elbows resting on the table. Then he began trembling all over.

“There are the ticket windows, just beyond that door,” Mabel said suggestively. “She needs you, even if she doesn’t believe it right now. If I did not know how much she loves you, I would never suggest such a thing. But she does love you.”

Mabel watched the storms blowing across his face, and she truly thought he was going to have a heart attack. Then his features changed ostensibly, in slow motion, from fury to thoughtfulness, then to determination, followed by meek tenderness.

“An attorney whose name is Bentley Harrison will know where to find her,” Mabel added when she was sure he had taken the bait. Then a self-satisfied smile pressed little dimples in her cheeks as she continued watching the expression on Michael’s face changing.

SOON AFTER MICHAEL STEPPED off the plane in Miami, he found a phone book, looked up Bentley Harrison’s address, and rather than call him, took a taxi to the man’s office.

The secretary was a sophisticated middle-aged woman, well dressed, and extremely polite. “Good morning, Sir, how may I help you?” Her smile was as pleasant as her disposition

“I’d like to see Mr. Harrison,” Michael replied in a businesslike manner.

“Do you have an appointment, Sir?”

“No, please tell Mr. Harrison I’m Michael Matheson and have just arrived from Montana.”

Maintaining a guise of cool politeness, she nodded, and picked up her phone. “Mr. Harrison, Mr. Michael Matheson of Montana is here to see you, Sir.” She listened to the response a moment then put the phone down.

She sent Michael another warm smile. “Mr. Harrison will see you now,” she said, standing and leading the way to the office door. She opened it and stood aside for him to pass, sending him another friendly smile as she closed the door behind him.

When Bentley Harrison rose from his chair, his more than six-foot height towered above Michael by an inch or two. Michael judged him to be about the same age his father would have been, in his late fifties. He looked at Michael through eyes that never lost their worried expression, but his smile was genuine and his handshake firm.

“Mr. Matheson, it’s good to meet you. I was sorry to hear the sad news about your father’s death. Mrs. Chandler told me a little about you, and your generosity in helping her. Have a seat,” he said, pointing toward one of the chairs facing his desk. “What can I do for you, Mr. Matheson?”

Michael lowered himself into the black leather chair. “I’m here to give whatever support I can to Rochelle, but I was hoping you might tell me the disposition of Chandler’s drug operation.”

“It’s very favorable. Every suspect proven to have ties to Chandler or his drug smuggling and distribution operation is in custody, including the guards that worked at his estate. If you have kept up with the news, you know it’s one of the biggest drug bust

Miami has ever known. Cops, police officers, two judges, and several other public officials are now in custody. I understand the DA has a strong case against them. Tobias's death was a boon for the DA. He can terminate the deals made to perpetrators on behalf of testimony against Tobias, and everyone involved will likely serve full sentences."

"I bet a lot of folks here in Miami can breathe a lot easier now."

"Oh, you better believe that," Harrison smiled. "Is Rochelle expecting you?"

"No, she isn't, but I'm concerned about her present mental state, I hope I can offer support and help her thought this. She's been through a great trauma, and while she seems to be bearing up under the pressure, I know she is severely stressed."

"I came to that same conclusion when I met her at the airport. I am to meet her in an hour. You're welcome to wait and we can go together."

"Thanks, but if you'll tell me where to find her, I'd just as soon go ahead."

"She's at Chandler's estate. She wanted a chance to pack up some of her personal things before we met. I took the liberty of putting a guard on the gate, so you might have a problem getting in."

He picked up one of his business cards, and handed it to Michael. "Show this to him, and have him call me if there's a problem. I believe you already know where it is?" Amusement spread across his face, as he recalled Rochelle's narration of her rescue by Michael.

"I obviously have no secrets from you, Mr. Harrison," Michael said with light mockery, and stood up.

Harrison shot him a smile. "I was a friend of her family since before she was born. I am her Godfather, you know. I think of her as

my own daughter, and I believe her confidences show a similar affection for me.”

“Thank you, Sir,” Michael said respectfully, reaching out his hand. “I’m certain we’ll be seeing each other again.” Michael picked up his bag, which contained two changes of clothing, extra shirts, his electric razor and toilet articles. He left Harrison’s office.

Michael took a cab to Chandler’s estate where he inquired at the gate if Mrs. Chandler was home before dismissing the taxi.

“She’s home, Sir,” said a uniformed, off-duty, police officer, “but I can’t let you go in there.”

“I expected that,” Michael told him, producing Harrison’s business card. “Mr. Harrison said to call him if there is a problem.”

The guard picked up the phone and dialed the number, greeted the voice on the other end, then looked at Michael. “Your name, Sir?”

“Michael Matheson.”

The guard said the name in the phone, listened, and hung up. “You may go in,” he said, going into his tiny cubicle to press a button that opened the repaired gate.

Michael dismissed his cab and stepped inside the gate, hearing it whine shut behind him. There were no dogs, no other guards, and no activity at all going on. The estate seemed nearly ghostly quiet and death-like. He began the hike up the long driveway to the house, reminded of Rochelle’s mention of riding her bike on the driveway. The thought made him think of a sad young woman, alone, lonely, and no one to turn to when the world seemed fraught only with misery and pain. It was a humbling thought.

Chapter Forty-Three

Rochelle was in the bedroom where she was going through her huge wardrobe of clothing. She tossed numerous suits, dresses, skirts, blouses and pants on the bed, intending to pack them into the suitcases setting on the carpet nearby. In the spacious closet, holding Tobias's clothing on one side, and hers on the other, she turned, and in a thoughtful mood, reached out, touching a couple of jackets Tobias had liked best.

The funeral was that afternoon, and the funeral home would be sending someone by soon to pick up the clothing to bury him in. She had no idea what to choose. What kind of things are people dressed in for their burial? She wondered dismally, not even knowing what the maid had chosen for her parents since they had closed caskets at the service. She felt tears expand behind her eyes in intermittent cycles over the misery of trying to make decisions when she was too confused to think.

Then like a hammer, it hit her, the misery of the years she had spent in this house, in this room, in this bed. The physical, mental and emotional suffering endured washed through her like a giant wave, mixed with the churning thought that she had taken a human life. The weight crushed down on her like a block of steel. She raised her hand in front of her eyes, studying it, seeing it holding a gun that pointed to Tobias's temple, then feeling the gentle squeeze of her finger on the trigger, the explosion...

She shoved Tobias's suits aside one at a time, rejecting one after the other, until, blinded by tears, she could no longer see. Her legs went limp and she crumpled to her knees, her head inclined, her upper torso pressed against her thighs. Loneliness engulfed her with such fierceness that she suddenly wished she were choosing clothing for her own funeral.

“Oh, dear God, what am I to do with my life?” she cried helplessly, thinking of Michael with longing.

The ringing of the doorbell chimed from the upstairs landing, and Rochelle’s whole body stiffened with tense listening. When it rang again, she rose from her crouched pose, hurrying to the stairs and on down, expecting to see Bentley Harrison at the door, or the man from the funeral home to fetch Tobias’s clothing. She still had not chosen a suit. She hoped either of them would help her choose.

She grabbed the doorknob, then wiped at the sheeted tears on her cheeks before opening it. “Uncle Bentley, I’m so gla...” she started to say, and then stopped, startled by the face before her.

“Michael?” His name came out in a shocked whisper.

A slow light crept into her green orbs, warming their depths, and suddenly she had never been happier in her life to see anyone. Misery and joy compounded together as she crumpled to the hard marble on her knees, balling like a kid.

“It’s okay, honey. I’m here to help you in any way I can.” He pulled her to her feet, and moved her inside. After closing the door behind him, he set his suitcase on the foyer and stood holding her.

He would have moved to the living room, but the doorbell rang again, persistently. Michael opened the door this time.

“Yes, what can I do for you?” he asked of the black suited man whose black car flaunted a funeral home logo on the car door.

“I’m here for the clothing for the deceased,” the pale faced man stated from a stiff vertical pose.

Rochelle was standing behind Michael. “Let him come in, Michael. I didn’t know what to choose.”

Michael sent the man to a chair in the room off the foyer, and then went upstairs with Rochelle, taking the initiative to choose a suit, shirt, tie, underwear, socks and shoes for Tobias. He put it all in a zippered clothing bag while Rochelle sat on the edge of the bed

and tearfully watched him. He took it back downstairs and she continued to sit on the bed, her gaze trained at some invisible object on the carpet.

She was sorting through her closet when Michael came back up. Going to her, he wrapped his hands about her wrists, keeping her from pursuing her task.

“You don’t have to do that just now, Chelle. It can wait until after the funeral. Come with me downstairs to wait for Bentley Harrison. He should be here soon. You look tired. Have you slept at all?”

“A little,” she whispered absently, letting him lead her downstairs. “Why did you come, Michael?”

“I came because I wanted to be with you, and because I knew you would need someone to help you get through this. But more than anything else, I came because I love you.”

“I’m glad you’re here,” she said, breaking into tears again. “I can’t seem to stop crying. I am a mess, Michael. I’m a real mess right now.”

“It’s okay to cry, honey. It’ll help heal the pain.”

She leaned her head back into the crook of his arm and shoulder. His arm reached reassuringly around her waist as they went downstairs. “This house has so many terrible memories,” she said after they were in the living room, sitting on the sofa. “When I walk into a room I almost expect to see Tobias there.”

“Where are you staying?”

“I’m staying at a motel not far from here. I thought about staying here, but I can feel his presence as strongly as if he were in the room with us.”

With a thoughtful glance at Michael, more words poured from her mouth in a rush. “Michael, I had to pull that trigger or he would

have killed me instead, and he threatened to come after you. I had to stop him.”

He patted her back. “Chelle, you did what you had to do, what anyone in your place would have done. Honey, you had no choice.”

“Why do terrible things have to happen to people? Why can’t people just be peaceful and happy?”

“If we had an answer to that question life would be paradise. Honey, it will get easier in time. When all this is behind you, the memory will fade, and you’ll go on with your life.”

“What am I going to do?”

Michael cupped her chin in his palm, and looked at her bruised face that was beginning to heal. “You don’t have to decide that now, Chelle. I am here and I do not intend to leave you alone until you are sure what you do want. We will go away together, see new faces, experience a different environment, give you time to mend. What you have been through would have permanently wounded any woman lesser than you. You’ve got strength enough that you’ll get through this.”

“I am so ashamed knowing people saw what Tobias did to me.”

“Don’t think about that now. The pain will pass. You’ll see.”

“If I can just get through today, through the funeral, then maybe things will slowly get better.”

“We’ll get through it together. You’re not alone,” he reassured her with loving tenderness.

She clasped his hand and held it to her heart. “No, I’m not alone, and when I’m with you, I’ve never felt alone.”

“Honey, you’re never going to be alone again.”

Epilogue

Five years later

A long white limousine crawled to a stop in front of a tall modern building, a structure made of steel, mortar and glass. The building was the same one that was in the picture, which had hung on the wall behind Michael's desk at the bank; the same building Michael sold after his father and stepmother were murdered. He had been able to buy it back for only a little more than he sold it for.

The chauffeur came around and opened the door, offering a hand to the little four-year-old boy who climbed out first. Then with his other hand, he took a tiny two-year-old girl's hand in his and helped her from the car. With both hands occupied, he stood and watched the beautiful Mrs. Matheson twist on the seat and put her feet on the pavement before exiting. She had a ready smile for him as she always did when he drove her and the children somewhere. As she climbed from the car and stood on the sidewalk, her eyes drifted up at the name over the large swinging doors that opened on the huge lobby of the building.

"Matheson and Associates Architectural Firm," she read aloud, a touch of pride swelling in her chest. "Children," she said, taking their hands from the chauffeur, "that's your daddy's name up there, and some day one or both of you will have your name up there, too."

"I can draw pictures like daddy," young Joanna stated proudly, holding up a picture she had brought just for her daddy.

"You can't draw. Can she, mommy?" Jason asked with a scowl on his face.

"Your sister is very talented, but so are you," she said, giving him a warm hug.

"Shall I wait for you, Mrs. Matheson," the chauffeur asked, smiling at the beautiful mother with her two small children.

"Yes, Jack. My husband is taking us for lunch. We have something special we're going to celebrate."

“I bet it’s a birthday,” he said, looking from one of the children to the other.

Rochelle smiled, her eyes lighting up with brilliant green lights. “You wouldn’t be far wrong,” she stated happily, and went through the swinging doors with the children who looked like they had just stepped out of an expensive clothing store.

The guard in the lobby called out a hello to the children and waved, and they waved happily back at him.

“Daddy’s taking us out to lunch,” young Jason called. “We’re celebrating a birthday.”

Rochelle sent the guard a bright smile then pulled the children in the elevator when the doors opened, and pointed to the button the children fought over pushing together.

They exited the elevator and opened a door off the hallway into a large, cheerful reception area, where two secretaries sat behind desks. One was Rochelle’s dear friend Mabel.

“Hi, Mabel,” Rochelle said, smiling her warmest smile. “Is Michael busy?”

Mabel rose from her chair, hugging the children, and lifting Joanna up in her arms.

“Aunt Mabel, you’re squeezing me!” Joanna squealed in complaint.

Mabel eased off on her hug, smiling with joy as she answered Rochelle. “He’s in his office, but I’ll let him know you’re here,” she said, still holding onto a squirming Joanna while she picked up the phone.

Mabel put Joanna down with a kiss upon her cheek. Then glancing at Rochelle, she said, “He said to come into his office. There’s someone you haven’t seen in a while.”

Taking the children’s hands, she went toward the door that opened for her as she neared it. Michael gazed at her proudly, took

the liberty of a kiss, and then kissed his children. They all stood there while the children greeted their daddy.

“Daddy, we’re celebrating a birthday. Can we go to lunch?” Jason called excitedly.

“A birthday, you say? Whose birthday is it? If it’s not mommy’s birthday, not mine, not Jason’s, and not Joanna’s, whose birthday can it be?” He looked up at Rochelle for confirmation, and when she nodded her head, Michael greeted her with a huge smile and another warm kiss.

“Daddy,” Joanna said shyly, tilting her head against her mother’s skirt while holding up her picture to her daddy.

“You drew a picture for me?” he asked excitedly, hugging her as if she had just produced a masterpiece. “I’ll put it in my office,” he said, lifting her in his arms. Then to Rochelle, “it’s been awhile since you visited. I believe you’ll enjoy seeing who’s here.”

He led her and the children into his office where Bentley Harrison sat. Mabel had slipped in through the boardroom door and now sat next to Bentley, the two having formed a warm relationship.

“Oh my goodness,” Rochelle gasped, covering her mouth with her hand. “Uncle Bentley!” she exclaimed.

Bentley came to his feet, stepping forward. He hugged her generously. They passed several words of greeting between them.

Jason began tugging at his father’s hand. “Daddy, mommy said you’ll put my name on the sign with your name.”

Michael looked down at his young son, took his hand and walked over to the window overlooking a large stretch of San Francisco. He picked Jason up, holding a child in each arm. “Not only will your name someday be on the sign, son, but you’ll be a master architect who will make your old man extremely proud.”

“I can draw pictures like you, daddy,” Joanna volunteered, not wanting to be left out.

“Yes, you can, and if you choose, you will work right along side your brother, and together the two of you will create the finest buildings in the world.”

Rochelle chuckled and said, “You hope.”

There was a bulletin board nearby and putting the children down, Michael made a big show of tacking Joanna’s picture on it. After they admired it a moment or two, he turned to his friends.

“Bentley, if you and Mabel will excuse us, I believe my family and I have a birthday to celebrate.”

“Whose birthday is it?” Bentley asked.

“He or she doesn’t have a name yet?” Michael said, and grinned at his lovely wife whose long red hair flowed down over her shoulders.

“You mean you’re going to have another one?” Mabel blurted out in her outspoken way.

Rochelle smiled at her and nodded.

“Why am I surprised?” Mabel asked. “You told me you want four.”

Bentley looked at Mabel. “Mabel, do you think we’re too old to...” he smiled as she interrupted him.

“Don’t even think it,” she laughed.

Laughing, Michael wrapped his arm about Rochelle’s slender waist, and sent her a look of devotion. “Do you feel okay, honey?”

“I feel wonderful,” she stated, smiling brightly.

Michael took Jason’s small hand. Joanna took her mother’s right hand and the Matheson family went out together, chuckling when Joanna asked if they could have a pink birthday cake.

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NOTE FROM AUTHOR:

If you enjoyed reading about Michael, Rochelle, and Ramm Prescott, the karate black belt expert, see what new adventures they are up to in the book: *Seductive Betrayal*. Ramm sets out to gain his trust fund fortune by seducing Jeannie, and his betrayal starts a horror story of conflicts.

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