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Fires of the Night

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Laurel was unhurried as she walked along the pebbled path that dissected the retreat center's large courtyard. Her gaze lingered on a cluster of cherry trees planted in the far corner. Each tree stood ancient and proud. Each brimmed with tiny pink blossoms. She slowly inhaled their delicate aroma, and as she lifted her face toward the sun, its gentle warmth bathed her in contentment. Nothing disturbed the quiet, except the faint sound of a chirping bird and the soft rustle of wind moving through new spring leaves.

"Better enjoy it while it lasts," her assistant muttered from behind.

Laurel turned around to face the younger man and laughed. "What would I do without you to remind me that nothing good lasts forever?"

"You'd go around with your head in the clouds. Listen, I've got quite a few items we need to discuss before tomorrow's onslaught. Now a good time?"

Laurel looked straight into Andrew's gentle face, his warm brown eyes resigned to some fate she knew nothing about. "I'll join you in my office in ten minutes. How's that?"

He nodded and moved down the path away from her. Laurel didn't really need a reminder that tomorrow was the beginning of the center's biggest conference of the year. By noon the halls would reverberate with the sounds of five hundred men and

women eagerly sharing their experiences of being gay, happy to be free of their usual life restrictions. But until that happened, she still had a few more hours to appreciate the serenity of this stately New England retreat center. She sighed deeply and continued across the courtyard at a leisurely pace.

"Ms. Lewis! Ms. Lewis!" a frantic voice from across the quad interrupted Laurel's musings.

"Yes, Julia," Laurel called to the woman rushing toward her. Laurel tried to hide the smile that teased the corners of her mouth. Julia, the Center's Reservations Manager for the past ten years, always looked like a whirlwind had just crossed her path and today was no exception. Her graying hair popped out in all directions. The seams of her dark linen skirt were noticeably askew. She waved at Laurel like a schoolgirl wanting the teacher's attention.

"Ms. Lewis!" she called out again.

"What's the matter?" Laurel said in a calming voice.

"Ms. Montgomery has been waiting for you in the office for quite some time," Julia explained breathlessly. "She's fit to be tied"

"Isn't she always?" Laurel muttered under her breath, reconciling to the fact that the tranquility of Spring was no longer hers. "I'm on my way," she assured Julia.

In the past, Laurel resented having to be at Claudia Montgomery's beck and call, but it hadn't taken Laurel long to realize that it came with her job as the Center's General Manager. After all, Claudia did chair the Center's Board of Directors and she was the Center's primary benefactor.

Laurel brushed away the few stubborn strands of light brown hair that refused to stay out of her face and reluctantly quickened her pace. But by the time she reached her office Andrew informed her that Claudia had left.

Laurel looked at her watch. "It's only quarter of! Our meeting isn't for another hour." She turned toward Andrew and shrugged. "Did she say anything worth repeating?"

"Nothing too colorful, although she did mutter something like, 'By god, no woman is worth waiting for!'"

Laurel laughed at Andrew's attempt to mimic the deep, silky voice they both knew so well. "She didn't really say that, did she?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Sometimes I think that woman is caught in a time warp. She acts like she's living in the South on a plantation."

"I don't think the South would have her." Andrew winked at his boss while handing her a small stack of checks to be signed.

Laurel took the checks and walked into her office. What would she do without Andrew's good humor and ability to not take things too seriously? *I'd have quit long ago*, she thought with a sigh as she put the papers down and turned to look out the large picture window that spanned the full length of the wall behind her desk.

The Center's grounds were magnificent any time of the year, but in spring they brought magic to the air. There was something about pristine white houses surrounded by carpets of fresh green grass that beckoned each onlooker to slow down and appreciate the simple gifts of life. Not even Claudia's arrogance could upset Laurel on a day like today.

Laurel sat down on the window seat, captivated by the idyllic setting. She tried to force her thoughts back to work, back to the signing of checks and the juggling of financial statements, but the idea of staring into a computer screen for the next few hours left her cold. Instead, she leaned over her desk and turned on her radio to a soft classical station, propped a few pillows behind her back and returned to gazing out the window. She watched the team of ground keepers in the distance, pruning and tidying up after winter's siege, and was reminded of the first time she had met Claudia, almost three years ago.

It had been Spring then also. Laurel had spent the previous seven years teaching senior English at a Boston high school. At first she had been excited by the challenges of teaching, but over the years as she had honed her skills, she felt she was becoming stale by the routine of public school. She also learned that she was not someone who thrived on life in a big city, at least not as a single woman. Although she had dated often, and even become serious a couple of times, there was always something that prevented her from making a true commitment.

Her brother told her that she expected too much, that she was too romantic. But in her heart of hearts, Laurel knew she just hadn't met the right woman yet. So when she heard about the opening for General Manager at the Eastland Retreat Center, she decided to apply for the position.

To her amazement, Laurel was invited to the Center for an interview in late April. Unfortunately, the trip from Boston to lower Connecticut for her meeting with Ms. Montgomery had taken much longer than she had anticipated. Laurel had wanted time to familiarize herself with the grounds and the small town where the center was located, but instead she barely had time to run a comb through her golden brown hair and slip into the linen jacket of her powder-blue, three-piece suit before she was ushered into a large room by a young man who looked as nervous as Laurel felt.

"Your three-o'clock has arrived, Ms. Montgomery," the man said as soon as he opened the door. He gave Laurel a little nudge through the threshold when it appeared she wasn't going to step into the room.

Laurel managed to take several steps into the room before she stopped. The room was strangely cold and uninviting, although it was furnished pleasantly enough. Claudia Montgomery sat behind an antique oak desk, her head pointing down. She was studying a file of papers laid out in a neat pile before her.

“You must be Ms. Lewis,” she muttered, not bothering to lift her eyes to greet Laurel. However, she did slowly rise to her feet.

“Please call me Laurel.” Laurel gathered her courage and walked across the room, the old wooden floorboards creaking under the carpet with each step. When she was within arm's length of the desk, Laurel stretched out her hand. The woman glanced at it, and then took it firmly in her own. To Laurel's surprise, in contrast to the rest of her demeanor, her touch was warm and oddly comforting.

Then Claudia looked Laurel fully in the face. Laurel swallowed the blush of color she felt rising in to her cheeks. The woman was strikingly beautiful—not in a soft or youthful way, but in a powerful, ageless way. Her bold features formed a chiseled perfection, but unlike a marble statue, there was a warmth to her light complexion and vitality in her ruddy cheeks.

And then Laurel noticed her eyes. They were turquoise-blue and sparkled like dawn on a tranquil sea. Laurel could feel herself drawn into their depth. At first she was warmed by their attention, lulled by their apparent kindness, but as Claudia continued to stare at her, the intensity began to burn into Laurel. That was when Laurel first sensed danger in the woman's eyes, a storm that brewed just below the surface.

Suddenly Laurel flushed with self-consciousness and her gaze darted around the room, away from the woman's captivating stare, her slender nose, her thick, short-cropped, dark brown hair.

This is ridiculous, Laurel thought, as she tried to regain her sense of composure. Instead, she felt more like a teenager drooling over a movie star than a seasoned professional seeking a career advancement. *Don't avoid the interviewer's eyes*, she reminded herself. At least that's what the books on interview techniques always advised. But none of them mentioned a solution for sweaty palms or fiery cheeks. Laurel swallowed again and forced herself to look at the woman.

Then Claudia smiled. It was a slight smile, only touching the corners of her mouth, but Laurel could see the arrogance of wealth and self-importance behind it, and she quickly realized that Claudia was one of those women who was accustomed to having others gasp at her good looks. From that moment on, Laurel made sure she did nothing that could be misconstrued as gasping.

“Have a seat, Ms. Lewis,” Claudia said coolly as she gestured toward the overstuffed chair positioned in front of the desk. “Why don't you start by telling me something about yourself.”

Laurel perched on the edge of the pillowy chair, afraid that if she sat back, the chair would engulf her. “What would you like to know?” she asked, trying to match Claudia’s reserve.

That insidious smile returned to the woman’s lips. “For openers, I’d like to know if you are gay or straight.”

Laurel was tempted to laugh at Claudia’s question, but she could see that the woman wasn’t joking. “I don’t believe that is an appropriate question to ask,” Laurel said matter-of-factly, at least she hoped she sounded matter of fact.

“I’ll take that as a yes.”

Laurel flushed. “Surely you know that you are opening yourself up for a law suit.”

Claudia’s eyes twinkled. “I do know that. I just wanted to make sure you knew it. This center caters to a myriad of groups, but our most treasured and lucrative clientele is the gay community. Anyone who can’t deal with that, can’t have the job.”

“I teach at an inner city school in Boston. I’m accustomed to diversity.”

“Yes, I read your resume. I queried your references. I ran a background check on you. But all that has told me is that you are capable of managing this center. But I need to know more than that.”

“Like what?” Laurel sputtered.

“Like your temperament. So many women are capable of managing but they don’t have the temperament. They don’t know how to confront or be direct the way men are. They get their feelings hurt.”

“You’re joking, right?”

“I’m dead serious. It’s a documented fact in the most recent studies.”

Laurel was appalled. “It’s true that women manage differently than men—we have our own strengths and our own weakness. But that doesn’t mean we have different goals or different successes. It just means we get there differently.”

“That’s easy for you to say. You’ve never managed employees before.”

“I’ve done something much more difficult. I’ve managed thirty-two teenagers in a four-hundred square foot room without the incentive of money or use of force to keep them there.”

Claudia bowed her head slightly. “I concede the point.”

“Maybe you have never been in a public school, because if you had you would release that women have been managing...”

"I gave you the point," Claudia interrupted. "That means the game is over."

Laurel was on a roll and not ready to accept her small victory. All of her feelings about the rich, all of her guilt about wanting to leave the inner-city to retreat to a life of peace and quiet were now fueling her response to Claudia. "This isn't a god damn game. This is my life we're talking about. And quite frankly, Ms. Montgomery, I don't think I want to spend it with someone like you."

Laurel rose to her feet, turned on her heel and headed for the door. As she reached for the doorknob, she thought she heard a groan come from Claudia's direction.

"Please, don't leave," Claudia finally said when Laurel started to open the door. "I didn't mean to offend you." Her tone was conciliatory.

Laurel turned around and faced the woman again, her hand still on the knob, but she said nothing.

"Come on, Ms. Lewis. Give me another chance." She smiled and for the first time Laurel could see past her polished pretenses. "It's just that I've had a long week of grueling interviews and I guess they've robbed me of my natural charm." The genuine weariness in her voice softened Laurel's anger.

"I really am interested in this job," Laurel conceded, more for her own benefit than Claudia's. From that point on, Claudia was pleasant and affable. She talked easily about the school and the job requirements. She seemed truly interested in Laurel's thoughts and feelings on many subjects, eliciting information from her without making her feel uncomfortable or intruded upon. There were times when Laurel thought Claudia was stuck in a nineteenth century classism, but for the most part, she found it amusing rather than infuriating.

Two hours later, as Claudia escorted Laurel around the center's grounds, Laurel knew she wanted the job more than she had ever wanted anything in her life -- and not only because Eastland was beautiful.

Of course Claudia hadn't offered Laurel the position right away, nor had she done it in the usual fashion. The weeks that followed Laurel's interview put her on an emotional roller coaster. Each day she opened her mailbox with high hopes and each day those hopes were dashed when there was no news from Eastland. She even purchased a telephone answering machine--just in case, she told herself. But as the weeks rolled by, it only served as proof that Claudia was not trying to reach her.

To make matters worse, Laurel couldn't stop thinking about the woman. At night, while fixing dinner, she would reconstruct every minute of their time together--the way she spoke, her deep, silky laugh, her cultured mannerisms.

And when Laurel went to bed, she would lie with her hands behind her head and picture Claudia in perfect detail--her soft, slightly weathered face, the gray strands

that lightly sprinkled her thick brown hair, her strong torso and round hips, and of course, her brooding eyes.

Then one afternoon late in May during her fifth period class, the school secretary announced over the classroom intercom that Laurel had a visitor.

"Who is it?" Laurel asked peevishly, annoyed that there was yet another interruption to her lesson.

"I don't know," the secretary replied. "The driver won't say."

"Driver?" Laurel asked, but she couldn't hear the secretary's answer because her entire class suddenly lined up in front of the windows, and noisily exchanged comments about the huge gray limousine parked by the school's entrance.

"Let me see," Laurel said, pushing her way to the front of the crowd.

When Claudia Montgomery stepped out onto the sidewalk, Laurel gasped.

"Do you know her, Ms. Lewis?" several of her students asked in unison.

"Sort of," Laurel admitted as she watched the beautifully attired woman walk across the scruffy front yard of the school and disappear through the front door. "You're in charge, Jason," she quickly said, grabbing her bag and rushing out of the classroom.

"How nice to see you, Ms. Lewis," Claudia said after Laurel had almost bowled her over when rounding the corner at the bottom of the stairs.

"Claudia," Laurel sputtered, momentarily forgetting the woman's surname. One look into her penetrating blue eyes rendered Laurel's brain useless. She looked down at the floor and took a deep breath.

"I'll only take a moment of your time. I've come to ask if you would join me for dinner tonight." Claudia's voice was deep and rich, just as Laurel had remembered.

Laurel's heart thundered and for a moment she was afraid that this was just another one of her many day dreams. She looked back at Claudia. *This is no dream*, she thought. *This is flesh and blood and she's inviting me out. But what is she doing here in Boston? Why did she show up unannounced? Why hadn't she called?*

Laurel managed a casual smile and asked in a teasing tone, "Have you ever heard of a telephone?"

Claudia grinned in that irritating way of hers. "I did call. I left a message with the school secretary early this morning, but since you didn't return my call, I decided to deliver the message myself."

Laurel groaned. What a day to forget to check her message box, she chastised herself.

“Is that a yes or a no?” Claudia prodded.

“It’s a yes,” Laurel said, trying to hide her excitement.

“Fine. My driver will pick you up at seven.”

Laurel momentarily bristled at her commanding tone. “Seven-thirty would be better,” she countered, then immediately regretted her own gall.

Claudia nodded, looking down the graffiti lined corridor with a mixture of amusement and disdain.

“How about telling me where we are going. I would like to dress appropriately,” Laurel inquired.

Claudia scanned Laurel’s simple, green cotton shirt and denim skirt. “What you’re wearing will do,” she said brusquely. “This isn’t a date. It’s a business meeting.”

Laurel was surprised at how deeply her words stung. But she quickly recovered and said, “It never occurred to me that you were asking me for a date. I was simply asking how formally I should dress.”

She met Claudia’s gaze head on. At first the woman’s eyes were filled with doubt, and then slowly they changed to resignation. *Resignation to what*, Laurel wondered.

“I’m sorry. I was out of line,” Claudia said genuinely. Then a coy grin crept across her face and she added, “You know, a confirmed bachelorette has to keep her guard up.”

“I’ll remember that,” Laurel said, matching her softened tone. She glanced at the large, plain, clock on the wall. “I really should be getting back to my class.”

“Yes, of course. I’ll see you tonight.”

As Claudia walked down the corridor, Laurel noticed just how out of place the woman looked in this run-down city high school in contrast to how comfortably she fit into the country club setting of Eastland. Laurel wondered if she would be able to make the transition from rags to riches herself.

Suddenly, she called out to Claudia, “By the way, did I get the job?”

Claudia turned back to her and smiled. “Of course. We’ll discuss the terms over dinner.”

Six weeks later, after several farewell dinners and a tearful good-bye to her two best friends from work, Laurel was driving from Boston to Eastland, pulling a small rented trailer that contained her most important possessions--knickknacks,

paintings, a CD player, her grandmother's old rocker, and a few large plants. The rest of the furnishings would be provided by the center, so she had been told.

The General Manager's house faced the same village green as did the Retreat. From her front porch Laurel could see Eastland's rather ornate entrance, two small churches, and several other quaint looking houses. Her new home was small, more like a doll house really, with a white picket fence that boasted the most beautiful array of dainty red roses. Inside the house was a living room, a well-equipped library with a fireplace, a large but antiquated kitchen and dining room, and two bedrooms upstairs in the dormer. A bathroom was positioned between the bedrooms and seemed to have been put there only as an afterthought.

But now, almost three years later, the house was definitely home to Laurel. The kitchen had been updated and air conditioning had been installed. She enjoyed pruning her roses and training them to flow over the picket fence. The small vegetable garden she had started that first summer had expanded each year to include new and exotic vegetables from around the world, as did her culinary skills in preparing them.

In terms of her career, she never once regretted the move to Eastland. Each day presented her with new challenges and new problems waiting for solutions. The variety of skills the position required never left room for routine or boredom. One minute she was smoothing ruffled feathers of some of the more temperamental employees and the next she was soothing client grievances. And never a day went by that she didn't have to contend with one client's fears or another's long-winded advice. She even spent many an evening studying heating and plumbing guides in an effort to have intelligent conversations with her maintenance crew.

The only thorn in her new life had been Claudia. From the beginning, they met on a weekly basis, and each meeting left Laurel confused and sometimes hurt. There were times when the woman's charm and warmth would melt Laurel's veneer of self-protection and fill her with dreams of secret intimacies. But there were other times, more frequent times, when the woman's cool reserve would quickly and antiseptically sever any connection Laurel might start to feel for the woman.

As the months passed, it became clear to Laurel that Claudia respected her and was basically pleased with her work, but wanted nothing more from her than a professional relationship. And by the end of the first year, any fantasies Laurel might have had, either conscious or otherwise, were completely dashed one sultry evening after one of their regularly scheduled meetings.

It was the beginning of August. Claudia had come up to the school from her co-op in New York to review the coming year's budget. To Laurel's relief, Claudia was in one of her more pleasant moods. She smiled easily. She was warmly receptive to most of Laurel's suggestions, and even laughed out loud on several occasions. They worked steadily through the afternoon in Laurel's stuffy office and around five Claudia leaned back in her chair, stretched, and said, "I need a change of scene. I think we can wrap this up over dinner. Where can I take you?"

Laurel wasn't surprised by the invitation. They often met over lunch or dinner, but she really wasn't in the mood for dressing up. So, on an impulse that probably stemmed from Claudia's unusually good mood, Laurel answered, "How about letting me cook something for us at my place. I really don't feel like going out."

Without any hesitation, Claudia accepted. "You go on ahead," she suggested. "I'll gather up this paper work and be over in an hour or so, okay?"

When Claudia arrived, she brought two bottles of wine. "One white, one red," she announced proudly. "I wasn't sure which would be most appropriate."

"Which goes better with Mrs. Paul's fish sticks?" Laurel retorted with a chuckle. She took the bottles from Claudia's hand.

"For that I recommend we pour them both into a pitcher and stir." As Claudia brushed passed Laurel and walked into her house, Laurel couldn't help but notice that she smelled like a freshly mown meadow.

"I bet that's how they make rose," Laurel said good-humoredly as she followed Claudia into the kitchen.

Claudia groaned loudly as she peered into the oven to see if fish sticks were really on the night's menu.

Laurel gently slapped her hand. "It's a surprise. You'll just have to wait and see."

"I don't like waiting," Claudia announced, lifting the cover off the only pot sitting on top of the stove.

"So you're always pointing out," Laurel said.

They continued casual conversation interspersed with business through the first bottle of wine and most of dinner. Claudia remained less formal and more relaxed than she usually was around Laurel, but Laurel was still keenly aware that there was always a part of Claudia that was resolutely held in reserve. A part that held mystery in her brooding eyes, vulnerability behind her firmly set jaw, and unfortunately, it was this part of Claudia that intrigued Laurel the most.

But Claudia was skilled at warding off another's curiosity. Each time Laurel tried to steer their conversation to a more personal level, Claudia maneuvered out of reach. Each time Laurel tried to express a little warmth, Claudia found a way to maintain her shield of distance, usually by mentioning one of her girl friends in New York.

By the end of dinner, Laurel's frustration was at a peak, and although her secretary had warned her from the beginning to never mention Claudia's "wife," Sarah, now dead ten years, Laurel rashly thought that it was high time she found out why the subject was forbidden. She took a final sip of wine and set the glass down firmly next to her empty plate. "So, Claudia, why aren't you married?"

"I just haven't met the right girl yet," she said, as if by rote.

"Then tell me about Sarah. What made her the right one?"

Claudia's rage was instantaneous and frightening. "How did you find out about her?"

Laurel braced herself. "It's common knowledge that you were attached just like it's common knowledge that you have a daughter."

"Then it should also be common knowledge that I don't want them discussed . . . either to my face or behind my back."

"I apologize," Laurel said, nervously fingering the stem of her wine glass.

But Claudia couldn't close the door so easily. "She's none of your damn business! Nor is anything else about my private life."

"All right. I said I was sorry. I didn't mean to pry."

Claudia's eyes churned like molten lava. "The hell you didn't."

Laurel squelched her own rising anger. "I had nothing sinister in mind. I only wanted to get to know you a little better."

"Why?"

Laurel sighed with exasperation. "I don't know, Claudia. Curiosity, maybe. Friendship." She threw her hands helplessly up in the air.

"We are business associates, not friends. Don't ever make that mistake again."

Laurel's mouth stiffened with hurt and anger. "Don't worry, I won't." She expected Claudia to get up and leave, but to her surprise, the woman didn't move. She didn't speak. She just sat there as fire burned uncontrollably in her eyes.

At first Laurel tried to match it with her own fury. After all, Claudia had ruined what had been a very pleasant evening. But as Laurel slowly began to realize that the fire was not meant for her, but rather a reflection of some unspoken torment the woman lived with every day, Laurel's anger was gradually replaced with compassion.

Laurel debated what she could possibly say to the woman and ended up saying nothing. Instead, she went out to the patio with a tray of coffee and two slices of cake, inviting Claudia to join her.

When Claudia finally did, she apologized for her outburst, but she continued to brood. Laurel tried several tactics to smooth her ruffled feathers, but Claudia resisted them all, sometimes with biting sarcasm.

"Maybe we should call it a night," Laurel finally suggested, walking away from Claudia into the darkness that loomed just beyond the patio lights. Her eyes burned with tears she didn't want Claudia to see.

"I should have known that you're no different than all the rest of them," Claudia grumbled from the patio's edge.

"What are you talking about?" Laurel demanded, swiping at a tear as it rolled down her cheek.

"I should have known that you would eventually make romantic overtures toward me."

"Romantic overture! Don't flatter yourself," Laurel said sharply.

"Then what would you call your incessant questioning?"

"I would call it common decency. So, I showed a little interest in your personal life. So, sue me, but certainly don't mistake it for romantic interest."

Claudia walked into the darkness toward her and when she reached laurel, she turned her around to face her. The woman's long, graceful fingers held onto Laurel's shoulders firmly. "Why did you ask about my wife?"

"I didn't mean anything by it." Laurel squirmed under the intensity of the other woman's gaze. "I was just curious. If that's a sin, then forgive me."

"I can't forgive you," Claudia said, her grip tightening.

Laurel became indignant. "Do as you like, Claudia. Just don't attribute motivations to me that aren't really there."

"I understand your motivations perfectly. You're like every other woman in my life. You want a hero, a strong and powerful shoulder."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Laurel said in protest.

"I'm talking about this," Claudia answered, pulling Laurel's body against her own.

At first Laurel was confused and a little frightened, but the woman's proximity soon overwhelmed her. Wasn't this the moment she had longed for? Hadn't she dreamed of Claudia's arms enveloping her in just this way?

Yes, but, not like this, she told herself, pushing the woman away. "Claudia, don't."

"Why not? It's what you want, isn't it?" She continued to hold Laurel, her mouth so close to Laurel's that their breath intertwined before settling on their lips.

Laurel stood in the cool night air, helplessly sad and helplessly hopeful, her resistance to this woman melting like butter in the sun. She didn't want a hero. She wanted Claudia. Slowly, cautiously, she moved her lips until their mouths joined, her whole body aching for the union.

Claudia responded with a mighty hunger and despite every warning Laurel's brain tried to offer, she quickly found herself succumbing to Claudia's invasion, to her mouth, to her tongue.

Laurel wanted more. She wrapped her arms around Claudia's waist and pulled her even closer. She felt giddy, suddenly caught in an infinity of wine and roses. The dam that held back her feelings for so long had finally broken and a whirlpool of sensations rushed through her. She was drowning and it was exquisite.

Then abruptly and harshly, Claudia pushed her away. "What did I tell you?" she sneered. "You're no different. You want what every woman wants from me." Then she disappeared around the house, through the front gate, until only the sound of her footsteps lingered in the darkness beyond.

Laurel was dumbfounded . . . and devastated. As she brushed away the tears that streamed down her face, she vowed she would never again pay the price she had paid tonight. She would never feel another feeling for that insufferable woman. She would never ask her another remotely personal question. She would show no signs of curiosity about her whatsoever. From this moment on, she would be all business with Claudia. She would be polite. She would be pleasant. But never would she be vulnerable with her again.

From that moment on Laurel was true to her word. Neither she nor Claudia ever mentioned the incident again.

Chapter Two

Laurel pushed away the memory when Andrew's voice filtered through the intercom on her desk. "Ms. Montgomery is back."

Laurel stepped away from the picture window, unconsciously smoothing the creases of her apple-green, cotton slacks before pressing the response button. "Send her in."

The door opened the moment she removed her hand from the intercom and she watched Claudia amble into her office, the woman's suit jacket slung casually over her shoulder.

"It's about time you showed up," Laurel said brightly, taking the offensive.

Claudia groaned with feigned displeasure. "You're just lucky that it's a beautiful day and that I was in the mood for a walk." Then she smiled and added, "I must say, you look rested today."

Now it was Laurel's turn to groan. She did so audibly. "It's always a dangerous sign when you tell me I look rested. It usually means you're going to double my work load."

"That's a good idea. If you had more work to do, maybe I could find you in your office when it's time for a meeting," Claudia teased.

"If I had to be an hour early for all of my appointments, I'd never get anything done," Laurel retorted good-naturedly. She stepped away from her desk and sat down in the wing chair next to the brightly covered couch where Claudia usually sat.

Claudia walked over to the brass coat tree in the corner of Laurel's office and placed her navy blue pin-striped jacket over a hook. She unbuttoned her vest, but left it on. "I suppose the fact that we have several hours worth of work ahead of us means nothing to a woman of leisure like yourself."

"If I'm a woman of leisure, then I'd hate to see what a busy woman looks like by your standards."

"Edith Bunker comes to mind, especially around the time Archie gets home from a hard day at work," she quipped, moving to the couch and taking a seat. "Now there was a woman you could count on."

"I'll remember to scurry around you more at the next alumni banquet. That should make a good impression in a roomful of lesbians, don't you think?" Laurel placed the

stack of papers she wanted to review with Claudia on the coffee table between them. “You must have important plans tonight if you are so anxious to get started with our meeting.”

“Actually, I do,” Claudia said with an exaggerated sniff. “I must be back in New York City by six.”

“Dinner with Muffey, or is it Buffey? I can never keep them straight.”

Claudia flashed a coy smile. “Luckily, neither can I.”

“That’s more than I needed to know,” Laurel said, raising her hands as if to ward off any more information. “Let’s just leave it at I hope you have a wonderful evening.”

Claudia sat back and propped up one foot on the coffee table. “Actually I’m having dinner with my daughter. It’s a special evening.”

“It can’t be her birthday. Didn’t she just turn sixteen last month?”

“Two months ago. Tonight is more like her coming out party. She’ll be joining the conference tomorrow as one of the high school delegates for the state of New York.”

“That’s quite an honor but I didn’t know she has decided she was gay..”

“This month she’s bi.”

Laurel laughed, remembering the eight years she spent teaching teenagers—the eight years she spent helping them on and off the emotional roller coaster of their lives. “Lilly is such a delight to be around. It will be fun having her here for the next few weeks.”

They continued their conversation about Lilly, interspersed between budget negotiations, teacher hirings and firings, and the plans for the new workout facility. Only once did they raise their voices with each other and that was when Claudia maintained, in Laurel’s opinion, her pig-headed view that the Lesbians Erotic Writers of America could not be booked during the same two week period as Gay Youths of America.

“Writers are writers. Why do you think women who write erotica are going to behave socially any different than any other kind of writer?” Laurel insisted as she pounded her fist against the thickly padded arm of the chair.

“And what exactly is it that you want to be teaching young gay girls and boys?” Claudia’s voice boomed.

“For one thing, the Gay Youth group is not comprised of young girls and boys. They’re eighteen-year-old men and women. For two, I wasn’t suggesting that we lock them in a room with a bunch of crazed sex fiends. I’m merely suggesting that they

share this vast facility with a group of mature, professional lesbians who happen to write about sexual encounters.”

“*Graphically* write about sexual encounters,” Claudia corrected. “It’s absolutely out of the question,” she concluded, dismissing Laurel’s comment with the wave of her hand.

Laurel continued, undaunted. “It is the only time slot each of the two groups can schedule with us. And besides, I will not be put in the position of censorship. If you want to be the center’s McCarthy, don’t ask me to participate.”

Claudia stood up. “Damn it, Laurel. Don’t debase our conversation by throwing insults in my face. I will not tolerate that kind of insubordination.”

Laurel laughed, batted her eyelids profusely, and in a demure southern accent, said, “Why, Miss Scarlet, please excuse my silly impudence.”

Claudia grunted, but Laurel could tell by the softening of Claudia’s clenched jaw that the cajoling was working. Finally, they settled their argument by agreeing to schedule the writers and discussing the situation with the Gay Youth’s group leader and letting him make the decision about sharing the facilities with the lesbian writers.

By four o’clock, their meeting was over in plenty of time for Claudia to drive back to the city. As she buttoned her vest, she asked Laurel to join her and Lilly that evening for Lilly’s birthday.

Laurel was not surprised. They had had dinner together several times over the years, usually to wrap up business matters or to help celebrate special occasions for Lilly. It all seemed harmless enough, especially since Laurel had convinced herself long ago that Claudia would never be anything more than a boss to her. Even Martha, the woman Laurel was currently dating considered her occasional outings with Claudia to be a normal business function.

“I’d be delighted to have dinner with you and Lilly,” Laurel said, making a mental note that she would have to call Martha and break their date for the evening. “It will be good to see Lilly again. I’ve missed her during the last few months.”

“She’s missed you too. You’re all she talks about. I’ll have Andrew make reservations for you at the Plaza Hotel. We’ll see you there at eight.”

Laurel nodded as she walked out of the office with Claudia. The woman still smelled as she had that summer so long ago, of freshly mown meadows, not that Laurel cared anymore. Laurel was confident that the part of her that reacted to Claudia as a woman had been buried far too long for a resurrection to be possible.

Two hours later as Laurel drove into the city, she thought of the thousands of things she had to do between now and the end of the Spring season. Starting tomorrow her time would not be her own anymore. There was the annual sales meeting, the Trustees’ meeting, the maintenance review board, the Client Advisor Board meeting,

and on and on. Laurel's mind was spinning by the time she dropped her car off with the doorman at the Plaza.

She checked in and went to her room. It was small but thoroughly elegant. The first time she had stayed at the Plaza, she spent the first hour gaping at its refined ambience and all of the patrons who seemed so obviously at home in its lavish surroundings. Now she was no longer starry-eyed. She took it all in stride and it made her smile at how much the last few years at Eastland had really changed her.

A small bouquet of tulips adorned her dresser and in it was a note from Lilly. 'Can't wait to see you,' it read. Laurel carefully refolded the note and put it in her pocket for safe keeping. Then she took a quick shower and put on the peach chiffon dress that suited her coloring perfectly. It complemented the soft waves of her shoulder-length golden hair, giving her a healthy, vibrant appearance. She accented the slightly daring neckline with a single strand of pearls, and the only makeup she used was to highlight her bright green eyes.

Soon there was a knock at the door. She opened it to let Lilly in. "Hi, Laurel," the girl said with a broad smile. "You look beautiful."

Laurel reached out and smoothed the young girl's short black hair. "So do you. I like your new hair cut." Laurel was always amazed at how fragile and innocent Lilly appeared. She was like a weeping willow in a morning mist, ephemeral and delicate. It was an odd contrast to the bold presence of her mother. Laurel decided long ago that Lilly's birth mother must have been the other woman, the wife no one was allowed to mention.

"Mom's waiting for us downstairs. She told me to hurry."

"Let's have her wait a few more minutes," Laurel suggested with a wink. "I have a little something I want to give you."

"A coming out present?"

"A belated birthday present," Laurel corrected.

"I didn't think you knew," Lilly beamed.

As Laurel handed the girl a small package, she said, "You're a light in my life, Lil. How could I forget your sixteenth birthday?"

"It's lovely," Lilly whispered in delight when she opened the dainty compact.

"My mother gave it to me when I turned sixteen," Laurel said, leading Lilly into the bathroom. "Let me show you how to use it. But don't tell your mother I taught you anything about makeup. She'd have my job!"

Laurel didn't believe that a woman should bother with makeup, but she did believe that for a young girl, learning the art of applying it was a sort of right of passage, and it was a right that Claudia denied her daughter. There were times when Claudia's heavy handed upbringing worried Laurel. More than once, Laurel had received a late night phone call from Lilly in a puddle of tears because her classmates or friends had laughed at her uncommon naivety.

After Laurel had given Lilly a few pointers, and the girl had a blush to her cheeks and a new depth to her eyes, the two of them headed for the lobby. When they reached Claudia, she turned around and smiled.

"I'm glad you could join us, Laurel. May I introduce you to Beverly Muffett? She'll be joining us for the evening." Claudia's voice was thick with formality and a hint of embarrassment.

An unexpected burst of fury flared in Laurel, although she wasn't sure why. Luckily, she was able to conceal her reaction to the pretty brunette who was clinging to Claudia's arm. "Ms. Muffett, it's nice to meet you."

"Call me Muffey. Everyone does," the woman said as she shook Laurel's hand in a clasp that could barely be felt.

An awkward silence followed. Claudia finally cleared her throat and said stiffly, "Well, ladies, shall we go?" Without waiting for a reply she placed her hand on Muffey's back and guided her outside to the waiting limousine.

Lilly slipped her arm through Laurel's and whispered, "I forgot to warn you about Muffey. She just kind of showed up at the apartment and Mom didn't know what to do but bring her along."

Laurel winked at Lilly as they walked out into the night air. "This way we'll have more time to talk together. We've made a few changes at Eastland that I think you'll like."

During the drive through the bustling city streets, Laurel and Lilly chatted on and on as Claudia and her lady sat opposite them in silence. Laurel couldn't tell whether Muffey was bored, annoyed, or simply vacant. When the four arrived at the restaurant, Muffey saw some friends and excused herself.

"Muffey's a very lovely young woman, Claudia," Laurel said with a grin when Lilly had gone to study the buffet. "Does she talk too?"

"I'll have you know she's very bright," Claudia pointed out haughtily. "And she's not as young as she looks. I think she's just under thirty—your age, I believe."

"As a point of clarification, I was twenty-nine when you hired me. I've aged a great deal in the three years since then." They continued their bantering until Lilly returned. Then their attention turned to the girl and Laurel was once again

reminded of what a doting mother Claudia was. She loved to make her daughter happy and she would do anything for her, except maybe, let her grow up.

The rest of the evening passed by pleasantly once Laurel was able to get Muffey talking. The food was delicious, the service impeccable, and the wine warmed even Claudia. The only time her disposition seemed to sour was when an old acquaintance of Laurel's asked her to dance. Of course, Laurel accepted the offer without hesitation, and she wasn't positive, but she thought she saw Claudia bristle when she moved into the gentleman's arms. As much as she hated to admit it, the thought of Claudia bristling pleased her.

"Good night, Laurel," Lilly said when Laurel stepped out of the limousine at the evening's end. "See you tomorrow."

Laurel reached through the open window to pat Lilly's hand. "Get a good night's sleep," she said warmly. "Tomorrow is a big day." Then she turned to Claudia and Muffey. "Thank you for the lovely evening, Claudia. Muffey, it was a pleasure meeting you."

Muffey smiled weakly and nodded. She then snuggled into Claudia's shoulder. Laurel plastered a smile on her face as she said her farewells. She then turned on her heel and marched straight to her room. She knew it was ridiculous to be angry. She had no claims on Claudia. Who Claudia dined with, who she snuggled with, or who she bedded for that matter, was none of her business.

Unfortunately, there was nothing she could say to prevent herself from picturing Muffey in Claudia's strong, enveloping arms. She could see Claudia's hands brush Muffey's wavy blond curls from her refined, upper class face. She could see Claudia's searing blue eyes glow with appreciation and then anticipation. She could feel Claudia's touch

"Stop!" she demanded of herself as she pounded her fist against the dresser. The vase of tulips teetered in the wake. She pressed her knuckles into her temples in the hope of squelching all traces of those kinds of thoughts. Claudia was not hers. She never would be.

Laurel went to the sink and splashed her face with water, disappointed in herself for reviving the old infatuation she had once felt for the woman. She's my boss and nothing more, she reminded herself as she crawled between the cold sheets of the hotel bed.

"Martha said you broke another date with her," said Jim as he sat down at Laurel's kitchen table. James Robert Lewis was Laurel's older brother. He was tall and lanky with hair a shade darker than Laurel's. Having moved to New Haven shortly after

his divorce four years ago, he now worked in a large computer software firm as marketing manager. He had introduced Laurel to Martha.

“It was business, Jim Bob,” Laurel protested, using the name she had called him from childhood.

“I’ve heard that before,” he taunted as he twirled the small lazy-susan Laurel had filled earlier that morning with various jams and jellies.

“How many pancakes do you want?” she asked, ignoring his comment. She turned up the flame under the griddle and continued stirring the batter. “How about some eggs to go with them?”

“Sure, do you want me to help?”

“Just finish setting the table and pour the orange juice, okay?” she answered, enjoying as she always did, Jim’s occasional visits for Sunday brunch.

Chapter Three

The next few weeks were as busy as Laurel had expected and when the chill of spring gave way to warmer temperatures, Laurel started taking late night walks to help herself unwind from the daily grind. It was during one of those walks that she realized life had become too predictable for her, and too comfortable. Although the picture of her life was pleasant and full, it was a portrait of a career woman and not much else. There were no romantic hues to it, no blushes of love. It occurred to her that the next thirty years could go by in a mist of tranquility and she would end up looking back on her life with regret. What had happened to her desire for a family, she wondered—her dreams of intimacy?

Granted, there was Martha, but she too was sedate and comfortable. Laurel liked her, enjoyed her company, but she never once felt a rush of passion for Martha. Laurel was too young for this much placidness and too old to deceive herself into thinking career was enough. So, she decided to break it off with Martha and she promised herself that she would make a concerted effort to meet eligible women. Maybe during August break she would go on a singles cruise or maybe join a singles hiking club.

Then in early May, Claudia asked if she would consider accompanying Lilly on a tour of London for the month of August. Laurel eventually agreed, convincing herself that there was no better place to begin her search for love than a foreign country.

“Sometimes I think Lilly is as fond of you as she is of me,” Claudia said during a phone conference. “She will be thrilled to find out that you will go with her to London. Of course it will be a first class trip, all on me.”

“Oh, I doubt I’ll have any trouble spending your money, Claudia. I’ve had a lot of practice at it as GM of this place,” she quipped good-humoredly. “Will you be joining us for any of the trip or are you making other plans?”

“I hope to spend the month in Germany, maybe even France. My company is exploring some interesting possibilities and since the trip will be business intensive, I didn’t think Lilly would enjoy coming with me. Anyway, England is where she wants to go, and with you there I won’t have to lose all my hair worrying about her.”

And from that phone call on, Laurel felt a new surge of energy. She had never been to Europe before and she thought a month’s vacation in a country rich with history and a city vibrant with culture would be just the ticket out of the routine she needed. Besides, being with Lilly would be fun. And with any luck, she would meet someone elegant and exciting and thoroughly British.

A few weeks later, on the Friday before Lesbian Mother’s Week at the retreat, Laurel was standing in her kitchen looking out the window onto the patio where Lilly was sitting facing the sun. The girl had come up by train for the afternoon to relax, but she was too excited about spending the next few days with her mother to

concentrate. Laurel, on the other hand, was a little apprehensive about having Claudia under foot for the next five days. Usually at these kinds of events Claudia was nervous and when she was nervous, she tended to criticize Laurel's every move.

With two glasses of iced tea in one hand and a plate of cookies in the other, Laurel joined Lilly in the afternoon sun on the patio. "You look very content," Laurel said as she handed Lilly one of the glasses. "But you should put some lotion on your nose. It's getting awfully pink."

"I will," Lilly said, reaching for one of the cookies. "I love it when you mother me. It brings a certain glint to your eyes!"

"I'm much too young to be your mother!" Laurel protested with a laugh.

"I thought child brides were the norm back then," Lilly teased.

"Contrary to popular belief, I wasn't born in the dark ages you know." Laurel watched Lilly's smile grow into laughter and she was reminded of how much Lilly had changed since their first meeting. It had taken Lilly most of a year just to relax with Laurel. Although Laurel had developed a deep sympathy for the girl early on. Lilly was such a delicate and sensitive soul, and as a result Laurel had to struggle against her inclination to be as overly protective as Claudia was.

Then, sometime last fall, Laurel gave up the notion that Claudia's daughter had to be treated with detachment. Soon after that, Lilly became the little sister Laurel had always wanted, and Claudia seemed to accept their special relationship without any resentment.

After a long sip of iced tea, Laurel screwed up her courage enough to broach the taboo subject. "While we're on the subject of mothers," she started. She then stopped to clear her throat before she continued. "Do you remember anything about your own?" She had no idea why, after so much time, she was asking Lilly about her mother. It was the first time Laurel had come close to the subject and she wasn't sure how the girl would react.

Lilly's eyes brightened and she seemed eager to discuss the mysterious woman lost long ago. "I don't really remember much, but I've kept lots of pictures of her. I wouldn't say that she was beautiful, not really, but she was . . .," Lilly searched for the right word, "haunting."

"Oh, really?" Laurel said, somewhat amazed. Haunting was a perfect word to describe Lilly. "What makes you say that?"

"Well, Mommy was very slight, even thinner than I am, and she had tremendous brown eyes which always look very sad in the pictures I have of her. Mom said she spent most of her time communing with spirits." Lilly gave a self-conscious giggle and then dropped her gaze to the floor.

Laurel chewed on the edge of a cookie. "What kind of spirits?"

“Oh, I don’t know,” Lilly said with a shrug. “Mom would never say any more than that. The only thing I really know is that she loved poetry. I even have some of the poems she wrote, but I don’t understand most of them. Would you like to see them sometime?”

“Sure. I can’t promise to understand them any better than you do, but I’d love to see them.” Laurel tried to sound casual, but in fact she was intrigued with the idea of seeing an inside glimpse into the woman that no one was allowed to mention in front of Claudia.

“Don’t tell Mom, though. She doesn’t even know that I have them. Mrs. Helms gave them to me last year before she retired. Did you know she was a facilitator here when my mother was running workshops at Eastland?”

Laurel didn’t try to hide her surprise. “I didn’t even know that your mother worked at Eastland.”

“Yes, that’s where Mom met her.” Then seeming finished with the subject, Lilly emptied her glass and set it on the table. A bed of flowers caught her eye and she walked over to it. With Laurel’s help, she cut a few and made an arrangement to take back to the quest house where she would be staying with Claudia during the conference. Though they didn’t discuss Lilly’s mother after that, Laurel felt a twinge of guilt at the prying she had done.

She did, however, tuck away in the back of her mind the idea of paying a visit to Mrs. Helms. They hadn’t spoken since the older woman’s retirement banquet, and Laurel had been meaning to give her a call anyway, just to see how she was adjusting to a quieter life in the neighboring town.

The next day brought all the joy and excitement that the onslaught of over a two hundred and fifty lesbian mothers always brought to Eastland. An outsider would have said that Laurel orchestrated the day’s activities with poise and grace, but the staff knew what a strain each event was on her.

When the plumbing lost pressure during one of the mid morning breaks, Laurel and Joe Simon, the center’s maintenance manager, had to crawl through an old wooden tunnel under the building to find the source of the problem before the plumber would agree to make an emergency call.

By lunch, several of the group’s facilitators hadn’t yet made their appearance, and Laurel helped track the women down. At dinner Laurel gave her usual state-of-the-center speech, which, to Laurel’s great annoyance, was interrupted by Claudia on more than one occasion. With humor and a smile, she finally just turned the lectern

over to her. When Claudia was done, they both received a standing ovation from the participants and group leaders.

Later that night, Laurel joined Lilly and Claudia at a nearby inn for coffee. Although she was exhausted, she had accepted the invitation because Lilly was so insistent and Claudia obviously wanted to review the day's events.

"I think the Lesbian Mother's Association is pleased with the center's facilities and improvements," Claudia said more as a question than a statement of her opinion.

Laurel nodded her agreement, while trying to suppress a yawn.

"Tell me again what this year's turnout was?" Claudia continued, oblivious to Laurel's fatigue. "Did you say over 250 participants?"

"Maybe if you had listened to my speech instead of figuring out ways to interrupt it, you would know the number," Laurel said with a grin. When Lilly giggled, Laurel winked at her.

"The answer is 253," Lilly chimed in. "And I think it was awful the way you took over Laurel's speech."

Claudia feigned ill humor by grumbling loudly, "I should know better than to talk to the two of you. Whenever you're together, you always gang up against me."

"Someone has to keep you in line," Laurel observed with a laugh. "Why don't you loosen your vest and relax. You look tired."

Claudia did as Laurel suggested and then ordered brandy for herself and Laurel and hot chocolate for Lilly. "I've been attending these Lesbian Mother's Association retreats for the last seven years, and each time I'm struck by how much fun I have talking to the other mothers."

Laurel took a sip of the warmed liqueur and felt its soothing effects immediately. "I think everyone does. It's always good to know that the problems you face have been faced by other parents."

They passed the subject back and forth several times before Lilly interjected with her own thoughts. "I think the Association has these retreats more for the children than the parents. It's difficult being the child of a lesbian and the parents need to know that."

Claudia flashed a look of concern toward Laurel. She then took Lilly's delicate hand in hers and looked directly at her daughter. "Has it been hard for you to be the child of a lesbian?"

Lilly wrapped her slender arms around her mother's neck. "It's hasn't been hard for me because I only know rich, liberal girl's and their families." Lilly then sat back in her chair, her eyes cast down. "But I do feel sorry for all the kids who don't have a

community like I do, or who have an extended family that is totally against them. I heard today that some grandparents refuse to see their grandchildren and some parents have to home school their kids because the public school systems isn't safe for their children. Some families only have one mother and they have to deal with all of these issues by themselves."

Laurel watched a shadow grow in Claudia's eyes and she was afraid Claudia would spoil the rest of the evening with one of her moods. She leaned over and tousled Lilly's hair. "Claudia, I hope you know just how terrific this young lady is. There aren't too many fifteen-year-olds who have the compassion and sensitivity that Lilly has."

"Sixteen," Lilly corrected, blushing at Laurel's praise.

"Sixteen," Laurel acknowledged with a grin.

Claudia smiled appreciatively, her mood still teetering on some abyss. But eventually, she seemed to brighten and half an hour later, the three of them moved into the lobby of the inn next to a small but glowing fire, and continued what was turning out to be a very pleasant evening.

Claudia seemed more relaxed and content than she ever had in front of Laurel which made Laurel slightly nervous, although she wasn't sure why. At one point, after Laurel had been gazing into the flames for a few minutes, she turned to look at Claudia. It was obvious that Claudia had been watching her. She had felt it. When she caught Claudia's eye, Claudia didn't look away as she usually did. This time, her eyes met Laurel's with an intensity that brought color to Laurel's cheeks. It took all of Laurel's conviction not to avert her gaze and all of Laurel's self-discipline not to hope that Claudia was looking at her with the same kind of desire she felt coming to life in her own hidden caverns.

"Do you mind if I have another brandy?" Claudia asked in an uncharacteristically quiet tone.

"Not at all," Laurel replied. "You're not driving back to the city tonight, are you?" She knew full well that Claudia wasn't. But under Claudia's steady gaze, simple conversation was flustering Laurel and she couldn't think of anything else to say. If only Claudia would quit staring at her with that odd look, she thought uneasily. If only it meant what she longed for it to mean. Laurel gave Claudia a nervous smile and glanced over at Lilly. The poor girl was half asleep already.

"Lilly? Are you still with us?" Laurel asked as she touched the girl's arm. Then she turned back toward Claudia. "Why don't I use your car to take Lilly back to the guest house. I could come back to pick you up once Lilly is in bed."

Claudia smiled at her. "No. I'll drive you back. What kind of woman would let her two favorite girls drive themselves home?"

A glimmer of joy brushed Laurel's heart, despite her natural distrust of anything nice Claudia ever said to her. She wanted to say something casual in return, something clever. But instead, all she could think to say was, "Are you sure, Claudia? You look so comfortable."

Claudia didn't answer directly, but when the innkeeper came to take her drink order, Claudia asked for the check instead. After she paid, she helped Lilly into her jacket while Laurel threw a shawl around herself. They walked out to the car, arms linked with Lilly in the middle. During the short trip back to the school, Laurel suggested that Claudia drop her off at the front gate and she could walk across the town green to her own home, but once Lilly was safely inside the quest house, Claudia insisted on taking Laurel directly to her house.

When they pulled up to the Laurel's cottage, Claudia stopped the car and walked with Laurel along the small path lined by a picket fence to her front door. Clusters of hyacinths stood proudly on either side, and although their color was beginning to fade, their smell was still intoxicating. Laurel felt their magic. Half of her cursed the desire she felt stirring within, and half of her held onto that desire, as if it was proof that she was alive.

She turned to face Claudia. It was time to say good night but her lips refused to say the words. Claudia's thick mane of hair danced with the breeze, occasionally brushing across her forehead, giving her a carefree, youthful appearance. Claudia's deep, soulful eyes looked vulnerable as the moonlight played on their surface. Her mouth was slightly parted and Laurel imagined that she was close enough to smell the brandy that must still be lingering on her lips.

"It's been a lovely evening," Laurel finally managed to say.

"You are a remarkable woman, Laurel," Claudia said in a slow and deliberate tone. When Laurel started to protest, Claudia continued. "I mean it. I know I don't compliment you enough, but you've done wonders for the center. You've injected life into it."

Claudia went on for a full five minutes, all about the school and Laurel's competence. Ordinarily Laurel would have been thrilled at Claudia's unabashed praise, but tonight, in this beautifully romantic setting, an on-the-job evaluation was not what she wanted to hear. Unconsciously, she set her jaw and narrowed her eyes.

A twinge of hurt registered on Claudia's face. "What is it, Laurel? I thought you would be pleased that I finally took the time to give you the positive instead of always just the negative."

"I am," Laurel said quickly, forcing a smile to her lips. "I've waited a long time to hear you say anything good about my performance."

"Then what is it? You look angry."

"I'm just tired. It's been a busy month since we were last together."

"I'm sure it has been," Claudia said quietly. If Laurel didn't know better, she would say that Claudia looked as though she were pouting.

Laurel should apologize for not being appreciative enough, she told herself with a weary sigh. And then she thought, after three years, Claudia decides to open up a little, pay her a compliment or two, and suddenly she's supposed to purr at the attention. Well, she wasn't in the mood. "If that's all, Claudia, I'll be turning in. Thanks again for the lovely evening." She opened the door and stood on the threshold of her home.

"Good night," Claudia finally said in a huffy voice.

Laurel watched her walk away before she went inside and locked the door. She poured herself a short glass of wine and took it with her up to the bedroom. As she ran the water in the tub and undressed, she found herself getting more and more angry. Initially, it was at Claudia's arrogance for being hurt that Laurel didn't swoon with the woman's praise.

Then Laurel got to the real reason she was angry. No amount of fireside brandies was going to make Claudia think of her as anything other than a competent business woman. "I'm incurable!" she admonished herself out loud. From the beginning Claudia had made it clear that she felt nothing for Laurel. Why couldn't she just let that be?

The next day, things went smoothly. Claudia helped Laurel host the picnic breakfast and was good-natured when one of the waitresses dropped hot coffee down her back. She even stood up at the end of the final luncheon and made a lengthy tribute to all of Laurel's hard work and determination. When the room cheered, Claudia presented Laurel with a single rose and a kiss on the cheek. But through it all, Claudia maintained an air of courteous formality, and unfortunately to Laurel, it was as if Claudia were rubbing salt into a wound.

Later on that afternoon, after most of the guests had departed and the center was returning to its normal schedule of preparing for the next event, Laurel went to her office, closed the door, and kicked her shoes off. The week had been a resounding success and she was feeling quite pleased with herself. She flopped into her desk chair and swiveled it around to look out the picture window.

Staff members dotted the lush green landscape. Some were playing tennis, some were taking walks, and some were stretched out on blankets, letting the respite seep into their souls. Dusk would soon be upon them, forcing the staff back inside, but until then the peace of a lazy, late Friday afternoon would dominate the center.

Laurel pushed herself off the chair and went out to the coffee pot in Anthony's office. She poured herself a dangerously dark-looking cup of liquid, warmed it in the microwave, and took it back to her desk. It wasn't until then that she noticed the large, tattered envelope in the center of her blotter. She picked the envelope up and put it to her nose. It smelled of musty lilacs. It was wrapped with several purple and

pink ribbons, under which was written, 'Mommy's poems.' The handwriting was beautiful, and unmistakably Lilly's.

Laurel tingled, first with fear and then with curiosity. She glanced up at the closed door of her office and then back down at the envelope. Her fingers trembled at the weight of the secret she knew she was about to expose. She put the envelope down, took a quick sip of the wretchedly bitter coffee, and then quickly untied the delicate ribbons.

Inside were several worn pieces of paper with scribbling on them, a small padded book, and a wallet-sized picture that was framed in antique lace. Laurel looked closely at the picture. Had it not been dated, she would have thought it was a picture of Lilly, perhaps a few years older, but definitely Lilly. The young woman in the photograph had the same black hair, the same willowy look, the same haunting eyes. On closer look, however, Laurel did notice a difference. It was in the woman's smile. There was something about it that made Laurel shiver.

Laurel put the picture aside and unfolded a piece of paper. On it was scrawled, 'Only through death can life be appreciated.' She unfolded another. 'Roses are red, death is black, mud can be soothing when against the back.' Laurel dropped it with a shudder.

"Laurel, are you in there?" Claudia's voice boomed. She knocked but didn't wait for an answer before she let herself into Laurels' office.

Laurel jumped to her feet, wide-eyed and horror stricken. Her hands grabbed for the envelope and its contents, and she frantically pushed what she could under the blotter. She walked over to Claudia quickly and flashed her a large smile. "It was a perfect event, wasn't it?" she said much too enthusiastically to be remotely typical of her personality.

"Perfect," Claudia agreed, but there was a quizzical look in her eye. She glanced over at Laurel's desk but luckily did not ask Laurel what she had been doing.

"Let's go for a quick walk before dusk settles in. I'm anxious to hear your opinion of the last few days." Laurel slipped her arm through Claudia's and led her out of the office and down the hall.

"Do you intend to go barefoot?" Claudia asked with a raised eyebrow.

Laurel could feel her face flush when she looked down at her feet. Even as a girl, she had been a terrible liar and she was no better at it today. She started to give some excuse, but she felt as though she had marbles in her mouth. She took a deep breath, hoping she could pull herself together. After all, she had more than just herself to protect. There was Lilly to consider. Lilly had trusted her with the secrets inside that envelope and Laurel intended to be worthy of that trust. Claudia could not find out what she had been doing.

"I forgot about my shoes," Laurel said with a sheepish grin. "You wait here and I'll get them." She ran back into the office and searched for the shoes.

Claudia followed her in and went over to her desk. As she peered under its broad, low frame, Laurel's heart thundered so loud she was afraid Claudia would hear it.

"Here they are," she squealed as she retrieved the errant shoes from under one of the wing chairs. She brandished them in the air proudly, knowing she was acting strangely, but unable to stop herself.

"Good for you," Claudia said somewhat sarcastically as she leaned against the side of the desk. "If I didn't know you better, I would say that I had walked in on you doing something you shouldn't have been doing."

"Like what?" Laurel challenged, as she sat down on the couch and gestured for Claudia to join her. If she couldn't get Claudia to go for a walk, then maybe she could at least get her away from the desk, she thought.

Claudia shrugged and walked toward her. "I don't know. Maybe you were reading - Play Boy and you didn't want me to know it."

Laurel laughed, wishing it was as simple as that. "Were you ever caught with one of those girly magazines?"

"Once," Claudia said with a smirk. "When I was twelve my brother hid one of the more sordid versions under my mattress. When I found it, it took me half an hour just to open the cover. Then I think my mouth went completely dry and I turned the pages in slow motion. I knew what I was seeing was terribly wrong, but I was spellbound. My father walked in on me and I didn't even hear him." Claudia smiled at the memory of it all and sat down on the coffee table in front of Laurel. "If I recall correctly, my brother was blamed entirely for the incident and couldn't sit down for a week after that. Neither one of them ever asked why I was so entranced by pictures of nude women"

"Were your parents very strict with you?" Laurel asked tentatively, remembering the results of the last time she had dared to ask Claudia a personal question.

"Very strict," she confirmed. "What about your parents?"

Laurel relaxed a little as she settled into the couch. She tucked her feet under her legs and shook her head. "My parents trusted me implicitly. They knew I would never do anything wrong, so they let me do anything I wanted."

"My parents were that way with my sister. I always felt sorry for her because of it. She never had any fun."

Although Laurel remained reticent, their conversation continued in that vein for over an hour. She learned more about Claudia and her childhood than she ever dreamed of knowing. Apparently Claudia was a curious and active child who loved

adventure and danger. She had had several imaginary heroes and a real horse for a best friend. She had grown up in a very wealthy but formal family, and the adult she had felt closest to was the family cook. “She was a hefty woman who loved to laugh,” Claudia said in a melancholy voice after a silence had fallen on their conversation. “When she died, I cried for the first time in my adult life.”

“I would like to have met her,” Laurel said, wishing she could have said something more to console Claudia. Laurels’ head was spinning with this new—or was it just different—side of Claudia. She was vulnerable in a way Laurel had never before experienced, her gruff and intimidating demeanor nowhere to be found. Laurel liked this side of Claudia. It was warm and tender, and for the first time since they had met, Laurel wasn’t afraid of her feelings for the woman. She wasn’t afraid of being burned by her fury or spurned by her rejection.

“Well, I should be heading back to the city,” Claudia finally said. The last rays of sun cast a pink hue on the fluffy clouds that meandered slowly across the horizon. The office was growing dim, bringing Laurel and Claudia together under a blanket of shadows.

Claudia stood up directly in front of the couch and stretched out her arms to help Laurel to her feet. If Laurel took her hands, their bodies would come closer than they had since that fateful summer night.

“You’re not leaving me any room,” she teased, thinking Claudia probably hadn’t realized what position she was putting her in.

“What a shame,” Claudia said as she took a firm hold of Laurel’s hand. Claudia moved back just enough to give Laurel’s feet room and then she pulled Laurel up.

When Laurel found her balance, she looked up into Claudia’s eyes. They sparkled, and in that moment she thrilled in the knowledge that Claudia was about to kiss her.

This is crazy, Laurel thought, her mouth parting involuntarily. Her lips seemed swollen with anticipation. She tried to keep her wits about her. She tried to keep a level head. She even tried to warn herself against wanting too much, against hoping for the impossible. But her mind was not there to protect her or guide her to safer shores. It was lost in a fog of feelings.

She watched as Claudia leaned closer to her and soon she could feel Claudia’s breath against her cheek. Every cell in Laurel’s body ached for Claudia and turned to liquid. This was the moment she had longed for, and she could no longer pretend otherwise. This was the kind of moment that gave meaning to life.

Claudia took several steps toward the desk, pulling Laurel with her, and propped herself against its edge, her arms encircling Laurel. Laurel knew full well that she was about to complicate her life immeasurably, and she also knew that she didn’t care. As Claudia’s strong hands took their rightful place on Laurel’s neck and shoulders, Laurel reached around Claudia’s powerful torso. She too wanted to take

possession, as Claudia was doing, but in the process she knocked the desk lamp over. It bounced on the blotter and then rolled to the floor.

“Damn,” Laurel muttered as she extracted herself from Claudia’s warmth and bent down to get the lamp.

“Is it broken?” Claudia asked in a husky voice.

Laurel switched it on and off several times, but nothing happened. “I guess it is.”

“Here, let me see,” Claudia said, taking the lamp from Laurel’s hand. Claudia shook it vigorously and then waited.

“I could have done that,” Laurel teased. Then she noticed that the plug had come out of the wall. She remedied the situation and the light blinked several times and then stayed on.

“Show off,” Claudia grumbled softly, but when she turned around to set the lamp down on the desk, something caught her eye and her face turned ashen.

Laurel’s heart stopped when she saw Claudia reach for the lace-lined photograph that was peeking out from under the blotter. First Claudia fingered it, then she looked at it, and then she put it to her nose.

The next thing Laurel knew, Claudia’s fist slammed into the desk. With giant strides, she stormed toward the door. But before she left, she turned to look at Laurel. There was fire in Claudia’s eyes and also tears, icy tears, clinging to her thick lashes. “How in the hell did you get this?”

“How I got it isn’t important,” Laurel managed to say in a fairly even tone. “But when you have calmed down long enough to listen, I’ll be glad to tell you why I have it.”

“I know damn well why you have it. I thought you were different, Laurel, but you’re not, are you? You’re just like every other woman. You’re conniving, deceitful, and manipulative!”

“I don’t know who or what has hurt you so badly that you feel justified in talking to me like this, but I have done nothing to deserve it.”

Claudia shook the now crumpled photograph at Laurel. “Oh really? This kind of prying into my past is grounds for dismissal as far as I’m concerned. How dare you violate my privacy like this.”

“I didn’t violate your privacy,” Laurel protested loudly, “but I don’t think you’re ready to believe that yet. When you are, I’ll be here doing what I always do, a competent job. And if you really want to fire me, you’ll have to do it in writing, and I would suggest you do it through a damn good lawyer.”

Laurel was furious, furious that Claudia had misunderstood her motives, and furious that she had let down her guard long enough to let Claudia touch her heart and her dreams.

“Damn you, Claudia Montgomery,” she yelled as Claudia slammed the door after herself. Laurel bent down to pick up the crumpled photograph Claudia had thrown in her direction. She tried to straighten it. It was cracked and marred everywhere except for the woman’s face. She took it over to the light. There was something definitely evil in that smile.

What had this woman done to torment Claudia so?

Chapter Four

The weeks that followed the Lesbian Mother's Association Retreat were grueling. Laurel was at her desk from dawn to dusk, motivating fund raisers, writing reports for the Marketing Review Board, and analyzing cash flow versus budget projections for the Board of Directors. Through it all, each meeting, each speech, each presentation, her anger toward Claudia smoldered. Laurel didn't talk to her unless it was absolutely necessary. If she did require Claudia's input she had Anthony make the call. When Claudia phoned in a question, Laurel answered by Fax. When Claudia came up to visit, Laurel avoided her. The fact that Claudia too seemed to be keeping her distance suited Laurel just fine.

It wasn't until the annual planning session in early June that they were forced to be together for any significant amount of time. Claudia considered it her duty to help Laurel host the three-day event which included board members, clients, and staff. So, for three days they worked side by side without saying anything to one another that didn't have a purely professional context.

"Did something happen between the two of you?" Anthony asked when Laurel finally returned to her office after the last of the group had left, and a long weekend yawned before them.

"I presume you're referring to Claudia's frosty veneer," Laurel groaned as she loosened the neck of her blouse. The weather had turned hot and she felt sticky all over.

Anthony followed Laurel into her office. "Iceberg is more accurate. If she had snubbed you one more time during that picnic this afternoon, I think I would have personally given her a piece of my mind."

"I appreciate the concern, but Claudia's moods no longer bother me," Laurel said, beginning to believe it herself. She stood in front of the picture window with her arms folded across her chest. Already she could feel herself miss the noise and chaos that always accompanied hundreds of lively participants and dozens of frenzied group facilitators.

Anthony sat on the window seat and looked up at his boss. "I don't know how you put up with that woman. And she can't even use menopause as an excuse!"

Laurel grinned. "I read somewhere that they're studying premature menopause. Maybe we can offer them Claudia as a prototype."

"Maybe, but I still can't believe how she treated you, especially when you asked her a direct question in front of that whole group of clients and she pretended not to hear. I had to poke her before she would answer."

“Don’t remind me,” Laurel said, rubbing her now aching head. “I just need to put the last few weeks behind me. I’m exhausted.”

“Well, I think you deserve a medal.”

“Just don’t ask Claudia to pin it on me. It could prove fatal!” The two laughed. Then Laurel got a twinkle in her eye and added, “I’ve got a great idea. Let’s take the rest of the day off! I have a book I’ve been dying to read, and didn’t you say you wanted to do some shopping in New Haven?”

Anthony flashed a devilish grin and went to tidy his desk. He then neatly printed two words on the back of an envelope and taped it to Laurel’s office door. ‘Gone Fish’n,’ it said and Laurel smiled as they both eagerly walked away from the day’s responsibilities into the bright sunshine of the quad.

“See you tomorrow, Anthony. You deserve the rest as much as I do,” she said as she waved back toward her colleague.

Laurel walked across the depressingly quiet school grounds to her house. She fixed herself a tall glass of lemonade and changed into a pair of faded cut-offs and a pink T-shirt. She then grabbed the book she had been meaning to read, along with a blanket, and headed for the lake at the far end of the center’s property.

When she found a perfect spot in the meadow near the lake’s bank, she spread the blanket on the lush green grass and lay down. Propping her head against a tree root, she opened the book and began to read. But halfway through the first page, the exhaustion of the last few weeks overtook her and she was almost asleep. The sun bathed her in warmth and the gentle breeze off the water lulled her farther and farther away from Eastland, clients, work, and most of all, Claudia.

When she woke, it was late afternoon, and her body was stiff from the hard ground. She got to her feet, stretched, and headed for the water’s edge. Feeling groggy, she splashed water on her face. It felt cool and refreshing. A fallen tree caught her eye and gave her an idea. She took off her shoes and socks and hoisted herself on top of the log. With her arms outstretched for balance, she moved slowly along the rounded trunk until she was about twenty feet from the shore. Just as she was preparing to sit down to let her feet dangle in the water, a voice from behind startled her.

“Laurel?”

Laurel turned too suddenly, swayed forward, teetered back, and then fell face first into the three-foot water, spread eagle. She struggled to her feet, but the lake bottom was soft and muddy. Lilly stood on the bank and watched. Then she hiked up her skirt and started to wade in toward Laurel.

“I’m all right, Lilly. Go back. It’s like quicksand out here.” To an echo of sucking and splashing sounds, Laurel was able to make her way toward the shore. Her T-shirt clung to her front like a second skin and her hair drooped down to her shoulders in stringy strands. From her thighs down, she was covered in a black, smelly mud.

"It's all my fault," Lilly said with her hand over her mouth, giggling. "I'm so sorry!"

Then Laurel heard a deeper, mocking laugh. She glanced up to see Claudia stretched out on Laurel's blanket with her back propped up against the tree.

"So, this is how you 'go fish'n,'" she said with that irritating half-smile of hers.

Laurel muttered an uncomplimentary comment under her breath, looked at Lilly, and then rolled her eyes. "What would a city girl like her know about fishing, anyway?"

"I know enough to stay dry," Claudia retorted as she walked toward them. "I think the point is to get the fish to come to you, not the other way around." Claudia's jacket was thrown over one shoulder, her collar was unfastened, but her vest was still buttoned. She looked hot. Perspiration had plastered some of her hair to her forehead in tiny curls. When she was a few feet from Laurel, she wrinkled her nose. "I'm afraid you stink."

Laurel looked down at her legs and had to agree with Claudia's assessment. She walked along the water's edge until she found a place she could rinse herself without sinking into the mud. Then she ran her fingers through her hair and pulled it back with a rubber band she had found in her pocket, but there was little she could do about the clinging T-shirt.

"I thought you had left," Laurel said to Claudia when she rejoined them. "And where did you come from?" she added, turning toward Lilly.

"I was staying with a friend in Waterbury. Her mother brought me over. I thought you would be glad to see me," Lilly said. There was a hint of hurt in her voice.

"I'm always glad to see you," Laurel smiled warmly. "I'd give you a hug if it weren't for the...well, stench."

"Although I had to twist Mom's arm to help me find you."

"I imagine you did," Laurel said, looking directly at Claudia for what felt like the first time in months.

Lilly continued. "I don't know what's wrong with the two of you. The last few weeks you've both been terribly owlsh."

"Me?" Claudia and Laurel said in unison.

"Well, I have to confess, Mom, you've been worse than Laurel. But then I've only talked to Laurel on the phone. Anthony's noticed it too. He even asked me if the two of you were having a fight."

Claudia seemed to find her daughter's comment amusing, but not Laurel. She had to live with it on a daily basis while trying very hard to keep her feelings about the woman to herself. Even though fury had been eating her insides since that day Claudia had stormed out of her office, she had not intended to draw attention to the strife.

"Laurel and I don't fight, Lilly. We have disagreements. Some are just a little stronger than others, that's all." Claudia's voice was sarcastic.

It took all of Laurel's self control not to add to Claudia's comment. She bit the corner of her lip and kept silent. She finally walked past Claudia and went to gather her belongings.

"Laurel, aren't you going to say anything to make things better between the two of you?" Lilly asked.

"No," Laurel snapped, but when she turned back toward Lilly, she regretted her haste. The girl looked wounded and a little bewildered, as though she were a child witnessing her parents fight for the first time. "I'm sorry, Lilly," she added. She dropped the blanket and book and walked over to the girl.

"I know I shouldn't pry," Lilly said in a halting voice. "But I've never seen you and Mom this angry with each other."

Laurel smoothed the girl's hair, and with one finger, lightly held Lilly's chin up. "There are two things I want you to know, Lilly. One is, that no matter what happens between your mother and me, it won't affect my friendship with you. Agreed?"

"Agreed," Lilly answered quickly.

"Number two is" Laurel stopped to consider her words. What could she say? "Your mother is a pig-headed boor who has such a twisted idea of friendship that she should be barred from polite society?" "Number two is . . . ," she repeated, but the more she thought about Claudia's treatment of her during the last few weeks, the more livid she became.

"We're waiting," Claudia prompted with a smirk.

Laurel's eyes flashed at Claudia. "You're insufferable!" She picked up her blanket and threw it over her shoulder. She then stuffed the book in her back pocket. "I'm going to leave before I say something I might not want Lilly to hear."

Laurel turned and started to walk away. The tall meadow grass tickled her legs as she strode across it, away from Lilly and the woman who consistently made her life miserable. She heard whispers behind her, but she didn't turn to see what the commotion was all about. She kept walking, her anger mounting.

“Laurel, wait,” Claudia commanded in a booming voice. Then, with what sounded like an afterthought, she added, “Please.”

Laurel stopped begrudgingly. Lilly was soon at her side, asking if she could go on ahead to the house to fix some iced tea while Laurel and her mother talked. Laurel nodded and watched Lilly run across the field and disappear behind a grove of trees.

When Claudia reached Laurel, she shifted the jacket from one shoulder to the other. With nervous eyes, she studied Laurel’s face. “You look great in cut-offs,” she ventured sheepishly.

“Claudia, I’m not in the mood for your sarcasm or wise cracks. If you have something to say to me, say it directly.”

“You’re impossible,” Claudia exclaimed. “Every time a pay you a genuine compliment, you get angry. What’s with you?”

“Nothing!” Laurel shot back.

“Good,” Claudia said, wiping the perspiration from her forehead with the palm of her hand. Then she added, “You really do look great.”

“Right,” Laurel snorted. “Putrid mud and all.”

Claudia let out a loud sigh and stared at the ground between them. “Listen, Laurel, I promised Lilly that we would talk, but quite frankly, I don’t know how to resolve this thing between us. You’re a bright, competent . . .,” she glanced up, “attractive woman, but I can’t allow you to pry into my private affairs.”

“I wasn’t prying, Claudia. I don’t give a damn about your private affairs.” Not exactly true, she thought, but close enough. “What I was doing with that picture you found on my desk is between Lilly and me, not me and you. I hope someday you’ll be able to realize that the woman in your mysterious past was not just your wife, but she was also the mother of your daughter, and there are times when Lilly needs to talk about it, even if you don’t.”

The color drained from Claudia’s face. “You mean Lilly gave you that picture?”

“Among other things, yes. But she wants it to be a secret from you, and after that day in my office, I can certainly understand why.” Laurel’s voice was firm, but her eyes softened as she watched Claudia grapple with her ghost. “I don’t mean to interfere with how you handle Lilly and the subject of her mother, but please don’t ask me to ignore Lilly’s needs. It’s only natural that she’s curious about the woman.”

Claudia wiped her forehead again. “There’s nothing natural about this. How in the hell did she get that picture?” Her voice was stern.

Laurel frowned. "Haven't you been listening to anything I've said? The fact that Lilly keeps mementos from her mother is normal. It's your reaction that's abnormal. And if you say anything to her about that picture, I'll never speak to you again!"

Claudia's dark eyes smoldered until suddenly, without warning, she turned away, her shoulders hunched and her head slightly bowed. She looked utterly defeated, something Laurel never expected from this arrogant, annoyingly confident female. Although Laurel didn't want it to, she felt her anger and frustration slip away, and without its protection, she was overwhelmed with the urge to reach out to Claudia, to hold her, to tell her that she didn't have to face her ghost alone. But no such words came to Laurel.

"It was wrong of me to lash out at you, Laurel. I should have known that you had a good reason to have that picture and I should have guessed that it had something to do with Lilly." Claudia's voice was thin, defenseless.

Laurel moved closer to her. Tentatively, her hand reached for Claudia's face, but it stopped just short of its destination when she remembered the hurt this woman inflicted whenever she got too close. She dropped her hand to her side. "What's sad is that you trust me with your daughter's life, but not with your own wretched past. You might want to think about that, Claudia." Laurel walked on ahead of Claudia, back to her house and Lilly's buoyant good cheer.

The rest of the month was relaxing for Laurel, but then summers were always slower paced as the Eastland wasn't air-conditioned and few groups held retreats during the hotter, humid months. Most of the other staff members were still working, but many had taken off to other locations by mid June. Those that did stay behind got together on an informal basis at least twice a week to play volley ball or swap opinions on the world's problems over a cold mug of beer at each other's houses. Laurel liked the casual and friendly atmosphere this time of year brought, but she still preferred it when the center was bustling with diverse and sometimes outrageous groups of people.

"Have you finished packing yet?" Lilly asked excitedly when Laurel answered the phone the night before they were scheduled to depart for London. Laurel had been trying to close the larger of her two suitcases, but she was having trouble.

"I think I'm taking along too many clothes. Are you sure we need things for cold weather, hot weather, and everything in between?" Laurel asked of her young traveling companion.

"The paper said that London's daytime high yesterday was fifty-eight degrees and rainy. It's supposed to be sunny tomorrow and in the seventies."

Laurel groaned. "Oh, no, my raincoat. It's still at the cleaners."

Lilly turned away from the phone to repeat to Claudia what Laurel had said. Then she resumed conversation with Laurel. "Mom said that if you don't have time to get it tomorrow, she'll buy you one of those plastic kinds that fit in a purse."

Laurel laughed. "Tell your mother that I'm willing to do many things with plastic, but wearing it isn't one of them. You might also remind her that she signed me onto her American Express account and I intend to give the card a thorough workout!"

The next evening, by the time Laurel and Lilly arrived at the airport, Laurel was a nervous wreck and Lilly was practically falling asleep on her feet from having had no sleep the night before. Claudia didn't come with them to see the flight off, for which Laurel was grateful. The farewell scene between her and her daughter at the restaurant where the three of them had shared an early dinner had been enough of an emotional drain as it was. When Claudia had held Lilly's fragile face in her large, strong hands and had so tenderly told Lilly how much she loved her and how she would miss her, Laurel ended up shedding more tears than Lilly.

The flight to London was comfortable and they were able to sleep most of the way, but it wasn't enough sleep to satisfy either of them. So when they arrived at the Dorchester Hotel early the next morning, they immediately checked into their suite of rooms and went straight to bed, despite everyone's advice to the contrary.

Later that day, to Laurel's surprise, she was up and ready to go while Lilly was still fast asleep. She ordered a light meal for Lilly and herself and then began to unpack. When she had finished and was sliding the last suitcase into the closet, she noticed an envelope sticking out of one of the side pockets. She slipped it out and held it between her fingers. On the outside her name was written in Claudia's broad-stroked script. Probably last minute instructions, she told herself as she threw it on the bed and walked into the living room to answer the knock at the door.

Laurel watched as the waiter arranged the tray. When he was satisfied with his work, she thanked him, signed the check, and closed the door behind him. She debated eating before she read Claudia's letter, but her curiosity got the better of her. Soon, she was perched on the end of her bed, reading the single page note for the third time.

Laurel,

I do trust you, not only with my daughter's future, but with my own as well. It's me I don't trust with the past. Someday I hope I can tell you about it, but for now I hope it is enough for you to know that I will miss you, more than I should admit. Neither you nor Lilly will be far from my heart.

Claudia

Laurel let her finger trace Claudia's name over and over. Life would be so much easier if she could just stay angry at Claudia, if she could just stop dreaming about her dark, hungry eyes. Would a time ever come when she could want another woman the way she wanted Claudia?

She certainly hoped so, but somehow she doubted it. How could she ever find in another woman the spark that constantly flew between her and Claudia? Would another woman respect her the way Claudia did? Since the day Claudia had hired her, she always demanded her best, and as a result, Laurel was able to be better than she had ever expected of herself. Claudia took pride in each one of her accomplishments, and in her own awkward way, gave Laurel support and encouragement.

Laurel sighed, realizing that no other woman's laughter would cause her such joy. No other woman's smirk would cause her such fury. There were so many things about Claudia she cherished—her large, powerful hands, her thick brown hair, her mysterious eyes, her outlandish confidence.

Then again, there were so many things about the woman Laurel didn't cherish at all. Claudia was domineering, arrogant, and presumptuous.

But never boring, Laurel concluded when a whimsical smile played at the corner of her mouth.

"Laurel," Lilly whispered as she opened the door to Laurel's bedroom and peeked in. "Are you awake?"

Laurel folded up the letter and slipped it under her pillow. "Hi, sleepy head. Are you hungry?"

"Mmmm," Lilly said, as she walked into the room and looked at herself in the mirror. "I look terrible. Maybe a new image would help. What do you think?"

They discussed the possibilities over lunch and decided that they both could do with a different hair cut and maybe even a few new outfits. By early evening, they were full of energy and ready to explore the streets of London.

Since it was Laurel's first trip abroad and Lilly had been to London once before, Lilly assumed the role of travel guide. Their first stop was Harrods, where Laurel could have spent the next two weeks without any trouble. They tried on hats and sweaters, scarves and jewelry, all the while laughing and posing and having a wonderful time. Laurel felt like a girl again whose only responsibility was to amuse herself.

Nevertheless, they bought nothing that night until they reached the lower level of Harrods where they were confronted with gourmet food from the world over. Even the packaging for the items was exotic and appealing. Laurel examined each box, each brightly colored bag, and each miniature bottle that lined the display shelves. Many of the items she had never heard of before and many she had only read about in books. Some smelled bitter, some sweet, but all tickled her fancy.

After much deliberation, Laurel and Lilly put together a huge basket of delicacies and had it sent to the hotel. As it was getting late, they had a quick tour of Bond

Street by taxi as they headed back to their new temporary home. Once in their rooms, they shared a quiet dinner, and went to bed early.

The next week was full of the new and the old. Laurel marveled at the history London represented and how modern-day life joined that history without a great to-do. In the States the old and the new never coexisted very well, not that anything was all that old, but anything that did have an important past was cordoned off, untouchable in order to be preserved for the future. In London the historical buildings were still being used, traffic still choked the cobblestone streets, and the Palace Guards still followed the same routine that had been in effect for hundreds of years, no matter what tried to disrupt them.

Each night that first week, Laurel and Lilly went to the theatre or the concert hall, but when they entered the second week of their vacation they decided to take a night off and just have dinner at the hotel.

“That woman at the next table has been watching you all through dinner,” Lilly said in a whisper.

Laurel poured a teaspoon of dark sugar crystals into her coffee and stirred it. “And I thought it was the young man who had been watching you all evening!”

“Do you really think so?” Lilly beamed.

Laurel nodded with a smile until she realized that she might be encouraging something Claudia would take issue with. “What rules does your mother have about your dating? And by the way, what sex are you dating?”

“You mean, a girl my age is allowed to date?” Lilly replied with a frown.

“I know your mother is a bit old-fashioned and a little over-protective, but don’t tell me that she doesn’t let you date, even in the summer?” Laurel didn’t try to hide her disapproval. During the last week she and Lilly had become very close, and she now knew that Lilly was mature enough to accept any criticisms Laurel had of Claudia as an opinion and not a condemnation of the total woman.

“To tell you the truth, it’s my fault as much as Mom’s that I haven’t dated much. I don’t really like being with strangers, so I end up going out with the same kids I’ve known all my life. We’re friends and we have a lot of fun, but I wouldn’t say that we go out on dates together.”

“Well, I think friendship is very important and after all, you’ll have plenty of time for dating when you get to college.”

“I know,” Lilly said a little sulkily. “But just once I’d like to know how it feels to fall in love.”

“Haven’t you ever had a crush on someone? It’s not that dissimilar, you know,” Laurel said as she offered Lilly the last sliver of cake.

Lilly's cheeks flushed and she grinned shyly. "I used to think Frank Barns was gorgeous."

"He's gay as red pumps and a matching boa," Laurel teased. "But he does have a certain charm, I guess. Although he's as clumsy as an ox!"

"I always thought that you and Megan Brown might . . . you know, get together."

Laurel laughed. "As kind and good-looking as she is, I'm afraid she's just not my type. I like my women a little more mysterious, with a little more swashbucklery to them."

Lilly poked at the crumbs of cake on her plate with a fork. "You mean like my mother." She then looked directly at Laurel.

Laurel could feel her cheeks burn. Her throat went dry, but she managed not to avert her gaze. She knew if she didn't say something quickly, Lilly would have a silent answer to her question and no subsequent words would be able to deny it. "Your mother and I are business associates and occasionally friends. But that's all, Lilly."

"I know," Lilly said with a shrug. "She tells me that too."

Laurel was surprised at the sting Lilly's words had. She knew Claudia thought of her only as a professional, but somehow hearing it confirmed through her own daughter's lips made it especially bitter. If it weren't for that stupid note Claudia had written her, she thought. Because of it she had let her guard down just enough to let in a glimmer of hope. But hope is poison, she reminded herself.

The next day, Lilly wanted to go on a picnic in Hyde Park. Laurel agreed to the idea easily and by noon they were both sitting on a blanket, leaning against a tree, reading out loud to one another. When it was Lilly's turn to read, Laurel closed her eyes and let the sun drench her face as she envisioned the various escapades the heroine was forced to endure. When it was Laurel's turn to read, she sipped on a glass of wine and, between sentences, munched on the watercress sandwiches the hotel had supplied.

When they came to a resting place in the story, Lilly said, "Isn't that the same woman who was in the restaurant last night?" She discreetly nodded toward the bench to her right.

Laurel tried to look casual as she craned her neck to see who Lilly was talking about. "Yes. The same young man too, don't you think?"

"They're coming over here! What should we do?"

Laurel laughed. "Quick, grab the communicator. Tell Scotty to beam us up!"

Lilly punched Laurel in the arm as they both looked up at the two now standing over them. "I don't mean to intrude," the woman said to Lilly in an elegantly thick British accent. "But I believe I know your mother, Claudia Montgomery. I think I've seen a picture of you on her desk in New York."

"Oh?" Laurel said with a polite smile. She warned Lilly to stay quiet with a touch to her arm. "How do you know Ms. Montgomery?"

"My company serves as her international accounting firm. Let me introduce myself. My name is Gini Cunningham and this is my son, James."

Laurel thought she recognized the name from occasional messages left for Claudia at Eastland and relaxed. "It's very nice to meet you. Would you care to join us for a few minutes?" Laurel gestured toward the corner of the blanket.

Both mother and son sat down cross-legged opposite Lilly and Laurel. Then Laurel proceeded to quiz Gini, trying not to be overly curious, while Lilly and James carried on their own conversation. Between questions, Laurel did take a moment to notice that, although Gini did look uncomfortable perched half on the grass and half on the blanket in her beautifully tailored three-piece suit, the woman's smile was dazzling.

Chapter Five

"Hi, Mom," Lilly said breathlessly into the mouthpiece of the telephone. "I didn't expect you to call till the weekend. We just came back from a jog around the park and I'm of breath."

Laurel couldn't hear Claudia's side of the conversation but she knew there would be trouble when Lilly said, "No, not with Laurel. You know she hates to jog. With James, a boy I met."

Laurel paced the room during the next long silence, imagining Claudia's tirade. Then Lilly said, "Be serious, Mom. I just met him yesterday. We had dinner together and Laurel and Gini were with us the whole time."

Lilly held the phone away from her ear and Laurel could hear the tone of Claudia's voice from across the room.

When there was a momentary silence, Lilly put the phone back to her mouth. "Gini. Gini Cunningham, your European representative."

After a few more tortured minutes, Laurel got on the extension in her bedroom and Lilly hung up. "Hello, Claudia. How's Germany?"

"I'm not in Germany. I'm still in New York. Now, what the hell is going on over there? I just got a call from my secretary that you were making inquiries about Gini Cunningham."

"That's right," Laurel said calmly.

"Why?"

"She said she knew you. I thought I recognized the name, but I wanted to make sure she was telling the truth before I let Lilly go out with her son."

"She's a womanizer, a rogue." Claudia's voice was blunt.

"Her son too?" Laurel said with amusement.

"No, damn it. I don't know anything about him, but I do know Gini and I don't want Lilly going out with the boy alone."

"All right," Laurel agreed. "I will make sure that Gini and I stay with them the whole time. Will that satisfy you?"

Lilly had come into the bedroom and was sitting on the end of the bed. She whispered a thank you to Laurel.

"No, that will not satisfy me," Claudia said in reply. "I don't want you seeing Gini either. She's notorious for her ability to get any woman into her bed."

Laurel couldn't help but laugh. "I'm not any woman, Claudia. And unlike Lilly, I'm old enough to choose who I go out with and who I don't."

"Not while I'm paying your ticket!" Claudia flared back.

Laurel's initial amusement was suddenly replaced by anger. "Your money can buy a lot of things, madam, but it can't buy me!" Then she hung up, fuming. But when she saw Lilly's eyes, wide with uncertainty, Laurel calmed down and said somewhat sheepishly, "I probably shouldn't have hung up, should I?"

Lilly fingered the collar of her blouse nervously. "What did she say?"

"You don't want to know!" Then she added for the girl's benefit, "But don't worry about it. I'll take care of things, okay?"

The entire next day, Laurel vacillated between wanting to call Claudia back to apologize and wanting to send her the balance of her savings account with instructions of what she could do with it. How dare that woman tell her who she could go out with and who she couldn't? Did Claudia really expect her to sit at home in a rocking chair every night with a shawl around her shoulders and a blanket draped over her knees? The gall of the woman, Laurel seethed.

That afternoon, when Gini called and asked if Laurel and Lilly would join her and her son for dinner, Laurel accepted without hesitation. She knew her real reason was to get back at Claudia, but she rationalized that she had accepted the date for Lilly's sake, so the girl could have a little fun with a kid her own age.

At six, after a quick nap and a leisurely pot of tea, Laurel and Lilly started dressing for their date. Laurel decided to wear her emerald green silk pant suit. Its style was simple, with a turned up collar and a short-waist jacket. What made it unusual, though, was how its color gave new facets to the green of Laurel's eyes. With a single gold chain at her throat, she was almost finished. One last time, she adjusted the fastener that loosely pulled back her hair to the crown of her head from where it flowed down to her shoulders in a cascade of golden curls. After a final look in the mirror, she declared herself ready and went to see if Lilly needed any help.

Lilly was still in her slip, trying to decide what to wear.

"How about the red dress?" Laurel offered.

Lilly sighed. "No. It will make us look like Christmas together."

"Good point," Laurel acknowledged with a chuckle, thumbing through the row of clothes hanging in the closet. "How about this one? You look lovely in it."

Lilly crinkled her nose. "It's too little girlish. I'm tired of that image."

Laurel had to agree and she wondered if it was her influence on Lilly that was encouraging the girl to grow up or just the natural course of time. She hoped she could blame it on time, especially if Claudia were to notice a difference. "How about the yellow dress? I think it's quite sophisticated without being obvious."

Lilly finally agreed and by the time Gini called from the hotel lobby, the two were ready for a pleasant evening. When they stepped out of the elevator, James flashed a youthful smile at Lilly and said, "You look smashing!"

"And you look stunning," Gini said, slipping her arm through Laurel's and escorting her toward the front door. "Your eyes are truly magnetic tonight."

With the customary small talk, they made their way in Gini's Bentley through the noisy and chaotic London traffic to a small restaurant in a section of the city Laurel had never been to before.

"It's not the most beautifully appointed dining room, but they have the best Indian food in the city," Gini said, holding the door open for the ladies. When Lilly went by her, she added, "You do like Indian food, don't you?"

"I've only had it once before, but I liked it very much," Lilly answered.

"Excellent," Gini said with a broad smile and then she turned to her son. "James, do let the Maitre-De know that we're here."

Gini orchestrated the rest of the meal with her polished charm and obvious good manners, but by the end of the evening, Laurel was fidgety with boredom and was anxious to get back to the hotel. It wasn't that she didn't enjoy Gini. She was a perfect host. Her sense of humor was dry and her conversation fluid, but it centered primarily around herself and her world travels. Her stories were interesting, but long-winded. She spoke lovingly of her son and her other three children, although Laurel did notice that she frequently interrupted James or finished the boy's sentences for him.

When the foursome returned to the hotel, James gave Lilly a quick peck on the cheek and then stayed with the car as Gini ushered the two ladies through the lobby to the elevator.

"Lilly, would you mind going up to the room by yourself? I would like to spend a few moments alone with Laurel," Gini said, holding the door of the elevator open.

Laurel nodded her consent and Lilly went on ahead.

"I've had a lovely evening, Gini. James is a delightful young man. I think it is wonderful the way he and Lilly have hit it off."

"And what about you and me?" she prodded. "Do you think we've hit it off as well?" With a finger, she traced Laurel's jaw line.

Laurel took Gini's hand from her face and held onto it lightly. "You're an interesting woman, Gini, and very generous. I've enjoyed the time we've spent together."

Gini let out a low groan. "That's what my ex told me the day she left!" She then smiled good-naturedly and added, "Is there someone else or am I just losing my touch with the ladies?"

"There's no one else," Laurel answered quickly. "But I'm not looking for any romantic attachments right now."

"Oh? Not even with Claudia?" Gini's smile seemed to mock Laurel.

Laurel's eyes flared. "I beg your pardon?"

"Claudia called me last night and warned me to stay away from you, so naturally I thought..."

"Naturally," Laurel interrupted with sarcasm. "To set the record straight, Claudia and I are business associates, nothing more. If she called you, then she grossly overstepped her bounds."

Gini smiled. "I hope that means that I can have the pleasure of your company again. Perhaps this weekend?"

"I'll look forward to it," Laurel said with an enthusiasm she didn't feel. She glanced up at the elevator indicator. It was descending slowly and she wished it would hurry up. "You don't have to wait. Your son must be wondering where you are. Thanks again for tonight."

"Good night, Laurel," she said with a contented sigh. "You are a lovely sight." Gini took a step toward her, leaned over and pressed her lips against Laurel's. Instinctively, Laurel took a step back, but Gini followed and brought her even closer by encircling her waist with her arm. Laurel pushed her away with her hands.

Suddenly, Laurel felt someone force themselves between them. Then came a brusque, "The evening is over," as the stranger gave Gini a powerful shove.

"Are you all right?" a strange and yet familiar voice asked Laurel.

Laurel looked back at Gini and then toward the voice. She blinked several times before she believed what her eyes were seeing. Her heart leaped with joy. "Claudia?" she asked, wanting to throw her arms around her neck.

"I warned you about that woman." Claudia's voice was cold, uninviting. She ushered Laurel into the elevator and pushed the close button.

As the elevator slowly rose, Laurel's heart sank. Claudia obviously wasn't as thrilled to see her as she was to see Claudia. "Gini was perfectly civil until that moment," Laurel said in a weak protest. "There was no reason for you to dislocate her shoulder."

"I ask very little of you," Claudia came back harshly, her grip tightening around Laurel's arm. "So why is it, when I asked you not to see this one woman, you go right out and do the exact opposite?"

Laurel pried Claudia's fingers off her. "For one, you didn't ask, you commanded me not to see her. And for two, you have no claims on my personal life."

Claudia said nothing more until the elevator reached the top floor. When the door finally slid open, she waited for Laurel to step out before she did. "I have a suite down the hall from yours and Lilly's. Will you come in for a moment so that we can continue this conversation?"

"Don't you want to see Lilly?" Laurel asked, stalling for time.

"I've already seen her. She told me you were still downstairs with Gini. I'll see her in the morning."

Laurel stared at the floor, trying to avoid Claudia's fierce blue eyes. "Shouldn't we make sure Gini is all right first?"

"I'll call down to the front desk. I'm sure if I did any real damage, I'll hear from Gini's lawyer before the night is over. Besides, that woman has been shoved or slapped more time than either of us can count"

Laurel nodded, a myriad of emotions muddying her thoughts. She tried not to look directly at Claudia's face. For the first time in a long time, she was afraid of her feelings for Claudia and even more afraid that she couldn't keep them to herself. The disappointing evening, Gini's aggressiveness, then the shock of seeing Claudia had left Laurel without her customary defenses and without those defenses she knew all it would take was one look, and she would become lost in Claudia's dark and brooding eyes.

Claudia guided her over the threshold of her suite by gently pressing her hand against the small of Laurel's back. Laurel desperately hoped Claudia couldn't feel the electricity her touch was generating.

"Can I offer you anything to drink?" Claudia asked as she poured herself a scotch.

Laurel shook her head. "Why are you here, Claudia? What happened to your trip?"

"We kept running into legal and governmental road blocks, so I've put the idea on hold for now." Claudia put the glass to her lips and took a long sip. Then she wiped her mouth and stretched out on the couch. "I have to admit that I am exhausted. It was a long trip over here."

"Then why don't we continue this discussion tomorrow when you're less tired," Laurel said curtly.

Claudia sat up and looked over at her. Laurel was standing next to a wing chair with her arms folded across her chest. "I've just spent the last twenty-four hours trying to get to you, so if you don't mind, I'm not quite ready to be dismissed yet. Why don't you relax for once and sit down with me." Claudia patted the cushion on the couch next to her.

Reluctantly, Laurel perched on the edge. She was close enough to Claudia to smell her fresh, outdoor scent and as far as she was concerned, that was too close for comfort. "What was your panic to get here? Were you really so worried that I wasn't exercising proper judgment with Lilly? Did you really think I would let her go traipsing off with the son of a rogue?"

"Damn it," Claudia pronounced as she brought her drink down hard against the top of the coffee table. Scotch splashed in each direction. "You're an impossible woman. I'm not here because of Lilly." She then released a heavy sigh and reached over to cup Laurel's chin in her hand. Claudia forced Laurel to look at her. "I know you would protect Lilly with your life." She released Laurel's chin and took another gulp of her drink as if she needed the courage it would offer. Staring at the wall across the room, Claudia added, "I'm here because of you, Laurel. Because I can't stop thinking about you. Because life is excruciatingly dull without our occasional arguments. Because. . .," her voice trailed off.

By the time she stopped talking, Laurel's heart was pounding wildly, so wildly that she was afraid she had misheard Claudia's actual words. Had she really said that she couldn't stop thinking about her? Did Claudia really mean she was in London because of her?

Laurel forced herself to look at Claudia. The woman's shoulders were bent and her head was limply hanging down. More than anything else in the world, Laurel wanted to reach out to her, to give her anything she wanted or needed -- her touch, her love, her self. At the same time, some inner voice warned her of the impending dangers. Could she risk Claudia's rejection again? Would she ever be able to regain her balance if Claudia knocked her off her feet, as she had done so many times in the past?

Her mind was spinning with doubts and uncertainties. Yet, against everything her mind advised her, she reached out to Claudia and stroked her beautifully chiseled cheek with the back of her fingers. Claudia's skin was soft and warm. She turned toward Laurel slowly and guided Laurel's hand to her mouth.

In Claudia's large, deep set eyes was a longing Laurel had never seen before. It drew her in, causing her to wonder what it would be like to stir its depth. Laurel's thumb traced the edge of Claudia's mouth, which was now moist and inviting. Was this really the same mouth that had challenged her, mocked her, scorned her so many times in the past? When Claudia wet her lips and left them slightly parted, Laurel's thumb slipped across their surface, and suddenly, the thought of Claudia's mouth on hers brought an ache to her core.

Claudia leaned toward her and Laurel leaned toward Claudia. Before their mouths even touched, Laurel could feel the flood gates of her past resolve straining with the anticipation of Claudia's lips brushing hers.

"Do you know how long I have wanted to touch you like this?" Claudia whispered into her ear.

Laurel's response was more moan than any recognizable word in the English language. She moved her lips to Claudia's and invited her to join her, to take her with all of her passion. Soon Claudia's mouth was devouring hers, Claudia's touch filling her own caverns of longing. No dream she had ever had of this moment had come close to the actual experience of being engulfed in Claudia's arms, of feeling the power of Claudia's desire match hers.

Time stopped during their moment of magic and did not resume again until Claudia slowly pulled away. "You're eyes are like emeralds tonight, but so mysterious. Is there something they are trying to say to me?"

Laurel flushed and tried to look away from the intensity of Claudia's gaze but Claudia wouldn't let her. "You are a dangerous woman, Claudia Montgomery," she finally said with a forced smile. Laurel didn't think she would ever be able to explain to Claudia the torment she caused her, the confusion, the ever vigilant guarding of feelings and desires she had forced upon herself from the first day they had met.

"Why?" Claudia feigned indignation and then she laughed. "Just because I shoved Gini Cunningham doesn't mean I'm prone to violence."

Laurel tried to laugh as well, but she couldn't. This new softness in Claudia was more than she could cope with. It was easier when they fought. Then she didn't have to admit the full extent of her feelings for the woman.

When her eyes rimmed with tears, Claudia's expression changed to concern. "What is it Laurel? Have I been too presumptuous again? Have I imposed myself on you?"

Laurel shook her head slowly as the unwanted tears slid down her cheeks. She tried, but she could not find the words to explain the roar in her heart.

Claudia stood up and started to pace the room. "Are you afraid that I would force you to go further than you want to go?"

"Of course not," Laurel replied. When she could think of nothing else to add, she went into the bathroom, ran cold water over a hand cloth, and wiped her face with it. She didn't object to crying per se, not when it was appropriate, but she refused to be the kind of woman that became a blithering idiot after one kiss from Claudia's lips.

Claudia was waiting for her outside the bathroom door. "Damn it, what's wrong?" she demanded.

"Please don't yell at me." Laurel tried to push past Claudia, but she wouldn't move. Laurel tried again until a rush of defeat swept over her. Then she leaned her head back against the door jamb and closed her eyes. "Don't you understand, Claudia? I'm tired of trying to be as strong as you are, as indifferent as you are. I don't think I can go back to playing that game anymore."

Claudia frowned, obviously confused. "I don't understand."

Laurel let out a tremendous sigh. "Every time we kiss, I end up getting hurt and I don't want to repeat the sequence."

"I've never wanted to hurt you. I'm sorry." Claudia's voice was so tender and sincere that Laurel was afraid her instincts to protect herself would melt like snow in the sun. She opened her eyes when Claudia placed the palm of her hand against her cheek. It felt so warm and safe.

"It's not the hurt I mind," Laurel said, swallowing her better judgment, "as much as the pretending. I'm sick of pretending that I don't care about you. So don't ask me to kiss you again if you want me to act like it means nothing more than a handshake." Her voice was quite firm.

"Yes, ma'am," Claudia said, touching her forehead in a formal salute. "Will you kiss me again?"

Laurel smiled, despite herself. "I'm not sure if I'm ready to believe you yet."

"Would it help if I wrote it on the blackboard a hundred times?"

Laurel moved into Claudia's outstretched arms and looked up at her. She wouldn't be surprised if someone pinched her and she woke up in her bed, alone, having dreamt it all. Claudia actually holding her, being nice to her, wanting her – it was too much for her to comprehend. It had all happened too quickly. For three years they had been at each other's throats and suddenly they were mouth to mouth. But what a glorious mouth to be possessed by, she mused, as she bent down to cover her lips with Claudia's.

The next morning, when Claudia joined Lilly and Laurel in the hotel dining room for breakfast, Laurel could tell that Lilly sensed a change was in the air. The girl's eyes were watchful every time Claudia smiled at Laurel and she was unusually happy, even for Lilly.

"Did you really knock Gini over?" Lilly said, aghast.

"It was more of a tap than a shove," Claudia retorted sheepishly. "You know I don't approve of people going around knocking each other over, but in this case, it was called for."

"Were you surprised, Laurel? Did you see Mom coming?"

Laurel laughed. "I was stunned, and no, I didn't see your mother coming. I didn't know it was her until she pulled me into the elevator and the door closed."

"How romantic," Lilly exclaimed. "Being rescued like that!"

Laurel suddenly bristled at the notion that Claudia had rescued her. It was too reminiscent of that summer night when Claudia had accused her of wanting what every woman wants, a hero who rides to the rescue to sweep the woman off her feet. She was about to set Lilly straight when Laurel realized she was probably over reacting. The girl had meant nothing by her comment and Laurel didn't want to spoil what promised to be a wonderful day with the two people who were most important in her life.

After a hearty breakfast, Claudia pushed herself away from the table and looked thoroughly content. Even her brooding eyes seemed at peace. For once, they didn't look as though they were beacons warning of some inner storm. Laurel had never seen Claudia look quite so relaxed before. She was casually dressed in neatly pressed, but faded blue jeans, and a pink oxford shirt that she wore tucked in with the sleeves rolled up to the elbow. On top of that, she wore a grey corduroy vest unbuttoned.

"Well, what would the two of you like to do today?" Claudia asked as she signed the check.

Then Claudia suggested they rent a car and spend a few days exploring the countryside. Laurel agreed that it would be wonderful to explore the countryside as long as they went by train. Trusting the woman with her heart was one thing. Trusting her behind the wheel of a British car driving down a narrow British road, was quite another. Wisely, Lilly stayed clear of the discussion, saying anything would be fine with her.

By afternoon, they had packed a few things for the weekend and were enjoying "high" tea in a first class dining car on their way into Devon. Lilly was sitting next to the window, mesmerized by the lush countryside as it rolled by.

Laurel was sitting on the girl's right and Claudia was across the table from Laurel.

She reached between the plates and tea cups to take hold of Laurel's hand. Lilly glanced at the action, smiled briefly, and then turned back to the window.

"There is so much of Europe I'd like to show you," Claudia said. "You'd love Belgium. Some of its small villages reek with charm and history. It's like walking through a Gothic romance with twentieth century prices."

"And what do you know about Gothic romances?" Laurel said with a laugh.

"Not much," she admitted. "Nevertheless, I have big plans for our future. What do you say, Lilly? Would you like to visit the Orient or the Mediterranean first?"

"You want the truth?" she said without looking away from the window.

Claudia turned serious. "Of course, sweetheart."

Lilly looked at her mother and grinned. "I want to see Cape Cod. Laurel has told me all about it and it sounds wonderful. She used to go there during the summers before she came to Eastland. Maybe we could spend a few days there before school starts."

"Whatever you want, we'll do," Claudia said, reaching over to ruffle her daughter's hair.

Lilly gently pushed her mother's hand away. "I'm too old for that," she admonished.

Claudia winked at Lilly. "You're absolutely right. From now on I'll treat you like the old woman you are. By the way, granny, when did you start dating boys?"

"I guess James was my first real date with a boy."

"And what did you think?"

Lilly shrugged. "It was okay." Then she added shyly, "He kissed me."

Claudia seemed to accept the fact easily. In truth, she seemed to accept everything easily during the course of the next few days -- her daughter's new and more sophisticated clothing, Lilly's persistence that Claudia treat her like a sixteen-year-old, and even Laurel's reticence to rush headlong into a whirl wind affair.

At night, Lilly would go to bed early, leaving Claudia and Laurel a few hours to themselves. The inn where they were staying was surrounded by gardens full of roses and lilacs and hundreds of other flowers. The couple spent hours meandering the moon-lit pebbled paths, talking, laughing, and becoming intoxicated in each other's presence. Laurel told Claudia of her childhood, about her parents dying in an auto accident when she was in college, and of her years teaching in the inner city high school in Boston.

Claudia told Laurel of growing up in a wealthy family and of her current relationship with her aging parents.

But Claudia never once mentioned Lilly's early years and she skirted the issue of her wife and the woman's mysterious death like an animal skirts a deadly predator.

Although Laurel's curiosity had been peaked on more than one occasion, she had the good sense not to pry open that catacomb of Claudia's past.

"I've never been happier," Claudia said the last night of their stay in the country.

Laurel smiled as she pulled her sweater tightly around her. She too had never been happier. The Claudia of the last few days had been tender and loving, full of good humor and good times. They hadn't fought even once. Not a cruel or recriminating word had passed between her lips.

Still, Laurel didn't trust it. Tomorrow, Claudia would return to the States and her life in New York City with all the Muffey's and Buffey's she could want. Soon, Laurel would be back at Eastland in her role as director. Then what? Wouldn't things go back to business as usual?

Laurel turned away from Claudia and fingered one of the large roses that was barely visible in the dark of the overcast night. "I'll never forget these last few days, Claudia. You've been wonderful."

Claudia moved up behind Laurel and wrapped her arms around her waist. She snuggled her face into the back of Laurel's neck. "Someday soon I hope I can show you just how wonderful." Claudia's voice was husky as her hands crept up from Laurel's waist to her midriff.

Laurel could feel Claudia's hot breath on her chilled skin. "I have no doubt that being with you would be incredible," she responded with her own desire evident in her voice. "I just need a little more time."

"I know," Claudia said as if the words themselves were torture. She then put her hands on Laurel's shoulders and turned her around. She covered Laurel's face with tiny kisses, and then her neck. Laurel moaned inwardly as each kiss burned her skin, knowing what Claudia wanted was no more than what she wanted-- to join her completely, to ride her passion without fear of Claudia's yesterdays or her tomorrows.

Claudia's powerful hands stoked Laurel's sides while she continued to kiss Laurel. Laurel's eyes were wide open but everything had a warm, hazy appearance, despite the dark. Claudia's hair was disheveled and her eyes glowed softly. When her thumbs strayed to the peaks of Laurel's breasts, she might as well have ignited Laurel with a flaming torch.

"Are you still cold?" Claudia whispered as she took Laurel's head between her hands and gazed hungrily into her eyes.

"Hardly!" Laurel said with laugh, wrapping her arms around Claudia's neck and pulling her mouth firmly against her own. Claudia's lips were full and demanding, Laurel's wet and insistent. Laurel opened herself and invited Claudia in, letting her tongue slide against her searching movements. Suddenly, she wanted to give Claudia more. She wanted to take more.

Laurel leaned back and basked in the warmth of the passion that glowed in Claudia's eyes. "Your touch is like fire," Laurel whispered.

Inexplicably, Claudia's body stiffened. She pulled away, her eyes narrowing into slivers of steel. "You just can't leave well enough alone, can you?" Claudia turned on her heel and walked away.

Laurel listened to the sound of her shoes against the pebbles until she heard a door close. At first she was stunned, her mind spinning. She couldn't understand what had just happened. Had she done something wrong? Or was Claudia just crazy? And what did she mean by 'leave well enough alone?' Leave what alone? But finally, when the wind had reclaimed all of her warmth, Laurel too went inside and up to her room with a single bed.

As Laurel quietly undressed in the dark, a smoldering anger began to ignite. Damn that woman! she silently seethed. Laurel had almost let her have everything. And for what? she asked herself. To be turned away from and left standing alone in the dark of the night?

Never again, she promised herself. Never again.

Chapter Six

"What happened between the two of you?" Lilly asked as soon as the cab pulled away from the airport curb. She and Laurel were returning to the hotel after having seen Claudia's flight off to New York. "You guys are harder to follow than a soap opera!"

"Nothing happened," Laurel offered weakly. She knew it wouldn't satisfy the girl, but she didn't have the energy to come up with a better explanation at the moment. Besides, how could she explain to Lilly something she didn't understand herself?

"Did she ever finally admit to you that she's in love with you?" Lilly continued, undaunted. When Laurel didn't answer, the girl sat forward and added, "Did you ever tell her that you're in love with her?"

"Lilly, this really isn't any of your business," Laurel countered testily.

"Like hell it isn't!"

"Don't ever let me hear you use that kind of language with me again." Laurel's warning was harsh and completely out of character.

Lilly threw herself against the back of the seat with her arms firmly locked across her chest. "For adults, you both sure can act like babies sometimes," she murmured just loud enough for Laurel to hear.

It was the element of truth in what the girl said that irked Laurel the most. The morning after Claudia had left her standing alone in the garden, she had tried to punish the woman with cool indifference, but unfortunately it was a game Claudia was far too adept at for Laurel to ever consider winning. By lunch, Lilly had ventured a comment on the sudden arctic conditions and Claudia had rewarded her perceptiveness with a cruel reprimand. From that moment on Lilly had kept her mouth shut, exercising more maturity than either Claudia or Laurel combined. The two of them had spent the train ride and the subsequent afternoon at the hotel, arguing every issue that came up.

Laurel shifted her shoulders against the back of the well-worn cab seat just enough to get a better look at Lilly. The girl seemed so small and delicate, although the defiance in her tightly set jaw gave her a resemblance to Claudia that was unnerving. "I'm sorry I snapped at you, Lilly. Of course you have a right to know what's going on between your mother and me."

At first, just the corner of Lilly's mouth twitched as if it were the only muscle in the girl's body ready to forgive. But finally, the pout softened, and then the eyes. "So, what did happen?" she eventually asked.

"I honestly don't know," Laurel said as she slowly shook her head. "After that incident with Gini..., well..., you know, your mother and I suddenly started to recognize a new dimension to our relationship."

"You mean you became lovers?" Lilly suggested excitedly.

"No! Of course not!" Laurel's cheeks reddened. "Anyway, that's not the kind of question you ask of your chaperon."

Lilly grinned. "You weren't telling the story fast enough. Did Mom at least kiss you?"

"Maybe," Laurel teased noncommittally, and then she wagged her eyebrows, taunting Lilly's imagination further. "But that's as much as you'll get out of me!"

Lilly giggled happily as the cab sped down the highway, but Laurel's veneer of levity was still very thin. She looked out the window at the lights streaking by. It was beginning to rain and the driver turned on the wipers. Laurel could hear them squeak across the windshield in an annoying rhythm and by the time they reached the outskirts of the city, she was barely able to suppress the urge to scream at their slapping motion.

Or maybe it was just that she couldn't get the picture out of her mind of the way Claudia had looked when she turned to look at Laurel for the last time after she cleared the airport's security check point. Claudia's face had assumed all of the stress and strain it had lost during those few precious days in the country. Her hair was neatly combed again, no longer casual and wind blown. And her eyes, Laurel remembered as she swallowed a knot in her throat, Claudia's eyes had turned cold again, possessed again.

"You didn't mention my other mother, did you?" Lilly's voice shook Laurel out of her reverie.

Laurel cleared her throat. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm trying to figure out why Mom started acting like a jerk again," the girl explained. "I thought that maybe you had inadvertently mentioned my mother to her."

"You shouldn't go around calling your mom a jerk."

"Are you honestly saying that you think she wasn't acting like one today?"

Laurel started to protest, until she looked at the twinkle in Lilly's eyes. Then they both burst out laughing. Laurel realized that over the last few weeks, she and Lilly had become far too close for her to start erecting barriers of pride or authority between herself and the girl. That was Claudia's style, not hers.

"Jerk it is," Laurel stated with a smile.

When the two got back to the hotel, they freshened up and had a light dinner in the restaurant. Neither one spoke much, both lost in their own thoughts. Laurel had no appetite, so she was sipping a second cup of coffee while Lilly was still finishing the last of her meal.

Then, out of the blue, Lilly said, "You didn't happen to mention anything about a fire did you?"

Laurel squinted her eyes, trying to think back to the night before. She had been in Claudia's arms. Claudia's mouth had consumed her self-control, Claudia's touch had created a path of desire that she would have willingly followed to the very end. She cleared her throat. "I don't remember," she said quietly, blushing at the direction her thoughts had taken.

"My mother died in a fire you know," Lilly said quietly.

Laurel's attention shifted immediately to the girl. "No, I didn't know that, Lilly."

"I really don't know anything about it. Mom has always told me it's too painful for her to talk about. Granddad and Granny have always avoided the subject of my mother like the plague, and even Mrs. Helms was pretty mum, though at least she gave me those pictures and poems. I even went to the library once to check old newspapers for an obituary or something, but I never found anything."

"What is it like for you, not knowing about her?" Laurel prompted carefully.

"It used to be hard. But when I was younger and wanted to talk about it, Mom would get so upset and withdrawn that finally I just gave up. It's no different really than what adopted children go through, I guess." Lilly shrugged, but Laurel wasn't wholly convinced of its sincerity.

"Maybe when you're older your Mom will feel more comfortable about sharing more of what happened with you," Laurel said, trying to console the girl. But Laurel worried about the fact that Claudia wouldn't even share what ever it was with her, and Laurel was an adult.

Thank god she had had the wisdom not to make love with Claudia. This way, Laurel had only given Claudia her heart, so it was only her heart that could break. Had they made love, she was certain she would have surrendered her very soul.

Laurel and Lilly's last week in London was uneventful. They went for a few picnics, visited their favorite museums for the last time, and shopped for gifts to take home to family and friends. Through it all, Laurel was unusually quiet and preoccupied. Although Lilly questioned her about it on more than one occasion, Laurel always passed it off as fatigue, which was true. But why she was suddenly so tired, she couldn't say.

During that week Claudia called nearly every night. She apologized several times to Laurel for the foul mood she had been in that last day they were together and she promised to behave herself in the future.

"I miss you, Laurel. You're all I think about these days," Claudia said across the miles in a husky voice the night before Laurel and Lilly were due to return home.

"It'll be good to see you too," Laurel responded in an unconvincing tone.

"Are you okay? You don't sound like yourself," Claudia asked.

"No, I'm fine," Laurel answered quickly. "I'm just tired."

It was the same conversation they had had virtually every night that week.

The next day, after a long and turbulent flight and a tedious delay through security and customs, Laurel had the limousine drop Lilly off at the apartment and then take her directly to Eastland. For some reason Laurel just didn't have the energy to see Claudia, not yet, despite her invitation for Laurel to join her and Lilly for the weekend in the city.

"I need a little time to myself. You understand, don't you?" she said to Claudia that night on the phone from her cottage.

"Sure," Claudia said curtly, obviously not understanding at all.

"Thanks, Claudia. Maybe we can get together sometime next week."

"Next week?" Claudia's voice got very loud. "What are you really trying to say to me, Laurel?"

"Nothing. Really. I'm just suddenly overwhelmed with all I'll have to do to get ready for the next group at the center."

By the time they finally hung up, Laurel knew she had pushed Claudia away, but she wasn't sure why she had done it.

Maybe I'm still hurt that she deserted me in the garden, Laurel decided as she started the chore of unpacking. But as she gathered together her laundry and headed for the kitchen, she knew there was more to it than that. If anything, the garden incident made her more sad for Claudia than for herself. Claudia was such a tortured woman and Laurel didn't think Claudia would ever let anyone get close enough to help her wrestle with her demons.

It's just my survival instincts, she finally concluded as she lowered herself into a nice hot bath. I'm too old to be chasing after rainbows and I have too much self-respect to allow myself to be some rich woman's punching bag.

The next morning, Laurel was already at her desk when dawn peeked through her office window. It was the beginning of August and the air was brisk. The tips of some of the leaves were already beginning to turn red. Even though she had on her old favorite sweatshirt and sweatpants, she was still chilly.

"How was the trip?" Anthony asked brightly a couple of hours later. He came into Laurel's office with two cups of coffee, obviously eager for long chat.

Laurel looked up from her papers and smiled. "It was great. But I've got to admit it is nice to be back in my own home again."

"You're crazy," Anthony said with a sigh. "I could really get into hotel life. No more cooking. No making beds. Butlers and boymaids waiting on me hand and foot. Why would you ever want to leave all that?"

"When you put it that way, I don't know." Laurel took a sip of the hot liquid Anthony had given her. "I sure did miss your coffee, though. One thing the British aren't very good at is making a decent substitute for tea."

"You'll drink anything as long as it's got a lethal dose of caffeine in it," Anthony chastised.

"True," Laurel conceded. She sat back in her chair and propped her feet up on the desk. "So tell, me. What new and exciting things have been going on around here lately?"

"Same old same old," Anthony said with a toss of his hand.

"We can talk about Eastland later. I'm dying to find out about your trip. Did you meet any interesting women over there?"

Laurel shrugged. "Not really. Lilly met a boy she quite enjoyed, so I double dated his mother, you know, to keep an eye on her."

Anthony raised an eyebrow. "Your idea or Claudia's?"

"Not Claudia's!" she said, laughing. "In fact Claudia ended up pushing the poor woman down." Laurel suddenly stopped, realizing that she hadn't intended to tell anyone about Claudia's appearance in London.

Anthony's eyes widened. "Oh, this does sound juicy! You didn't tell me that Claudia was joining you."

"It was quite unexpected, I assure you. But I really don't feel like discussing it now. Beside, nothing juicy happened." Laurel started to shuffle some of the papers on her desk. "I can't believe all that has to be done before the next conference starts."

"I'm not letting you off the hook that easily. Now start from the beginning and tell me every detail."

Laurel blushed. "There's nothing to tell. Claudia arrived late one night as a surprise for Lilly. She saw a woman try to kiss me, she saw me resist, so she gave the woman a shove when the woman wouldn't respect my wishes."

"Then what happened?"

"Nothing. That's it."

"That's all there is to the story?" Anthony asked, obviously not pleased with Laurel's brevity. "Are you sure there wasn't a look of jealousy on our favorite Chair's face?"

"Of course not." Laurel's voice was a little too high and a little too weak to be convincing.

"And that's the end?"

"The end. Claudia stayed with us for the rest of the weekend and she was on her best behavior, I'm sure for Lilly's sake, not mine. Then she returned to New York and Lilly and I went about our plans in London. It really is a fascinating city. I took lots of pictures. I'll show them to you when I get them developed."

"Right," Anthony said, disappointment evident in his voice. "I'd love to see them."

"Great, now let's get down to work. Okay?"

Anthony got to his feet begrudgingly. "So, what's on the schedule for today?"

They went on to discuss the various tasks that had to be completed by the first group's start date and a time line for their completion. It was easy for Laurel to get back into the swing of her job. She was going into her fourth year as Director and by now she not only knew what had to be done, but also the most efficient way of going about it. She knew where she needed help and where she didn't. Lack of organization was not one of her shortcomings.

The next week passed quickly without any real surprises. Claudia came up to the center at the beginning of the second week, but she only stayed for the day. During the few hours they did have together, it struck Laurel that Claudia was being unduly cautious with her. Claudia even let Laurel take the lead in setting the level of intimacy that would exist between them and naturally Laurel fell back on what was most comfortable -- professional courtesy.

It was what Claudia really wanted, Laurel told herself. After all, Claudia had put up no arguments when Laurel greeted her with a handshake. Claudia never once tried to steer the conversation toward a more intimate level nor did she ever mention the weekend they had shared in England.

But things were good between them, Laurel continually reassured herself. Maybe they didn't love the way she had hoped they would, but at least they weren't fighting, a refreshing change, she thought.

"What's the matter, Lilly?" Laurel asked into the phone late Thursday afternoon, two days after Claudia's last visit.

"It's Mom," she whispered. "She's in the next room and I don't want her to know that I'm calling you."

"Is she sick?"

"No. Just drinking herself into a stupor."

Laurel was shocked. "What do you mean?"

"I mean she's sitting in her den without any lights on and she's getting drunk," Lilly said matter-of-factly.

"Is she having business troubles?" Laurel struggled to figure out what could be bothering her to the point of drinking alone.

"No," Lilly said impatiently.

"What then? Lady troubles?" There was an unintentional hint of sarcasm in her tone.

A short silence followed on the other end of the line and then a heavy sigh. "You don't get it, do you, Laurel?"

"Get what?" Laurel asked defensively.

"She's been this way ever since I got back from London."

"Do you know why?"

"You're impossible!" Lilly exclaimed loudly, and then lowered her voice again. "Yes, I know why. It's because of you. Mom was very upset that you didn't even bother to come up to the apartment that night when you dropped me off from the airport. Then, when you didn't want to spend the weekend with us, she was furious. But ever since she came back from Eastland Tuesday, she's decided that getting drunk is more fun than pining for you. Sometimes I wonder just who the teenager is in our little triad!"

"Lilly, I don't know what you're talking about. Our first night back I was exhausted and I went straight home. Your mother wasn't expecting me to see her. I explained to her that night about the weekend and I'm sure she understood. At least she said she did. And she didn't seem upset on Tuesday."

"But she is upset. She's hurt because she doesn't think you want to spend time with her any more," Lilly protested quietly.

"I do want to be with her. It's just that. . . ."

Lilly interrupted. "I know. You've just been very tired."

"Well, it's true," Laurel said indignantly. "Besides, this really isn't any of your business."

Lilly groaned rudely. "That's her line. I expect more from you."

Laurel tapped a pencil against her desk furiously until the lead finally broke. She let out a long sigh. "Listen, Lilly. I know your heart is in the right place, but you have to realize that your mother and I really are just business associates. Maybe we did have a brief moment of infatuation that weekend in London, but since then everything is back to normal. Believe me, it's her choice as much as mine."

Lilly spat out, "I don't believe that for a moment. Mom's been moping around here for two weeks and you've been dull as dishwater every time I talk to you on the phone. If that's normal then I'd rather not be around either one of you." She suddenly turned secretive. "Uh-oh, Mom's coming. I have to hang up."

Suddenly the phone went dead. Laurel stared at the receiver, not sure that she hadn't dreamed that Lilly had called. She hung up the phone and turned her attention back to the computer screen she had been studying.

"Laurel," Anthony said, peeking his head back into Laurel's office. "Lilly is on the line again."

Laurel groaned inwardly as she picked up her phone. "Is everything all right?"

"I hate to keep bothering you, Laurel, but is there any way you can come into the city this evening? I really need to talk to you."

Laurel stalled, trying to think of a legitimate excuse of why she couldn't. But none came to her. "I will, but only if it's important."

"I wouldn't ask you if it weren't. I'm just very worried about Mom."

"Okay," Laurel conceded. "I'll be there in a couple of hours." Ordinarily, Laurel would have approached a drive into the city on a summer night as an adventure, but tonight it sounded like such an effort -- getting in the car, fighting traffic, finding a parking space. Then she remembered that Lilly had accused her of being lifeless. Maybe she is right, Laurel thought. Maybe the incident with Claudia took more out of me than I realized. She collected her jacket, tidied her desk, and told Anthony she was calling it quits for the day.

When she arrived at Claudia's apartment building, Laurel suddenly realized her hair was a mess, and she was still wearing her old grey sweats. Fortunately the doorman recognized her anyway and offered to park her car in the underground garage. "Ms. Montgomery always saves a space for a pretty young lady," he said.

"I'm sure that's true. Actually, I'm here to see Lilly. Do you know if she's in?" Laurel asked as he opened the double paned glass doors to the Sutton Place complex.

"I haven't seen her in the last few hours," he replied and took Laurel's car keys. "I'll drop these off in the Super's office, if that's all right with you."

Laurel nodded and thanked the man. In the elevator ride going up to the penthouse, she searched her pockets for a comb or brush or something to help her appearance. She found a clip to pull her hair back, but that was it.

Lilly was the one who answered the door. "Laurel! What are you doing here?" The girl's eyes pleaded with Laurel to play along.

"I was just thinking about you and decided it had been far too long since we have had dinner together," Laurel said with a questioning shrug, forgetting in the moment that the play would bear no scrutiny, considering how she was dressed.

Lilly nodded her approval and gratitude. "That sounds wonderful. I'd love to."

An awkward silence fell between them. "Are you going to make me stand in the hall all evening or are you going to invite me in?"

Lilly blushed and fully opened the door. "Mom's mood has turned even more sour," she whispered.

"I've seen her like that before," Laurel reassured the girl.

"Why don't you say hello to her," Lilly said, pushing Laurel toward the door of Claudia's den. Then she quickly scampered back to the front door and yelled, "I have to go out to the store for a few minutes." She waved good-bye and slammed the heavy metal door shut behind her.

"Lilly!" Laurel protested loudly and then she quickly looked into the den to see if Claudia had heard.

"Who's there, Lilly?" Claudia's gruff voice boomed from behind a large leather chair back.

Laurel considered running out the front door herself, but realized that would be childish. "It's Laurel, Claudia. I'm here to see Lilly."

"That's perfect," Claudia said as her figure emerged from the shadows. She leaned against the intricately carved wooden door and put her hands in her pockets. Laurel wasn't sure, but she thought her voice sounded slurred.

Laurel backed away. "I didn't mean to disturb you. I just wanted to stop in and say hello."

Claudia stared at her blankly.

Laurel nervously fidgeted with the button of her jacket. "So, hello."

"Hello," Claudia answered. "Can I get you a drink?"

Laurel looked down the empty hallway toward the front door and realized that Lilly would probably not be coming back to rescue her in the very near future. "Whatever you're having will be fine," she replied.

Claudia laughed as she walked back into the den toward the heavy oak bar. "I'm indulging in a little self-pity. It goes down hard but once you get used to the taste, it's quite comforting." As she spoke she filled up two glasses with ice and poured a healthy dose of scotch in each one. She handed one of the glasses to Laurel. "Cheers."

"What do you have to feel sorry for yourself about?" Laurel asked after taking a quick sip.

Claudia walked over to the mantel and leaned against it. "There's this woman I'm quite smitten by, only she doesn't seem to care about me."

"I see," Laurel said caustically, suddenly feeling very foolish. She should have known that Lilly had mixed up who Claudia was having lady troubles over. Laurel took a long sip of scotch and slumped into the nearest chair. "I'm sure things will work out. Just give it time."

"Why do some women always want more time? Is it genetic or what?"

"Probably," Laurel answered coolly. The last thing she wanted to do was hear about Claudia's lady problems or her perverse philosophy of women. Laurel put her drink down. "I should be going," she announced in a weak voice.

"You're always leaving me, aren't you?" Claudia's speech was getting more slurred although Laurel hadn't seen Claudia touch her drink.

"What are you talking about?" Laurel asked with incredulity as she got to her feet.

"I'm talking about you and me."

"What about you and me?"

Claudia downed half her drink before she answered. "I thought we had something special going."

"I thought so too," Laurel quipped, surprised at how quickly her submerged anger from that summer night in England could shoot up to the surface.

"So, did you simply lose your feelings for me or were you lying about them from the beginning?"

Laurel laughed bitterly, trying to cover the hurt that was quickly replacing her anger. "What do you care anyway?"

Claudia shook her head. "Didn't you hear anything I said to you when we were in England?"

"Yes, but. . . ."

"Did you think I told you my deepest feelings just so I could get you into my bed?"

"No, but. . . ."

"Then what the hell happened between us?"

"I don't know." A tear rolled from her eye as she realized that Claudia must have forgotten her cruel withdrawal from Laurel that night in the garden. But Laurel didn't have any time to pursue the thought.

Claudia went on, "I told you then that I love you. Do you think it is something I go around saying indiscriminately?"

Laurel didn't know what to think. For two long weeks she had felt nothing, and now she was drowning in feelings. All this time she had just been deceiving herself into thinking that her passions and desires for this woman had finally run their course. Now she knew their course hadn't even begun. They were still there, churning inside, washing over her like a tidal wave breaking shore.

Laurel took a few steps toward Claudia. It was the first time she had noticed that her shirt was half unbuttoned and hanging loosely around her waist. The beginnings of a full cleavage disappeared beneath the wrinkled shirt. A familiar ache returned to Laurel's heart, her loins--the ache of wanting too much. It was an ache she hadn't missed and she didn't think she could take it back on again. More tears spilled from her eyes.

Claudia went to her. "It's not fair of you to cry."

Laurel wiped away her tears, but when Claudia tried to touch her, Laurel pushed Claudia's hand away. "Don't you dare say anything nice to me."

Confusion clouded Claudia's bright blue eyes. "I don't understand."

"Every time you do I end up getting hurt."

Claudia's voice sounded defensive, a tone Laurel rarely heard from her. "I'm the one who's been hurt the last few weeks. For some reason you've put up a wall between us that's impossible for me to climb over. You're all business again every time we talk on the phone, and even when I came for a visit, you greeted me with a handshake. So, how is all this my fault?"

Laurel looked at Claudia full in the face, the hurt now brimming her eyes. "Who walked out on whom that last night in the garden?"

Claudia ran her hand through her tousled hair. "I apologized for that. What more can I do?"

Laurel planted her hands firmly on her hips, fully intending to insist that Claudia give her a decent explanation for her behavior that night, but when Claudia hung her head like a repentant school girl, Laurel's hurt and anger dissipated and without meaning to, she smiled. Claudia smiled with relief and placed her hands on Laurel's shoulders. Claudia's eyes seemed to smolder with longings and Laurel was consumed with the thought of igniting her passions.

"I'm very much in love with you, Laurel. If I act like an idiot sometimes it's because I am an idiot sometimes, but it's no reflection on my feelings for you." Claudia brushed away Laurel's last tear with the tip of her thumb.

"I love you too," Laurel whispered as she let the last of her protective barriers melt in the rush of heat she felt from Claudia's touch. Laurel reached up and wound her arms around Claudia's neck. How could she have been so foolish as to think that she could become indifferent to the power of Claudia's magnetism?

Claudia gently brushed her lips across Laurel's forehead and down to the end of her nose. It was such sweet torture. Laurel lifted her lips to join Claudia's but Claudia wasn't finished tormenting her yet. She kissed Laurel's ear and ran her tongue down the side of her neck. How could such a simple act transport Laurel to a world she had never been to before, a world without time or thought, a world where instinct and passion mingled to create a music too primitive for an audience of one.

Laurel tightened her grip around Claudia's neck, forcing her face closer to her own until finally, at last, their mouths came together. Claudia's hunger was overpowering. She pushed Laurel's mouth open and forced herself inside. Claudia was possessive and Laurel feasted on her presence, taking her in wantonly, matching Claudia's hunger with years of her own. Laurel pressed her soft breasts against Claudia's. Their breathing was irregular, forgotten at times, gasping at others.

"I want you," Claudia whispered.

"I want you too," Laurel replied.

"Hi, Guys!" Lilly added.

Chapter Seven

"I brought Chinese," Lilly continued, hugging a large brown paper bag. The smile she wore spanned her entire face. "Do you want it now or should I warm it in the oven?"

Claudia looked at her daughter tenderly, her arms still wrapped around Laurel's waist. "It was your idea to get Laurel here tonight, wasn't it? That's what all the whispering on the phone was about. Right?"

Lilly nodded, obviously pleased with her own handy work.

"Where did you get the food?"

"Jade Gardens."

"You're full of good ideas, aren't you?"

"I aim to please!" Lilly headed toward the kitchen. She called back, "I'm going to set the table outside. The sunset should be beautiful tonight."

"Let me help," Laurel said quickly, trying to extract herself from Claudia's grip.

"Oh, no you don't," Claudia whispered. "It feels much too nice having you this close for me to let go of you now." She bent down and buried her nose in Laurel's neck.

Small sounds of pleasure gurgled inadvertently in Laurel's throat. It seemed like a lifetime since she had first dreamed of a moment like this, one where each of her senses were held hostage by Claudia's powerful touch. Could she ever again drive by a field of freshly mown hay without thinking of Claudia's special scent? Could she ever lay her head against a pillow without remembering the feel of Claudia's shoulder against her cheek? Could her mouth ever be her own again after having been possessed by Claudia's hunger and thirst?

"You better let me go or I'll do things unbecoming an employee," Laurel warned in a voice thick with desire.

Claudia's tongue teased Laurel's ear lobe as her hands found their way under her sweatshirt and crept up her spine. "I'd like to see that," Claudia said breathlessly.

"I'm serious!"

"So am I." Claudia loosened her grip but continued to kiss Laurel's neck. "I don't want you to ever leave my side again."

Laurel put her hands on Claudia's upper chest, her fingers lightly stroking the shallow valley between Claudia's breasts. "We'd look pretty silly going to the next board meeting joined at the hips."

"I'm willing to suffer the ridicule."

"Well, I'm not," Laurel said, gently pushing Claudia away. "Let's go find Lilly."

Claudia followed Laurel out to the balcony where Lilly was starting to set the table.

"Let me help," Laurel offered, taking one end of the thick damask table cloth while Lilly took the other. They spread it over the table and Lilly put a small bouquet of flowers in the center.

Laurel handed Claudia the pile of silverware Lilly had carried outside in a basket. "Here, you can help instead of just standing there watching."

Claudia took the utensils reluctantly. "My job is usually to supervise."

Laurel laughed and turned to Lilly. "How long has she been getting away with that kind of nonsense?"

"She only tries it when Martha has the day off." Lilly flashed her mother a smile. "Now, there's a woman who can keep my Mom in line. Mom's not allowed to set foot in the kitchen unless she is given explicit permission. And when Martha asks Mom to do something for her, Mom jumps to her feet and does it."

Claudia didn't bother to protest.

"Martha isn't a woman I would want to cross," Laurel agreed, remembering her first encounter with Claudia's house-keeper, a German woman who believed discipline and good manners were more important than air and water. "By the way, where is she?"

"She's visiting family in Brooklyn," Claudia said as she finished the last place setting. "She'll be back late tonight."

Lilly got the rest of dinner on the table while Claudia and Laurel watched night descend on the East River and the island beyond. Claudia stood behind Laurel, her arms draped around her shoulders, and Laurel felt in harmony with the ebb and flow of life. It wasn't just the warmth and safety Claudia's arms provided, it was also the knowledge that being with this woman was the direction each day of her life had pointed her toward. It was right. It was what she wanted. Denying it was no longer a possibility, and if she got hurt again, which she suspected she probably would, she would have to cope with the pain of it then. Now, she promised herself, she would just savor the pure bliss of having Claudia's firm body against hers, the sheer joy of knowing that Claudia loved her as deeply as she loved Claudia.

"Why don't you stay in tonight?" Claudia ask in a relaxed tone.

Laurel's body stiffened. "I can't."

"Not even in the guest bedroom?" she added. "That's where all my lady friends spend the night."

At first Laurel thought Claudia was joking about the women she'd known through the years, but one look into her piercing eyes told her that she was dead serious.

Laurel hesitated for a moment, and then said, "I really should get back. Besides, I don't have a change of clothes, or a toothbrush."

"You don't need a change of clothes and I'm sure we can find you a new toothbrush somewhere in this apartment. Knowing Martha, there's a month's supply somewhere in the linen closet. She likes to hoard things."

Laurel turned around to face Claudia. Although she had buttoned her shirt to the nape of her neck, Laurel could still envision the soft curves now hidden. "I wouldn't be able to sleep a wink knowing you were in the next room."

Claudia's smile was laced with satisfaction. "If Lilly weren't here, I wouldn't have to be in the next room."

Laurel raised one eyebrow. "Don't expect me to be that easy, madam!"

Claudia laughed. The sound was rich and comfortable. "Having my way with you has never been easy."

The three of them ate dinner in a flurry of chopsticks and white cardboard boxes. Laurel couldn't believe her sudden appetite and Lilly's choice of dishes was delicious. By the end of the meal, there wasn't a morsel left. Laurel put her elbows on the table and sipped a cup of coffee. She felt completely at ease. Even Claudia seemed content and at peace with herself. As Claudia pushed away from the table and leaned back in her chair, Laurel realized that there was no sign of the storm that usually brewed in her eyes. Claudia seemed genuinely happy.

And Lilly, too, seemed very content. Not in her usual girlish way, but in a way that was stronger, more enduring. Her face looked fuller and more mature, as if she knew she had just completed a circle, passing back to her mother the gift of life Claudia had given her.

Laurel took Lilly's hand and squeezed it. "You hosted this evening beautifully, from beginning to end, and I personally want to thank you for it."

Lilly beamed. "I did, didn't I?"

"You're going to have a big future in matchmaking," Claudia said as she tousled her daughter's hair.

"Just don't do anything to undo all of my hard work, " she teased back. She then reached over and tousled her mother's hair.

Claudia laughed. "We better get this place cleaned up before Martha gets back or we'll never hear the end of it!"

The three of them all pitched in to clear the table and return the kitchen back to its spotless condition. By the time they were through, Laurel was tired, but now it was from happiness rather than depression.

She yawned and considered the long drive ahead of her. "I think I'm going to take you up on your invitation to use the guest bedroom. I'm too tired to face the hour and a half drive back to Eastland."

"Terrific," Claudia said enthusiastically. "Why don't you take tomorrow off so we can go for a picnic or a ride on the river."

"Because I don't have any clean clothes with me," Laurel reminded her. "But mostly because I have a budget to balance before meeting with my boss at the end of the week."

"Don't worry about your boss. I have a feeling she won't be causing you any more trouble," Claudia said, mimicking a classic New York mobster's accent. She pulled Laurel down the hallway to the linen closet as she spoke. "This is for you," she added as she handed Laurel a huge emerald green bath towel. Then Claudia rooted around amongst the medicines and presented Laurel different items. "Here's a toothbrush, as promised. A bar of soap. Hand lotion. A shower cap. Makeup remover."

"Makeup remover? I guess you have entertained high class ladies here before," Laurel said, poking her elbow into Claudia's stomach.

"Actually, not as many as you would think. I just travel a lot and each hotel has its own set of giveaways. I can't bring myself to leave them behind. I've been told it's a dangerous personality disorder, and apparently the only cure is a large dose of sympathy and affection." Claudia closed the closet door and dragged Laurel into the guest bedroom. "Unfortunately you'll become familiar with this room. It's where you'll be sleeping tonight," she said, gently pulling Laurel's body against her own.

"Alone?" Laurel asked, knowing the answer was both of their decisions.

"I just don't want Lilly to think that lesbian relationships should be seen as casual—actually I don't want her to think that about any relationship."

"I know," Laurel added quickly. "It's important to me too that Lilly see a relationship should build toward intimacy, not start with it."

"I guess that makes us old-fashioned, huh?"

"Maybe. But I've attended a lot of youth conferences and more often than not I hear kids Lilly's age say they wish they could postpone the pressures and complexities of sex until they understood more about basic relationship skills."

"I hope you're right," Claudia said, brushing her lips against Laurel's ear lobe. "Because leaving you alone in this room will be extremely difficult for me to do."

Claudia's warm, moist breath caressed more than just Laurel's flesh. It entered her and filled her with longing. Unconsciously, as if to a slow waltz, she moved her head away from Claudia's lips, giving Claudia access to the tender and responsive areas of her neck and shoulder. Claudia's kisses were light and electric and Laurel groaned with exquisite yearning.

With a weak effort and unconvincing effort, Laurel push Claudia away. "Please don't stop," she whispered—maybe out loud, maybe not. "My god your touch feels good."

Claudia opened her eyes as if from a trance. "You're right. If we don't stop now, we never will."

"Once we start, promise me we'll never stop." Laurel's voice was light, joking, but the request came from the depths of her soul.

An hour later, Laurel was wearing one of Claudia's old oxford shirts and was stretched out on the bed in the small but comfortable guest room. The room was dark, and although it was cool from the air conditioning, she tossed the covers to one side.

Just the thought of how Claudia had looked when she had said good night to her was enough to bring a sweat to Laurel's brow. Claudia's filmy, white PJs was seductively unbuttoned to the middle of her chest and slightly lopsided to reveal one smooth, well muscled shoulder. The bottoms were low slung on her waist, revealing her navel when she absent-mindedly put one hand in her pocket. When Claudia had kissed her for the last time that night, Laurel couldn't help but feel the woman's arousal as Claudia's large hands held Laurel firmly against her taut breasts. Inside, Laurel felt an ache that bordered on torture and for a moment, like a moth to a flame, Claudia's blatant desire became a source of power Laurel felt compelled to join.

This time it was to Claudia's credit that they pulled away from their embrace before it was too late. When Claudia walked down the hall to her own bedroom, Laurel's gaze followed her, fixed on the muscles in her buttocks, rippling beneath the thin white cloth. Laurel wondered what it would be like to have a night with her without the fear of giving her too much.

A quiet knock on the guest bedroom door shook her from her reverie and brought her to her feet. "Who is it?" she said in panic, thinking she couldn't take seeing Claudia in the flesh one more time that night.

"It's me," Lilly said in a low voice. "Can I come in?"

Laurel switched on the light and said, "Of course." She sat back down on the bed and patted the area next to her where she wanted Lilly to sit.

"Are you too tired to talk?" Lilly asked tentatively.

"Not at all. What's on your mind?" Laurel was in fact relieved to get away from her own thoughts.

"I was just thinking about you and Mom. I've wanted the two of you to get together so much that it hurt. But now that you are, there's a part of me that's still afraid to be too happy about it. I mean, what if something happens like it did in England? What if I never get to see you again?"

Laurel smoothed the girl's short black hair away from her face. "Lilly, no matter what happens between your mother and me, it won't stop me from loving you. I'll always want you to be a part of my life, just like if we were sisters.

"When you go off to college, I'll expect you to call, and when and if you get married or involved and have children, I'll expect you to bring the brood for lots of visits."

A single tear fell from Lilly's large eyes. "Do you really mean that?"

"Absolutely," Laurel said, scooping the girl up in a warm embrace. "It's a promise."

"But, I'm still scared something's going to go wrong. I don't think I could stand to have my dreams for a perfect family dissolve again."

Laurel released Lilly and wiped away the girl's tears. She propped a pillow behind her back and leaned against the headboard. "There will always be things you want that you can't control, Lilly," she said, the experience a little too close for her to be objective. "The key is to not let hurt and disappointment steer you off course. Do you understand what I mean?"

"I think so," Lilly said, her tears now replaced with a coy smile. "That's kind of the approach I took with you and Mom. Nothing was going to stop me from getting the two of you together! By the way, I'm sorry I got you here on false pretenses. I mean, Mom did start drinking more and more since our return from England, but she never got as bad as I implied. And I'm sorry I ran out on you when you first got here, but I couldn't think of any other way to get the two of you talking."

Laurel chuckled. "The fact that you got me to drive in here tonight in the first place is proof that you won't have any trouble going after what you want in life!"

Lilly threw her slender arms around Laurel's neck. "I just want us to be a family and I want Mom to be happy."

"It's what I want too," Laurel said, surprised at how simple the statement was, and how complicated it had been to get to the point where she could admit it.

The next morning Laurel woke with a start when Martha burst into her room and opened the drapes. "Good morning, Ms. Lewis," she said with her thick German accent.

Laurel yawned and rubbed her eyes. The sudden light hurt them. "Why don't you just hit me in the head and get it over with?" she countered testily.

"Ms. Montgomery said she was tired of waiting for you to get up." Martha placed Laurel's clothes in a neat pile on the unused twin bed, obviously having just washed and pressed them.

"Thank you, Martha. But you can tell Claudia that the next time she wants me up early she can give me an alarm clock. What time is it anyway?"

"It's almost eleven," Martha replied, the disapproval evident in her voice.

Laurel jumped to her feet. "What? Are you serious?" She hadn't slept this late since . . . since the last time she and Lilly had stayed up all night talking.

She took her towel and ran into the bathroom. After a long hot shower she felt somewhat revived, but it wasn't until she was standing in the middle of the guest room again, wet hair dripping down her back and a towel wrapped loosely around her body that she remembered today was a work day. She should have called Anthony hours ago. The poor man was probably worried sick.

She quickly threw off the towel and reached for her underwear. Then she heard a knock at the door. As the door slowly swung open, she grabbed the towel and held it across her front.

"Are you decent?" a somewhat timid female voice asked.

"Don't you dare come in here!" she warned loudly.

Claudia pushed on the door and took several steps into the room. "That's an invitation I can't resist."

"I'll scream for Martha if you take another step." Laurel's towel was crooked and she struggled to fasten it around herself without having to open it and start again.

"I don't think Martha will help your cause any. Seeing us like this will just convince her that I'm terribly swarthy and that you're a tramp. You know those 'Old World' types. It's always the other woman's fault."

Claudia walked over to Laurel and helped her pull the towel around herself. Then she smoothed back Laurel's wet hair and kissed her. "I thought about you all night," she whispered.

"If this is all just a dream, I hope I never wake up," Laurel said, almost purring with contentment.

"This is no dream, Laurel," Claudia said tenderly, and then added, "But I can't believe how long it took you to wake up. I've been up since dawn, hopping around with more energy than a college kid. I even went shopping."

"Shopping? You? What for?"

"You, of course."

"Me? What did you get?" she asked with excitement.

Claudia unfolded her arms from around Laurel's waist and left the room. Moments later she was back with several large shopping bags. Laurel peeked into them, surprised to see that they contained clothing. Laurel's slow motion pace was too much for Claudia, who lifted each bag into the air and spilled all of the contents onto the bed.

"Last night you said you wanted a change of clothes. How do you like this?" Claudia asked as she held up a light cotton shirt which boasted a green, pink, and orange batik design. It was wilder than anything Laurel had ever worn before, but none the less tasteful.

"It's beautiful," Laurel said, clearly touched by Claudia's thoughtfulness.

Then Claudia held up three more shirts, each one identical to the first. "I didn't know your size, and there wasn't a sales clerk to be found, so I bought a range. I hope that's okay."

"I'm sure one will fit," Laurel said softly. She was overwhelmed by how endearing Claudia was being. She seemed so proud of herself and so eager to please.

"Martha does most of my shopping for me, or a tailor comes here, so I'm not that good at this but I thought these pants would go with the shirt," she continued, pulling several identical shiny, mottled, fuchsia pants from the other bag. Claudia held the shirt and pants together against herself. "Not bad, huh?"

Laurel stared at her, trying to control her gag instinct. Then a laugh forced its way past her tightly closed lips. "I'm sorry," she sputtered when Claudia's face registered hurt. "But as a swarthy woman you look ridiculous holding brightly colored sport's wear to your body." She hoped she wouldn't have to make any further comments on the fuchsia pants Claudia had selected.

"What's all the noise?" Lilly asked as she ventured into the room. When she saw her mother, she added, "Oh, Mom. Even with your classic good looks, that's the worst combination I've ever seen!"

Claudia looked crest-fallen.

"I mean the shirt is hot. Really," she added quickly. "But those pants have to go."

Claudia snorted, and threw the pants back on the bed. "I liked them," she said with an exaggerated pout.

"For a pimp, maybe,"

"A pimp?"

"It looks like someone wretched all over them," Lilly continued.

"All right already. I get the point." Claudia folded all four pairs of pants and shoved the bundle back into one of the shopping bags.

"It wasn't that bad," Laurel tried to console her, but then she looked at Lilly and they both burst out laughing.

"Well, you can go bare-assed for all I care." Claudia kissed both Laurel and Lilly on the head and left the room.

After trying on several of Lilly's pants, Laurel finally found a white cotton pair large enough to be comfortable. She dressed quickly, dried her hair, and put on her old pair of tennis shoes. She then joined Claudia and Lilly in the dining room for lunch. Claudia seemed quite pleased with her contribution to Laurel's appearance.

"Oh my God," Laurel suddenly exclaimed through a mouthful of toast. She rushed into the kitchen and picked up the portable phone. As she turned it on, she walked back into the dining room.

"What's the matter?" Claudia asked with concern.

"I forgot to call Anthony. He'll be worried sick."

"You can hang up. I already took care of it," Claudia said with the wave of her hand. "Someone around here has to be responsible."

"And what exactly did you tell him?" Laurel turned the phone off, and rested it on the dining room table.

"Nothing more than the truth," Claudia said, her voice full of innocence. "I told him I woke up this morning and found you in my bed."

Laurel glanced at Lilly, who was wise enough to remain expressionless, and then glared at Claudia. "I'm serious, Claudia. You don't have to live with the rumors that will be flying. I will. Now tell me exactly what you said to him."

Claudia looked over at his daughter and winked. "Should I tell her?"

Lilly leaned toward her mother and in a loud whisper, said, "I wouldn't get her mad if I were you. When she's steamed even Martha would wince."

"I'll take your opinion under advisement." Claudia turned toward Laurel, hesitated, and then said, "I know this is a serious concern of yours, so I'll be serious too. I told Anthony that you had stayed up late with Lilly and that you would be in around three."

That was the last they discussed the issue, but Laurel knew the issue was far from resolved.

Later that afternoon, Laurel pulled into Eastland's parking lot, not remembering when the trip from New York had been more pleasant. Not even the thirty-minute detour getting onto I-95 had upset her. As she walked past the rose garden on route to her office, there was a new spring to her step. But fortunately, by the time she arrived at Anthony's desk, she was able to control the silly grin that had been plastered across her face for the last several hours.

When Anthony looked up from his work, Laurel smiled and quickly reached for the door knob of her office, not wanting to linger under the scrutiny of Anthony's gaze.

"Nice threads," Anthony said casually. "Did Ms. Montgomery pick them out herself?"

Laurel's face reddened. "What are you talking about?" she stammered.

"When I called her place this morning, worried sick about you, Martha told me you were still asleep and that Ms. Montgomery was out buying you new clothes." Anthony stood up and circled Laurel. "I like her taste, if you are going for the drag queen look."

"Well, it's true, Claudia did buy this for me," Laurel started to confess, not having prepared a better explanation. Then quite unexpectedly, the details of the night before came out as a flood of words. She spoke of going into New York to see Lilly, of staying up late talking, of being too tired to drive back safely. The only thing she didn't mention was Claudia's participation in the events.

Anthony nodded a few times, blinked, and then said, "That's what I figured must have happened." Then he leaned against his desk and folded his arms across his chest. "That is until the flowers arrived."

"Flowers?" A sinking feeling settled in Laurel's stomach.

"Check out your office." A devilish smile played on the man's lips.

Laurel opened her office door and peered toward her desk. On it stood an exquisite bouquet of coral-colored roses interspersed with a few sprigs of baby's breath.

"There's a note," Anthony added.

"Which I suppose you read," Laurel said as she walked over to her desk. She picked one of the roses out and held it to her nose.

"I suppose I did," Anthony said apologetically. "But we had to. We didn't know who they were for. The florist just told the driver to deliver them to Eastland."

Laurel's cheeks burned. She pulled the card from the center of the bouquet and opened it. It read, "Laurel, last night was incredibly special. I wish I could find you in my bed more often. Claudia."

At first Laurel was mortified. Her mouth went dry. Her head began to spin with possible explanations she could give Anthony and the rest of the staff -- some were crazy, others just plain stupid. Then she read the note again. "Claudia's such a kidder," she called out to Anthony.

"Exactly my impression of the woman too," Anthony retorted, obviously having a hard time stifling his amusement. "Anyway, that's the explanation I gave Cheryl."

Laurel came out of her office and handed Anthony one of the roses. "Besides Cheryl, how many people do you suppose know about this little joke of Claudia's?"

Anthony took the stem gingerly, as if he were expecting to get stuck by a thorn. "Not too many," he answered, looking at his watch. "But then, the flowers just arrived about fifteen minutes ago. I'd guess you have another ten or eleven minutes before the entire staff is fully briefed."

Laurel said nothing as she turned on her heel and went back into her office. That night, when she called Claudia to thank her for the flowers and admonish her for the note, Claudia shrugged the whole incident off. Her mind was elsewhere. It was on the coming weekend. She wanted Laurel to join Lilly and herself on Cape Cod.

"Lilly and I will drive up there in the morning," she suggested, "hopefully beating some of the traffic across the bridge, and you can catch a flight from Bradley in the afternoon. I've already reserved three rooms in Chatham at the Queen Anne Inn. P-Town was completely booked."

"But what about our budget meeting on Friday? Anthony and I have been peering into computer screens and pouring over spread sheets for days."

"Bring the hard copy along. We can use it as a late night deterrent."

"But," she started.

"You have to come with us. Lilly is counting on it." Claudia's voice turned deep and intentionally persuasive. "And I can't live through too many more nights without being able to steal at least one kiss from you."

Laurel tried to figure out why she was resistant to her invitation. It sounded wonderful and she wanted to be with Claudia so much that she was afraid of becoming obsessive about the woman. So what was it? she asked herself and then she realized that the Cape had always held special meaning for her. It was like a Fantasy Island. She had spent much of her girlhood walking down its moonlit beaches, dreaming of the perfect person at her side. Now she was afraid that if she really did complete the fantasy with Claudia, then she might find out that Claudia was nothing more than a dream after all.

"What will we tell the staff?" Laurel protested weakly.

Claudia's answer was impatient. "Tell them anything you like. They already think we're lovers, so let's give them some gossip they can really sink their teeth into."

"That's easy for you to say," Laurel shot back.

"I know, I know. You have to live with the consequences. Well, if it's too much trouble" Her voice trailed off.

"I hate it when you sulk. Every time you do I end up doing exactly what you want."

"I know," Claudia said with a chuckle. And then her tone turned serious. "But I have the feeling something else is bothering you. Are you having second thoughts about us?"

"Oh no, Claudia," she quickly assured her. "There's no one in the world I'd rather be with than you and Lilly and there's no place I'd rather be than on Cape Cod."

"Then what is it?" Claudia prodded gently.

Laurel hesitated, trying to find the right words. "I guess I'm just afraid that this is all too good to be true. Being with you on the Cape -- it's almost too perfect."

"I understand. I'm scared too. When Sarah died . . . well, I never thought I would ever feel this way again."

Laurel's eyes filled. Claudia's voice sounded so vulnerable. "I guess you really do understand."

"I do. I promise."

"Then this weekend on the Cape it is!"

Chapter Eight

"You look a little green around the gills," Claudia commented when she picked Laurel up at the airport in Hyannis late Friday afternoon.

"It was a rough flight." Laurel tried to force a smile to her lips, but couldn't.

"I should have warned you about the small airplane, huh?"

Laurel rubbed her stomach. "You also could have mentioned that the plane would be jam packed. It was so crowded that we all had to suck in a deep breath just to get the plane off the runway."

"I guess this means I won't get a kiss hello?"

"You'll be lucky to get a kiss good-bye."

Claudia laughed nervously. "I see."

But by the time they reached Chatham, Laurel had cheered up considerably. Claudia unloaded the car and took Laurel's luggage to her room while Laurel went to find Lilly. "She said she'd be waiting for you at the spa," Claudia told her.

"Laurel! Over here," Lilly said excitedly when Laurel peeked her head into the indoor spa area. Lilly was in the hot tub with two other guests. "You're right. This place is beautiful. Mom and I have already taken a tour of Chatham. I can't believe how quaint it is."

"I knew you would like it," Laurel said, taking off her sandals and dabbing her foot into the burbling water of the hot tub. "Yow! That's too hot for me. Why don't we go down to my favorite beach and get a taste of ocean water."

"Okay," Lilly agreed easily. She hoisted herself out of the water and walked over to her towel, lying in a heap in the corner of the room.

"Has your mother seen that swimsuit?" Laurel asked hesitantly as she watched the girl's slender, and scantily covered frame walk toward her.

Color tinged Lilly's cheeks. "Do you like it?"

"Band-Aids would be less revealing."

"Yes, but do you like it?" Lilly insisted.

"Hold out your arms."

Lilly stopped and did as Laurel said.

"Now turn around."

"Laurel," Lilly squealed. "People are staring."

"If you don't like how it feels to be watched, then you better not wear that suit," she said gently, but seriously. "Come on. Let's go find your Mom."

Lilly wrapped the towel around herself and followed Laurel to the room. Claudia was still there fussing over Laurel's luggage.

"What the hell do you have in here?" she asked peevishly as she struggled to hang up her garment bag.

"Aging playgirls," Laurel said, winking in Lilly's direction. "They can bench press fifty pounds without breaking a sweat, but ask them to hang up a twenty-pound garment bag and they get a hernia."

Lilly giggled. "Laurel wants to take us to her secret beach. I'm going to get changed." She clutched the towel to herself as if she were naked underneath.

"Sounds good," Claudia said, "But first let me see your new swimsuit."

"Later," Lilly said casually as she headed for the door.

"Now." Her voice was stern.

Lilly stopped, turned around, and looked to Laurel for help.

"I think you better show her, Lil," Laurel said quietly.

Lilly looked horrified, betrayed. "You can't tell me what to do!" she protested loudly. "I thought you were my friend." She ran out of the door and slammed it behind her.

Claudia started to go after her daughter.

"Let her cool down, Claudia. Teenagers need to be allowed to have outbursts without being scolded for it."

"I will not condone the way she spoke to you." Her face was red with anger.

Laurel went to Claudia and rested her arms across Claudia's shoulders. "She has a lot to cope with right now. You. Me. Hormones. I'm sure it all gets pretty confusing to her."

Claudia's eyes softened. "I suppose you're right. But if this is a taste of the rest of her teen years, I don't think I'll survive."

Laurel felt like saying, 'You ain't seen nothing, hon.' But she held her tongue, not wanting to reveal just how critical of Claudia she suddenly felt. In so many ways her wealth and privileged lifestyle kept her in a cocoon from the real world, where kids and parents had to cope with harsh and sometimes catastrophic realities.

"You'll survive," she finally said. "And so will Lilly."

Claudia put her hands around Laurel's waist and stroked her back. "How do you do it week after week with all those groups of young boys and girls who invade the center on an annual basis?"

"It helps to remind myself that I'm the adult and that they're the kid. Besides, it's a teenager's obligation to make parents, and adults in general, miserable."

"I'll try to remember that the next time Lilly lips off." Claudia bent down and brushed Laurel's mouth with hers. "Speaking of lips. Are you ready to give me a kiss yet?"

Laurel answered by holding Claudia's head in just the right position so that Claudia's mouth molded to hers. Then she let her tongue find Claudia's, making hers soft and slippery against Claudia's gentle thrusts. Laurel's veins started to tingle as if they carried electricity rather than blood. How could such a simple act have such a far reaching effect?

Laurel slowly released Claudia. "We have a walk to take," she said breathlessly. "And you and I have a teenager to make up with."

The rest of the evening was very relaxed and pleasant, although Lilly remained sullen for the most part of it. The three of them shared lobsters and clams and various other seafood delicacies. Afterwards they strolled down main street, window shopping along with the hordes of other tourists out to enjoy the brisk night air. The next morning they woke up at dawn in order to get to Dennis in time to catch the first fishing boat out.

"Are you sure this is absolutely necessary?" Claudia complained yet again after they had spent an hour powering out to one of the fishing reefs, along with thirty other tourists packed shoulder to shoulder on the boat. This time she was holding a small piece of clam daintily between her thumb and forefinger, looking very much like a proper English lady holding a teacup.

"You can't catch a fish without bait," Laurel admonished through a grin.

"Can't I hire someone to do it for me?"

"You mean to put the bait on the hook or to catch the fish?" Laurel asked, nudging Lilly to join in.

"Both," Claudia said, wrinkling her nose as she pricked the tip of the clam with the large deep-sea hook. "Yuk!"

Lilly giggled as she watched her mother contend with the slimy morsel of bait.

"Now what?" Claudia said proudly, brandishing her baited hook in the air for Laurel and Lilly to see.

"Now you toss the line overboard and release the tension on the reel." Laurel sounded very much like a first grade teacher. "Good," she added when Claudia followed her instructions flawlessly.

"This is easy," Claudia said smugly as her line sank toward the ocean floor.

"Not so fast!" Lilly yelled, but she was a little too late. Suddenly her mother's reel stopped spinning and her hand was covered in loops of tangled fishing line.

"You didn't tell me speed was to be factored into this equation."

Laurel shook her head and turned to Lilly. "Your mother is hopeless. Next time we take her fishing let's make sure she's standing next to a trout tank at some fancy French restaurant."

Lilly extended her hand. "Agreed," she said and the two solidified the pact with a handshake.

When the deckhand circled by their end of the boat and saw Claudia's handiwork, the young woman muttered loudly while taking the pole from Claudia's grip.

"I'll buy you a new one," Claudia offered weakly to the deckhand.

"Don't worry about it. Happens all the time," the young woman said, obviously fed up with having spent the last several months coddling tourists. "Here's a bucket of new bait. I'll get you another pole in a minute." She handed Claudia a small metal pail and was off to tend to the other novices.

Claudia held the pail up to get a closer look at its contents. Then she gingerly reached in to retrieve a sample. "Oh for god's sake," she said when she realized she was holding half a tiny blue crab between her fingers. Instinctively, she flung it to the deck.

Laurel laughed out loud, along with a few of the other passengers. "It's just a crab," she tried to console Claudia.

"I thought you were supposed to eat crabs not spear them with a fishing hook."

Lilly picked up the crab her mother had tossed aside and handed it back to her. "Here. It's only half a crab anyway, and it's quite dead, I promise."

"I don't think I want to catch a fish that's capable of eating half a crab. You take it." Claudia pushed her daughter's hand away.

Lilly baited her hook. "You're such a city girl," she said, shaking her head.

"So, where did you learn so much about fishing?"

"I went to camp every summer in Maine, remember?"

"Right," Claudia nodded. "Well, why don't you teach your old Mom the tricks of the trade." Claudia's eyes were full of love and laughter for her daughter.

Laurel watched as Claudia leaned over the railing on one arm, the other draped loosely around Lilly's shoulder as Lilly instructed her mother in the art of waiting for a bite. They seemed so easy and comfortable with each other, and Laurel thought that despite Claudia's faults as a parent, it was this special love between mother and daughter that would guide them safely through the rough waters of life.

"You look so pensive," Claudia said when she noticed Laurel staring into the rolling horizon.

Laurel's eyes filled with emotion. "I was just thinking how much I love you both. It's a little overwhelming at times like this."

"You mean times when you're trying to catch a fish in order to eat it, but the bait you're using is something you would never consider eating in the first place?" Claudia's eyes communicated a message much more tender.

Laurel laughed and said, "Yes, that's exactly what I mean!"

Lilly handed her Mother the fishing pole and went over to Laurel. She wrapped her arms around Laurel's neck. "I'm sorry for what I said yesterday," she whispered into Laurel's ear. "I know you'll always be my friend."

"Always." Laurel affirmed, returning Lilly's hug. Then they heard a loud yelp and turned to see Claudia clutching onto a wiggling pole, fully bent, and clearly out of her control.

"Now what?" she asked frantically.

Lilly rolled her eyes at her mother. "See that little handle? It's what you use to wind the line back in."

"You do it!" Claudia tried to pass the pole off to her daughter, but Lilly backed away. Claudia turned to Laurel. "Aren't you going to help me either?"

Here, let me show you," Laurel said, standing behind Claudia and reaching around her waist to help her reel in the fish.

When it came close to the surface, Laurel moved out of the way and let the deckhand do her job. In one swift motion, the young woman had the fish gaffed through its side."

"It's huge," Claudia gawked as deckhand brought the fish onto the boat. "What kind is it?"

"Turbo," the young woman muttered as she carted the catch off and dumped it into a large wooden bin.

"Can't we keep it?" Claudia said, her gaze lingering on the bin.

"What do you want with a dead fish?" Laurel asked, amused by Claudia's apparent disappointment that the fish had been taken away from her so soon.

"I don't know. I thought we could get it stuffed or something."

Laurel and Lilly looked at each other and laughed. When the boat arrived back at the dock, Claudia and Lilly went to get the car. Laurel stayed behind, saying she wanted to thank the deckhands for all of their help. When she got the attention of the young woman who had gaffed the fish, Laurel asked if she knew a good taxidermist.

"Yeah, my uncle does that kind of stuff. Why?"

"I want to get the fish stuffed that my friend caught today," Laurel said, suddenly feeling a little foolish.

"Why? It was only a small one and I don't think anyone would consider it a game fish."

"I know, but I still want it done. Can you arrange it?" She looked over her shoulder to make sure Claudia wasn't watching her.

"Sure, but it'll cost you."

Laurel pulled her wallet out of her purse and handed the girl a ten dollar bill and a business card. "Ask your uncle to give me a call with a price."

The deckhand smiled for the first time all day. "Okay. Thanks for the tip."

That night, after Lilly had gone to her room to watch T.V., Laurel and Claudia drove to the town pier and walked arm in arm out to the end of the dock. The smell of salt air permeated Laurel's senses. A light breeze made swirls in her hair. She clutched at her thick woolen sweater as she snuggled closer to Claudia's warmth.

The day had been full of tender moments like the one of Lilly teaching Claudia how to fish. Laurel sighed heavily. Her heart was filled to its capacity for happiness, and the feeling made her giddy, almost reckless.

She stopped Claudia and slipped her arms inside Claudia's jean jacket and around her waist. Claudia's hair fluttered in the wind. Laurel could see moonlight skitter across the waves behind Claudia. The sound of water lapping at the pilings beneath her feet made a rhythm that was primitive and stirred her own longings into life.

Thoughts, basic and unrestrained, probably slightly depraved, took Laurel's brain hostage and demanded recognition. Laurel imagined that Claudia was wearing her cottony thin pajamas and that Laurel's finger nail was sliding along Claudia's skin just under the draw string. Laurel imagined giving the string a quick tug and watching the cloth fall in a silent heap around Claudia's feet. She imagined her hands traveling to Claudia's thighs, thrilling at the feel of muscle quivering in the wake of her touch.

"You have a strange look in your eye. What are you thinking about?" Claudia asked just at the moment Laurel's mind became truly uninhibited.

"Nothing," Laurel managed to choke out.

"You must have been thinking something," she prodded.

Laurel could feel herself blushing and was grateful for the secrecy darkness could provide. "If you must know, I was thinking about you."

"Good answer," Claudia said with a quiet smile. "And which of my many attributes has you the most contemplative? My charm? My wit? My good looks?"

"Actually, your inner thigh."

A slow grin took hold of Claudia's mouth. "Another good choice. And what about my inner thigh has you most interested. My soft skin? My muscular physique?"

A wicked smile played on Laurel's lips. "Try a little farther up."

Claudia's eyes sparkled. "My button navel?"

"Too high," Laurel teased, and then added, "You have a button navel?"

"Yea, it's just above my, well, you know. I didn't think ex-school teachers thought that sort of thing."

"What sort of thing?" Laurel taunted, finding Claudia's sudden shyness unexpectedly exciting. It was her first glimpse into the power she held over the woman.

"I'm just surprised, I didn't think ex-school teachers spent time fantasizing about the lower regions of the female anatomy."

"No just any female's." Laurel's voice continued to taunt. "So, what do business women fantasize about? The location of a woman's bank account?"

The deep rolling sound of Claudia's laugh was like medicine to Laurel's soul. She inched closer to Claudia and rested her cheek against Claudia's neck. Claudia's scent, mingling with the salty air was intoxicating. Her heart beat was predictable and solid, like the waves lapping at the shore. In that moment, there was nothing else the world could offer Laurel greater than what she already had, this woman in her arms. Nothing could have made her happier. She had no empty Chambers needing to be filled.

"Laurel?" Claudia's voice was soft but there was a nervousness to it that caused Laurel alarm. "Can we talk?"

Laurel took a step back in order to look into Claudia's eyes. Her eyes could tell Laurel everything -- if the storm had returned, if it would cause damage it in its wake. But it was too dark for Laurel to gather the information she needed. "Of course we can talk."

Claudia cleared her throat.

Laurel braced herself.

"Does the reason you won't make love with me have anything to do with how you feel about me, you know, for the long haul?" Claudia's hands nervously played with a button on her jacket.

"What?" Laurel said, not prepared for the direction their conversation had taken.

"I know you want me. I can feel it in your body every time we kiss, and god, it's an incredible experience. Then there was that look you had in your eye when you said you were thinking about, you know, me, which is further proof that making love isn't a completely foreign notion to you."

"I want you very much," Laurel said, trying to convey with her voice all of the truths that simple statement held. "Sometimes my ache for you is painful. Sometimes it's bliss. But, it's never far away."

"Then it's not a matter of you just needing to warm up to the idea?"

Laurel shook her head. "Of course not. If I was any warmer to the idea I'd be on f..." Laurel suddenly remembered Lilly's warning about mentioning fire. "Well, you know, I'd be damn hot."

"Then what is it?"

"I thought we agreed that we wouldn't rush into bed because of Lilly."

"I don't want to have you stay in my room at the apartment because of Lilly, at least not until we make a commitment, and I mean a commitment the three of us make. But, there's plenty of other places we could be together."

"I guess I thought we should wait to make love every where, not just in your apartment. But I'm more than willing to reconsider. I mean if you would be comfortable with that." Laurel started to stumble over her words.

"So you would like to make love?"

Laurel was quick to answer. "Of course."

"I'm not going to fast for you?"

"No. If we go any slower I might melt."

Claudia smiled. "One last question." She cleared her throat. "Are you a virgin?" She asked the question so carefully that Laurel had to laugh.

"No. I've slept with a man before and several women, but to tell you the truth, I think I am a virgin when it comes to really making love." Then she added shyly. "To someone I'm totally in love with."

Claudia seemed pleased with her answer. "I'm very much in love with you too, Laurel. And I would like us to make a commitment to one another. I'd like us to marry."

"Marry?" Laurel stammered. Suddenly, some inner voice told her that she shouldn't surrender everything, that she shouldn't trust that the storm of Claudia's past wasn't still brewing on the horizon.

"Now I *am* going too fast for you." A flicker of hurt registered in Claudia's eyes.

"No. No you're not. There is no one I would rather marry than you."

"Is that a yes?"

Tears started to brim Laurel's eyes. "I think so," she whispered. This was the moment Laurel had dreamed of her whole life. Why was she hesitating? How could she possibly risk losing the one woman she longed to be with? "It's just that..."

Claudia put her fingers gently over Laurel's lips. "It's just that I have hurt you in ways you are unable to forgive me for and I suspect you are the kind of woman who needs to fully trust before she can fully give."

The woman's perceptiveness pierced Laurel like an arrow. She thought about denying what Claudia had said, but decided against it. In some ways it was good news that Claudia knew her so well, but in some ways it was bad news to realize that she had revealed so much of herself. Especially when she had tried so hard to

not let Claudia know the depth of the hurt she had experienced. Laurel extracted herself from Claudia and walked slowly toward the end of the dock. The old wooden planks creaked beneath her feet. The wind had picked up strength and was whipping her hair across her face.

Although Laurel hadn't heard Claudia follow her, the woman was soon at Laurel's side, putting her hands firmly on Laurel's shoulders and trying to turn Laurel's body to face her. Laurel resisted, not wanting Claudia to see her cry, but Claudia's determination was stronger than Laurel's resistance. Laurel looked at Claudia, her eyes guarded. Claudia's were full of concern.

"Was it wrong of me to say that?" Claudia asked gently.

Laurel shook her head. "It's just that you have your secrets and I thought I had mine. But it turns out I have no secrets from you and you have so many from me."

Claudia's face tightened, but she didn't walk away, although Laurel could see that the woman considered it for an instant. "Is this about Sarah?"

"No, not really, although I didn't even know her name until you mentioned her a few days ago." Laurel started to shiver, the sea air penetrating her thin woolen protector. "What it's really about is vulnerability, equality, and yes, trust."

"What's more vulnerable than asking you to share the rest of your life with me?"

Laurel leaned forward and brushed her lips against Claudia's. "It won't be a very long life if we keep standing on this pier in a gale force wind." She put her arm through Claudia's and led her back to the car. "I would love to spend the rest of my life with you. But I can't if I'm afraid of you." She got into the passenger side of the car.

Claudia quickly slid into the driver's seat and turned on the car, switching on the heat button in the process. "You're afraid of me? That's ridiculous."

"You know damn well what I'm talking about. There are subjects that are taboo. I continually censor my thoughts for fear that something I say will set you off. What happened in that English rose garden is still very fresh in my mind and my heart."

"So we are talking about Sarah."

"We're talking about *you* telling me about Sarah. It's not Sarah I care about. It's you. It's your feelings, your torments."

Claudia's jaw muscles twitched. "All right. What would you like to know?"

"I don't know, Claudia," Laurel said, letting her hands fall into her lap. "Whatever you want to tell me about."

"There's nothing I particularly want to tell you about Sarah. This is your issue. You'll have to take the lead."

Laurel's anger flared. "Okay. What was it like to lose your lover in a fire? What was it like to raise your daughter alone? What was it like to..."

Claudia turned in her seat and grabbed Laurel's arm before she could finish her litany of questions. Claudia's reaction was automatic, not reasoned. "What do you know about the fire?" Her voice was pure steel.

"Let go of me," Laurel yelled.

"What do you know about the fire?" Claudia repeated, her grip becoming a vise.

Laurel looked at Claudia with fear in her eyes. "You're hurting me," she said quietly.

Claudia's eyes widened and she immediately released Laurel, but she continued to watch Laurel for a long time, as if searching for the nearest shore to swim toward, as if she too were frightened by the storm within. Finally, Claudia reached out and lightly stroked Laurel's cheek with the tips of her fingers. "I'm sorry," she whispered, her eyes filling with moisture. "You are right not to trust me."

"Someday you'll have to tell me what happened between you and Sarah. You know that, don't you? Because if you don't, we'll keep coming to this cliff and unlike you, I'm not the type to keep running away."

Claudia swallowed. "I know. Part of me wants to tell you. I just..." her voice trailed off.

Laurel studied her in the darkness, sensing the power of her pain. She caressed Claudia's cheek lightly, feeling for the first time Claudia's trust of her grow. "I'll be here whenever you're ready," she assured the woman.

A weak smile came to Claudia's lips. "I promise to tell you before our wedding night."

It took several minutes for Claudia's words to sink in. This time, Laurel's reservations were nowhere to be found. "You still want to get married?"

Claudia turned in her seat so that she was facing Laurel. Claudia then held Laurel's face between her hands and stroked her cheeks with her thumbs. "Yes, I do. I want to let you inside me. I want to give you my heart, my body, my past, and my present . . . forever." Her eyes searched Laurel's. "Will you have me?"

"Oh, yes, my love," Laurel confirmed without having to think. She pressed her lips to Claudia's. The dream had come true. She opened her mouth wider, needing more of Claudia. Claudia answered with her own hunger. Their tongues explored each other's caverns, Laurel's darting and slipping, Claudia's thrusting and taking. Laurel's hands slipped past Claudia's jacket and under her shirt. Her skin was cool.

Her passion was hot. Claudia pulled Laurel closer but she couldn't get close enough to satisfy her own needs.

Laurel twisted her body to the point of discomfort, trying to have more of its surface against Claudia. She felt compelled to merge reality with fantasy, to have Claudia's hands drive her wild with desire, to have her body join Claudia's passions to the very end.

Laurel knew of Claudia's great tenderness and she knew of her churning torments, but never had Laurel known such power could be shared in darkness. Every cell in her body wanted to be bathed in Claudia's flow. Claudia's arm wrapped around Laurel's lower back and pulled her into an impossible position. Her back arched as Claudia's mouth formed damp kisses along the base of her neck. Claudia's hands unfolded her sweater and pushed it aside.

Laurel's breasts were full and hard, waiting impatiently for the kind of relief only Claudia could provide, but when Claudia undid the first button of her blouse, Laurel stopped her.

"What's the matter?" Claudia whispered. Her voice was pure velvet.

"Look behind you," Laurel choked, her chest still heaving. "I think the guy knocking on your window wants our attention."

Claudia unraveled herself from Laurel's body and turned to face the window.

"This isn't P-Town," a muffled yet distinctly gruff male voice announced.

As Claudia opened her mouth, Laurel signaled a warning to Claudia with her hand and added, "Come on, let's just leave."

"We're sitting here in the dark in an empty parking lot and this ass..."

"I mean it, Claudia. Let's go. He's right. This isn't P-Town."

In an uncharacteristic moment of compliance, Claudia put the car in gear and lurched them away from the intruder. "It's not like we were making a public display of ourselves."

"I don't know about that. I was about to make a very public display of myself."

Claudia grinned as she glanced toward Laurel. "Postponed, but not canceled, right?"

"Right," Laurel assured.

Chapter Nine

The next weekend, Claudia and Lilly came up to Eastland to take Laurel out to dinner.

"Wear your green jacket," Lilly said, perched on the edge of Laurel's bed. She seemed unusually impatient for Laurel to get changed.

"I don't know," Laurel said, stepping into her room from the adjoining bathroom. She was putting on a white silk blouse and had just finished a quick shower. "I haven't worn that since we had dinner with Gini Cunningham."

"But Mom loves it. She once told me that it turned your eyes into emeralds and your skin into alabaster."

"I've always wanted to be described as rocks," she said, holding the jacket up to herself. "Are you sure it isn't too fancy? We're just going down the street, aren't we?"

"You can be fancy at the Country Inn. Besides, Mom is wearing a tuxedo, of sorts."

"What do you mean of sorts?" Laurel asked, slipping the cream colored pants she pulled out of her small closet over her hips and zipping them up.

"Well, the lapels of her black jacket are shiny and she's wearing a bow tie. Of course, Martha had to tie it for her, which put her in a bad mood for a long time. She's wearing jeans though, so I don't think it counts as a full tuxedo."

Laurel brushed her hair and asked Lilly to help her put it into a French braid. Lilly was glad to help, and with practiced efficiency, had Laurel's hair done in a flash.

"What do you think? Gold or pearls?" Laurel asked as she held both up to her neck.

"Neither," Lilly announced firmly.

"I have to wear something."

"No you don't."

Laurel looked at Lilly from in the mirror. "Something funny is going on here. You and your mother have some trick up your sleeve, don't you?"

Lilly feigned ignorance, but Laurel could tell by the rising color in Lilly's cheeks that tonight was not going to be the ordinary outing she had been told it would be.

Laurel took a final look at herself in the mirror, and said, "Come on, kiddo, let's go downstairs and get your mother."

When they walked into her library, Claudia was standing by the unlit fireplace, a book resting in her hand and her head bent over it. Laurel's favorite Beethoven CD was playing in the background.

"Are you ready to go?" Laurel asked.

Claudia looked up. Without reserve or comment, she let her eyes touch every inch of Laurel's surface, her approval apparent in her growing smile. "I am a lucky woman," she said walking toward them. "Separately, I wouldn't be able to say which of you is more beautiful. But together, the vision is too much for a mere mortal."

"You must have been reading Shakespeare. He's the only one I know who can spread honey like that."

Claudia tossed the book on the table. "You scoff me, woman!" She then linked their arms through her and escorted them out to her car.

When they got to the Country Inn, they were greeted with warmth by the innkeeper and shown to the best table the intimate dining room had to offer. Champagne was poured and Claudia even let Lilly have a small glassful. The fact that she drank it as though it were not her first experience with the bubbling liquid, was an observation Laurel kept to herself.

By the time the main course arrived, Laurel was warmed inside and out. Although the dining room was full, she was oblivious to the other patrons' presence, her full attention on the two people she cherished most in the world.

When they finished their meal and the plates were cleared, Claudia took Laurel's hand in her, her fingers playing absent-mindedly with Laurel's. Claudia then looked at her daughter and nodded.

"Mom and I have a very important question to ask you," Lilly started. She reached into her tiny evening bag and retrieved a long, thin, black velvet box. She placed it in front of Laurel and cleared her throat. "This is a symbol of my love for you. But before you open it, I would like to ask you a question."

Laurel looked directly at the blossoming young woman, sitting across the table from her. Lilly's short black hair looked like a satin crown on her exquisitely delicate head. Her features looked porcelain in the dim candlelight. Laurel smiled.

"Laurel, will you marry into my family and become the mother and big sister I have always wanted?" Emotion filled Lilly's large brown eyes.

A lump lodged in Laurel's throat. "Yes," she said, her voice full of feeling too. She leaned over and gave Lilly a kiss on the cheek. "There's nothing I want more."

Lilly swiped at an escaped tear. "So, open the box."

Laurel did as she was instructed. Inside was a delicate gold chain with a small diamond teardrop hanging from a tiny loop. "It's lovely," she gasped. "Will you help me put it on?"

Lilly quickly rose to her feet and draped the necklace around Laurel's neck. She fastened it and then sat back down.

Claudia smiled broadly at her daughter. "It really is beautiful. Your taste is impeccable." Then she turned to Laurel. "Now my turn."

She walked over to Laurel. Her physique alone took Laurel's breath away. Claudia was a woman meant to be dressed in crisp black lines and formal white accents. A living statue, she thought, with chiseled features, refined yet soft. And her presence, magnificent and larger than life, made Laurel tremble.

Claudia knelt down beside Laurel. Laurel looked at her, somewhat astonished. Everyone else in the dining room did as well. Claudia's bright blue eyes sparkled with dancing candlelight. She reached into her pocket and extracted a tiny ring box. She opened it and took the ring between her fingers.

"You bring my life meaning and my heart indescribable joy. I want you next to me, in front of me, behind me, and inside of me, now and forever." Claudia slipped the ring on Laurel's finger. "Will you marry me and become my life's partner?"

A single tear hung on Laurel's eyelash. Silence fell across the room. "Yes," she finally whispered. Then she looked around the room at the rest of the witnesses. "Yes!" she said loudly and most of the other diners cheered and clapped. Of course, a few clucked with disapproval but not enough to dampen anyone's spirits.

Claudia stood up and pulled Laurel up against her. "Well, how does it feel to be a member of the Montgomery family?"

"It feels wonderful," she said looking deep into Claudia's eyes. "I love you very much."

"Ditto," said Claudia, releasing her hold over Laurel.

"I just wish I had more of a family to bring to you." Laurel slipped away from Claudia and resumed her seat. She took Lilly's hand and said, "I love you too, you know that don't you?"

Lilly nodded. "So, are we going to have a ceremony day and invite lots of people and get lots of presents?"

Laurel smiled at the girl and then at Claudia who was motioning to the waitress to bring the check. "How about during Thanksgiving. You'll have time off from school and the center will be closed for that week."

"We have to wait that long?" Claudia chimed in while signing the credit card slip.

"That's what people do when they marry, isn't it? They set a date and tell everyone about it."

"I was hoping this dinner and our speeches were ceremony enough," Claudia said with a wink to Lilly.

Lilly protested. "But what about Gran and Granddad? What about Laurel's friends? What about my friends. They should be invited. I don't think just because you're two women you should make any less of a deal about it."

"Okay. I give in. Thanksgiving we'll have a party then maybe the three of us can go off somewhere, like the Virgin Islands and rent a boat."

Laurel raised one eyebrow. "Make it a hotel with room service and I'll agree to the plan."

Later that night, Laurel sat on her bed, pillows propped against her back, and gazed at the new ring on her finger. It was a thin gold band with three small emeralds set into it. She loved it. It fit perfectly. And she vowed never to take it off.

When Monday morning arrived, Laurel felt all of the pre-conference jitters she felt every year when the biggest client group rented the entire center for two weeks. She paced the floor of her office, reviewing in her head for the millionth time all that had to be done to begin the conference off smoothly.

Anthony poked his head into Laurel's office. "I was going to offer you more coffee, but from the looks of it, I'd say you're already wired."

"You know the first pre-conference staff meeting always makes me nervous."

"You don't have anything to worry about. We've collated all the handouts. Your charts have been made. The schedules have been printed." Anthony's confidence had a soothing effect on Laurel's nerves.

"Do you think I have to make an announcement to our staff about me and Claudia? I don't want to make a big deal about it. After all, I'm not the first member of this staff to get married."

Anthony patted Laurel's arm. "I think it would be nice if you told them yourself."

Laurel gathered her piles of papers and headed out the door with Anthony. "It's probably unnecessary. They probably already know."

Anthony grabbed his own piles and continued down the hall with his boss. "How could they know? You only told me ten minutes ago."

Laurel shot Anthony a knowing look. "It's been that long?"

When Laurel pushed open the door to the large meeting room, her staff rose to their feet and started clapping and calling out their congratulations.

"So, are you going to have a celebration?" someone asked Laurel as she passed.

Laurel nodded, her face flushing with embarrassment.

"When's the big day set for?" someone else asked.

"Some time over Thanksgiving break," she answered, unable to control the silly grin she felt creep across her face.

"Where's the honeymoon going to be?" another spoke out.

Laurel shrugged. "Maybe the Virgin Islands. I don't really care, as long as it isn't Eastland!"

"How long has this romance been going on? How come I never know anything?" The question had come from the center's most notorious gossip.

Anthony fielded it for Laurel. "The actual romance is only a few weeks old, maybe a few months. It's the anti-romance that has some history to it!"

More laughter erupted.

"Can't we get on with important business? Our client's staff should be here any minute." Laurel cajoled, her voice rising above the others.

When the room was quiet again, Laurel presented the day's agenda and ran through each item efficiently.

"Any questions?" she asked when the last item was covered.

"I have one," one of the newer faculty members ventured. "Does your pending marriage mean that we'll have to break in a new Director any time soon?"

Laurel's face turned ashen. "Of course not," she answered quickly, but she realized it was an issue she and Claudia had never even discussed. In fact, it hadn't even occurred to her that she might want to move to New York or give up her job.

"Of course not," a familiar female voice reiterated from the rear door. It was Claudia. She walked toward Laurel, the look of pride and respect evident in her face. "You don't think I would do anything to jeopardize this center's chance of turning a buck, do you?"

The group laughed and gradually dispersed for a quick break before the client staff joined the meeting.

"But where will we live?" Laurel asked in a low voice as the last of the staff members left the room. "I mean, I can't commute from New York, and you can't commute from here."

"It doesn't matter where my office is as long as I have electricity, broadband, and phone lines." Claudia took Laurel in her arms and kissed her. "I'm sure we can figure something out."

"I guess as long as I get to see you every day, I don't really care how far I have to commute."

"Does that mean you'll join me on all of my business trips?"

Laurel arranged her piles of papers. "That depends on where you go."

"Anaheim. Dallas. Denver. Des Moines. Washington, D.C."

Laurel considered her options. "Nah. I think I'd rather miss you."

Claudia grumbled rudely and headed for the door. "Then I won't tell you about my trips to the Orient, or my occasional dalliances in Paris. And of course, there's Rome!"

Laurel ran after her. "I could do Paris without too much trouble. And I've always wanted to go to Japan."

"We'll see," Claudia sniffed. "We'll see."

After the joint staff luncheon held in the center courtyard, Laurel sent Claudia and Lilly on their way back to New York. It was hard for Laurel to watch them drive away, particularly since she knew her job was about to steal most of her time and energy away from them.

Still, she would be able to see Claudia almost every weekend, she tried to console herself. Except the weekend of the Gays and Religion Retreat, and then there was the fall fund raising event, and of course the Halloween Banquet and the Costume Party. She shook her head to stop her mind from spinning. Thinking about her schedule was much too depressing.

As September passed into October and October turned into November, Laurel continued her hectic pace, loving every moment of it. She felt alive and vibrant in

ways she had never known before. The gift of life and love was in her hands and it gave her power, power to rule her destiny and direct her fate. Not that she was ever cocky about all of her good fortune, but the magnitude of her joy gave her the confidence she needed to feel in control of her life rather than controlled by life's circumstances.

As her wedding day approached she grew more and more impatient with time's annoying ability to crawl at a snail's pace. The daylight hours grew shorter, but she perceived each moment between dawn and dusk to be infinite. Nights grew colder, but, since she and Claudia decided on the traditional approach of waiting for the ultimate intimacy until their wedding night, the mere thought of that night provided her more warmth than a desert sun at noon.

Finally, the Tuesday of Thanksgiving week arrived. Claudia and Lilly came up early for normal business reasons and also to move a few of Claudia's clothes and other essentials into Laurel's house. After the wedding, staying in the cottage was a temporary arrangement until they closed on the farm they were purchasing just south of the center. It was more country estate than anything else, but Laurel felt most comfortable referring to it as simply as 'the farm.' Lilly would start at a nearby prep-school after the Christmas holiday, but until then she would stay with friends in New York to finish her semester at her old school.

Most of Claudia's possessions would remain at the apartment in New York. She needed a place in the city and Laurel wanted their new home to have furniture they could both select. The only thing they hadn't yet resolved was where Martha would live. Laurel didn't like the idea of waking up every morning to Martha's stern countenance and Claudia didn't like the idea of having to tell Martha she would be staying behind in New York as Martha had made it clear she looked forward to country living.

Wednesday morning, all of the clients and most of the staff would leave to visit family and friends for the holiday weekend. Claudia, Lilly, and Laurel were planning to go back to New York. The wedding would be that afternoon, with only a few close family and friends in attendance. That night, at Lilly's insistence, Laurel and Claudia would fly to St. Croix and Lilly would spend the long weekend with her grandparents in New York.

But first, there was Tuesday night to get through before Laurel's pent up energy could be spent without inhibition or secrets. After dinner and after Lilly had returned to one of the suites at the center's main dormitory, Claudia and Laurel stood in the library in each other's arms. A fire crackled in the hearth, piercing the otherwise dark room with spears of orange light.

"You're not going to make me leave tonight and go back to that cold lonely dormitory, are you?" Claudia's asked, her eyes dancing with mischief. She covered Laurel's throat and neck with light kisses.

"You can stay as long as you want," she answered, groaning each time Claudia's lips brushed against her skin. "As soon as you honor your promise."

Claudia's body didn't stiffen, as Laurel thought it might. They had not mentioned Sarah or Claudia's promise to reveal her past since that night in the parking lot at the shore.

"I was hoping you had forgotten," she murmured as her lips traveled to Laurel's ear.

"Not a chance," Laurel said, her hands stroking the smooth curves of Claudia's back.

"You're going to torture it out of me, aren't you?" she said when Laurel's thumb found the hollow of her lower back.

Claudia knelt down and brought Laurel with her. She undid the top button of the red mohair sweater Laurel was wearing and let her fingers slide across Laurel's collar bone. "You'll have to let me warm up to the story," Claudia said, undoing another button, giving her lips access to the very top of Laurel's cleavage.

"You're not playing fair," Laurel gasped, her chest heaving as if she had just run a mile.

"We do it my way or no way at all."

Laurel swallowed. "Your way is good." She nuzzled Claudia until her mouth found Claudia's. Claudia tasted of brandy and wine and Laurel was becoming intoxicated much too quickly.

Gradually Claudia pulled away from Laurel and became serious. She took a deep breath, and then looked at Laurel with a power that was dark and frightening. "One of the things you should know is that part of me is very superstitious."

Laurel's first reaction was to laugh, but one look at Claudia's face stopped her cold. It was as though she were seeing her for the first time. The soft lines Laurel had traced only moments ago had hardened into carved crevices that chilled her insides. She cleared her throat and said, "That surprises me. You've always seemed so..., I don't know, precise and logical."

Claudia's eyes softened, but only for a moment. "That's true for the most part, but there are times...", she paused, as if she were looking over the edge of the cliff one last time before making her final leap. Then she continued, "With Sarah, I was drawn into a world where the laws of cause and effect were completely unnatural."

The chill ran up the full length of Laurel's spine. She could feel Claudia's muscles ripple with the undercurrents of tension. "Unnatural?" Laurel prodded gently. "What do you mean?"

Claudia stared blankly at a point somewhere beyond the flames of the fire and did not speak. Laurel waited. She could hear the clock tick as each endless moment passed. She couldn't get rid of the feeling that she was being robbed. Some piece of Claudia was slipping away, and she reached over to touch her, to pull her back to

the safety of her arms, to save her from the abyss she had chosen to face for her. But Claudia's hands had turned to ice.

Then, as if the imperceptible force had already won the battle, Claudia started to shiver. Laurel frantically rubbed her arms, but it had no impact.

"She's here, Laurel." Claudia's voice was thin, removed.

"Who's here?"

"Sarah! I can feel it!"

Laurel's voice became frantic. "Claudia, what's happening to you?" Laurel rose to her knees and shook Claudia's shoulders. "Claudia!"

Claudia looked at Laurel with the eyes of a hunted animal. Then she suddenly rose to her feet. "I've got to find Lilly," she said, desperation breaking her voice. She rushed to the front door, Laurel following close at her heels.

When Claudia opened the door, Laurel grabbed her arm and stopped her. "I'm sure she's fine, Claudia," Laurel insisted, not wanting Lilly to see her mother in this state. But Laurel's plea was not heard.

Claudia moved to the threshold of the door and then her face drained of all color. Laurel followed her gaze out into the darkness. Then she froze. Flames were licking at the roof of the far end of the east wing. They were thin and insidious, like flickering tongues of the devil's light. They mocked the cold night air. They defied the building's stone sheath.

Laurel ripped herself away from the vision's spell, ran into the kitchen and dialed the fire department.

"Trucks are on their way? Thank god!"

She quickly redialed the phone, praying someone would answer on this end of the east wing. No one did. She called the center's front lobby. The night supervisor answered. Laurel could hear the alarm sounding in the background, which was all she wanted to know. She hung up and ran back outside in time to see Claudia disappear through the center's front gate.

Laurel didn't follow her. Instead she ran around the side of the center to the rear of the main dorm building. It was a good three hundred yards and she was panting wildly by the time she reached the playing field where the remaining staff and clients were lined up in drill formation.

The staff were standing at the front of the lines in a huddle. Laurel forced her legs to walk over to them in a steady, confident gate.

"Is everyone out?" she asked, her chest still heaving from the exertion.

The group of six women and three men stood motionless, staring at her.

"Answer me," she demanded.

They refused, or perhaps they couldn't.

Laurel's mind spun recklessly. She considered striking each one of them across the face. Terror coursed through her veins, turning her life juices into dust. One gust of wind and she knew she would disintegrate. She ran over to the line where the clients from the east wing were standing. The small young faces were glazed, some smoke stained and singed. Their frail bodies shivered in the darkness. Laurel took off her coat and draped it around a young boy who was bent over crying.

She wanted to shake each child and demand the facts of what had happened. She wanted to scream her protest at all of their vacant faces. Instead, she stroked their hair or wiped their faces. She smiled reassuringly, rubbed their backs, and told them everything would be all right. By the time she reached the end of the line, pure logic dominated her actions. Her brain had counted three people missing.

She went back to the staff and instructed them to take all of the clients to the rec center. The building would be warm and it was large enough to house all of the fifty young adults and twenty staff members, she reasoned with them.

Then Laurel went back around to the front of the school where sirens had been blaring and red and white lights were swirling in frantic circles. She walked up to the man who wore 'chief' on his helmet, and said, "Three people are missing. And I think a mother is in there somewhere."

"Are you all right, Ms. Lewis?" the young man asked.

"I'm shaken, but I'm fine," she answered.

"Well, the fire isn't as bad as it looks. It was pretty much localized to two or three rooms. Two of the kids have been pulled out. They're over there in the ambulances. They're scared, but they're all right." He pointed toward the row of white vans with their rear doors flung open.

Laurel's eyes narrowed. "And the other girl?"

The chief held the walkie-talkie to his ear and mumbled incomprehensibly into the mouthpiece.

"They've just reached her now. She's alive, but burned. My men are pretty sure that she is the last one in there."

Laurel nodded and moved slowly in the direction of the ambulances. She felt as though her heart was made of glass, fragile, cold, isolated. As she approached the nearest van, she heard voices from behind.

"Get out of the way, Lady!" two Rescue Squad members shouted.

She turned around to see Claudia. Inside herself she could feel a piece of her heart splinter and fall. Claudia was limping along side of the stretcher that was being carried by the two fire fighters. On it was Lilly, her body limp, her face stained -- black with smoke, red with blood.

"Lilly!" she cried out. Lilly's head rolled in her direction, but the eyes were closed.

"Claudia!" she screamed, but Claudia didn't look at her until she was in the ambulance, crouching next to Lilly. Her face and clothes were smoke stained. Her hair was plastered against her head with sweat. Her eyes were red and swollen. Then the doors were slammed shut. The lock was sealed. And they were gone.

Chapter Ten

The following twenty-four hours were a nightmare. How Laurel made it from one hour to the next, she did not know. It was as if her mind went on automatic pilot, where each flight check is followed, each takeoff is routine, and each landing is completely predictable, but a machine is in charge, not flesh and blood.

And a machine is exactly what Laurel felt like. She no longer counted on her heart to guide her. It had shattered amongst the sirens and flashing lights.

Once the ambulance had sped away into the night, Laurel had walked mechanically to the gymnasium and supervised bedding the kids and adults down for the night. As soon as everything was under control, Laurel called the hospital in New York where all three girls had been taken. The other two girls' were met at the hospital by their parents and quickly released with only minor cuts and bruises.

Lilly had been admitted to ICU, but no information was available about her condition. Laurel had Claudia paged, but she not did respond. Laurel called again at dawn and was told that Lilly's condition was critical and only immediate family members could visit. Claudia still did not answer the page.

Between the hours of eight and two that Wednesday, Laurel orchestrated the exodus of all the groups and staff with a calm that was not her own. For each parent or partner who came directly to the school to pick up a child or a loved one, Laurel gave answers to the endless flow of questions about the fire.

Yes, it was true, someone in one of the suites had been smoking in bed. Yes, Lilly Montgomery had been badly burned, but she had no further information yet as to her condition. No, no one else was seriously hurt. No, there would be no charges filed against the smoker. Yes, the center would take steps to insure that this would never happen again.

Then there were the local reporters she had to contend with, each eager to get a new slant on the story. There were also insurance investigators who had to be taken to the scene and pacified, and there were a myriad of work crews who had to be contracted to get the dorm ready for occupancy as quickly as possible. A new group was due in by Sunday and they were expecting a full house the following week.

When the last person left Wednesday afternoon, Laurel asked Anthony to tell each client, or parent, or partner who phoned that she would personally return their call the next day. Then Laurel drove to the hospital, frantic to be with Lilly and Claudia at last. After driving around the parking lot for nearly thirty minutes, she finally parked illegally and ran inside, only to be stopped by the receptionist at the information desk. The girl was sympathetic, but firm. Laurel could not see anyone in ICU unless she were an immediate family member.

"I am a member of the family, for god's sake!" Laurel reasoned.

"Then tell them to put your name on the cleared list for ICU visitors," the young woman suggested. When Laurel tried to explain that she hadn't been able to reach Claudia, that she probably wouldn't leave Lilly's side long enough to make any calls, the girl simply said, "I'm sorry, Ma'am, but my hands are tied."

In exasperation, Laurel pleaded, "Will you at least page Ms. Montgomery for me? Tell her I'm here, waiting in the lobby."

"All right," she finally agreed. "But she won't hear the page if she's in ICU. It's kept totally quiet in there."

Laurel waited through five pages that she herself could hear, but after each one the receptionist shook her head to let Laurel know that no one had responded.

Finally, in desperation, Laurel asked where she could find a restroom, and on her way to it, she snuck onto one of the crowded elevators. After another thirty minutes of wrong floors and wrong turns, she found the sign she had been looking for. 'ICU -- Positively No Visitors Allowed Without a Pass.'

As soon as she pushed open the swinging double doors, a nurse carrying a clipboard was at her side. "Are you here to see Mrs. Fulford?" she asked in a soft, comforting voice.

"N-No," Laurel stammered. "Lilly Montgomery, the girl who was burned in the fire at Eastland last night."

"Oh, yes. Poor thing. And you are?" The nurse opened the metal top of her clipboard as she spoke.

"Laurel Lewis, the Director of Eastland, and Claudia's...."

The nurse didn't give Laurel a chance to finish. A frown crossed the woman's face as she looked up and down the list on her board. "I'm sorry Miss Lewis, but your name -- in fact, no one's name is on Miss Montgomery's cleared list. It's very important that we screen visitors here. I'm sure you can understand. People and families here are in such a state."

"But my name should be on the list!" Laurel insisted.

"I'm sure it was just an oversight on Ms. Montgomery's part. You see, she and I were to be married today. This just happened last night and I had to stay at Eastland to make sure the other people got home safely, and....," Laurel's voice began to crack.

"There, there now," the nurse said. "I'm sure you're right. There's probably just been a misunderstanding. Let me see what I can do."

As relief spread through Laurel, she realized that she had to sit down -- soon.

"You look awfully pale," the nurse said quickly. "You rest here on the couch and I'll be back in a minute."

"Thank you," Laurel said, her body crumpling onto the stiff sofa. "But first can you tell me if she's all right? The only report I could get by phone is that her condition is critical." Laurel held her breath while the woman leafed through several more pages of her clipboard.

"Ah, yes, Lilly Montgomery. She's been placed in isolation, due to the severity of her burns." Then the woman looked up reassuringly, "To prevent infection, you know. As of twelve o'clock her condition was still critical, but all her vital signs look good."

Laurel breathed a small sigh, and nodded gratefully to the woman. The nurse closed her clipboard and hurried off down the corridor. Laurel leaned her head back against the wall and closed her eyes. She felt weak. How long had it been since she had slept? Since Monday night, she thought. How long since she had eaten? She couldn't remember.

Visions of the previous night filled Laurel's mind --Lilly on the stretcher, Claudia's blank stare through the ambulance windows, Claudia's tortured face in her library just before they discovered the fire. It was still hard for Laurel to make any of it real. And she didn't know how much longer she could face it alone. Be patient, she told herself. Soon she would be with Claudia, and together they would do whatever needed to be done for Lilly.

Another eternity passed until the nurse with the clipboard returned. Her face did not look hopeful. "I'm sorry to have taken so long, Miss Lewis," she said as she sat on the edge of the sofa with Laurel. "I'm afraid I don't have any answers for you, but Miss Montgomery's doctor has agreed to see you as soon as he finishes his rounds."

"How long will that be?" Laurel asked, trying to remain calm.

"Probably another half hour or so, if there are no complications. I'm sorry," she apologized again, as if there were some element to all this that was her fault.

Laurel nodded, feeling defeated and weaker than ever.

The woman patted her arm and said she'd be back to check on her in a few minutes. True to her word, she returned ten minutes later with a glass of orange juice. "You look like you could use a little nourishment yourself."

Laurel was unprepared for this gesture of kindness. She burst into tears. "Thank you," she finally managed to say.

"Drink it down now. You'll feel better," the woman said to her before she walked back to her other duties.

Laurel was surprised at how the juice did make her feel stronger, almost immediately. As she stood up to dispose of the cup, a man in a white coat approached her.

"Are you Miss Lewis?" he asked tonelessly.

Laurel nodded.

"I'm Dr. Feinstein. Lilly has improved from this morning. Her burns are severe, on her back, left leg, and left arm, but the front of her body and head and face were spared." He spoke matter-of-factly, with no perceptible emotion.

"Is she going to be all right?"

"It's really too soon to tell yet. She's basically unconscious, which is a blessing in disguise. If she were fully conscious, the pain would be unbearable."

Tears filled Laurel's eyes, but she willed them away. "Can I see her?" she said, refusing to let her voice break.

The doctor sighed heavily before he spoke. "Nurse Crestwell filled in me on your situation, and I don't exactly know how to tell you this. I spoke with Claudia Montgomery about you being here, and she is adamant that you not see Lilly. She also made it very clear that she doesn't want to see you herself."

Bewilderment filled Laurel's mind. She thought she understood why Claudia hadn't contacted her during the last eighteen hours -- she couldn't bear to leave Lilly's side, even for a moment, and of course Claudia would know that Laurel would come as soon as she could. But now that she was here, what was she doing? It made no sense.

"Did she say why?" Laurel set her jaw, preparing for any answer.

Dr. Feinstein shook his head. "She didn't, Miss Lewis. And I'm sorry. I haven't even been able to get the woman to leave the room, let alone delve into why she wouldn't want to see her . . ."

"Partner," Laurel interjected.

"And I know this may sound harsh, but this isn't the time for her to be dealing with whatever problems the two of you might have. I have to respect her wishes right now. Quite frankly, if she doesn't pull herself together soon, I'm going to have two patients on my hands."

Laurel searched the doctor's face for some reprieve, some clue to release her from this maze of confusion. But there was none.

Dr. Feinstein looked at his watch. "I'm really sorry, Miss Lewis. I know this must quite a blow to you. The best I can suggest is that you leave your name and number

with Nurse Crestwell, and perhaps a note to Ms. Montgomery. You can call everyday to get an update on Lilly. Other than that, just give things a little time, at least until Lilly is out of danger." He squeezed her arm in an awkward gesture of comfort and slowly walked back to his patients.

Laurel did leave a note for Claudia, which Nurse Crestwell promised to deliver, and she left her office and house numbers with the nurse as well. The woman promised to call her personally if there were any significant changes for the worse, and then she ushered Laurel onto the elevator with reassurances that many people often had strange reactions when their children were badly injured. "Get some sleep, honey. It's the best thing you can do for everyone right now."

It was nearly seven by the time Laurel was back on I-95. She refused to let herself think about what had just happened. She knew her heart couldn't possibly take it in yet. Instead she forced herself to think about all that had to be done in the next three days.

A drive that should have taken an hour and a half was extended to three and a half due to the heavy traffic exiting the city for the holiday. By the time Laurel arrived home it was nearing eleven. Anthony had left a message on her answering machine. "Please call if there's anything at all I can do," it said.

Laurel ate a piece of cheese on a cracker as she walked up to her bedroom. She fell onto the bed without even changing and slept fitfully for the next several hours. Her dreams were disjointed, full of broken images -- images of Lilly's young body covered with bloody scars, images of a twisted and gnarled face that she knew had once belonged to Claudia, and echoes of a harsh and bitter laughter that sounded like Claudia's, yet wasn't. It was mingled with that of someone else, someone Laurel didn't want to know, someone Laurel regretted having asked to meet.

Laurel woke well before dawn, showered, and was at her desk by seven. She spent Thanksgiving Day calling clients and cajoling local work crews into coming out to the center. Most of them agreed to come for at least part of Thanksgiving Day and were fairly good-natured about it when they arrived.

"After all," one of the foreman said, "we can't have our Eastland 'girls' sleeping out in the cold now, can we?" He wagged his wrist to mock the limp wrist queers he was always joking about.

Anthony stopped by the office around three and brought Laurel leftover turkey and trimmings. Laurel picked at it, but couldn't eat much.

"How's Lilly?" Anthony asked.

"Better," was all Laurel could say.

"And Claudia? How's she holding up?"

Laurel swallowed, and said, "I can't talk about that now. It's not on the schedule."

Anthony nodded and patted his boss awkwardly on the shoulder.

"And no touching words either," Laurel continued. "I mean it, Anthony. I know you're concerned. So am I. There's nothing we can do right now except get this center back in shape for Monday morning."

And for those next four days Laurel and Anthony, and several other staff members who had stayed around because of the fire, did work, like a well-oiled machine under Laurel's command. By Sunday night almost all evidence of the fire had been wiped clean. The walls of the East Wing were once again white. The door frames and window sills were once again secure, the floor boards had been replaced, and new carpeting had been installed.

Sunday afternoon Laurel watched the Gay and Lesbian Seniors Without Partners group pour into the building, adding life and laughter to the empty halls, but to Laurel's ears the sound was hollow. Laurel answered, as best she could, her returning staff member's questions about how Lilly was doing, and Monday night Laurel held a staff meeting. She addressed the issue of how the fire started, the buildings safety features that saved the structure and many lives, Lilly's prognosis, but she avoided mention of Claudia or their canceled honeymoon.

Tuesday, at eight in the evening, Laurel made her usual call to the Third Floor ICU. "Is Nurse Crestwell available tonight?" Laurel inquired of the voice at the other end of the wire.

"Nurse Crestwell has been out sick since yesterday afternoon. May I help you?" the hurried voice responded.

"Yes. I'm calling to find out how Lilly Montgomery is doing."

"Miss Montgomery is no longer a patient here."

A stunned silence followed. "Is she...? She's not...," Laurel couldn't make her mouth form the words.

"No, no. She was moved to a Burn Center somewhere in the South," the woman said, seeming to understand Laurel's panic.

"Where?" Laurel pleaded.

"I'm sorry. We do not give out that information without positive ID." The voice returned to its perfunctory tone.

Laurel hung up the phone. She fixed herself a bowl of soup, sat in front of it for a few minutes, and then poured it down the sink. She looked at the time. It was nine o'clock. She watched television for about an hour and finally went up to her bedroom.

She opened her closet door, moved Claudia's dressing gown aside and grabbed her flannel nightshirt from the hook. She undressed, leaving a pile of clothes in a heap on the chair. She threw on the nightshirt, went into the bathroom, and leaned against the white porcelain sink. It was cold. She looked at her face in the mirror. It too was cold. She quickly opened the medicine closet, and between Claudia's toothbrush and toothpaste, she picked out the bottle of aspirin and slammed the door shut.

She took the pills, brushed her teeth haphazardly, and went to bed. As she leaned over to turn off the light on her bedside table, a package caught her eye. It was shoved under her bureau, and as she remembered what it was, tears brimmed her eyes. She brought it over to the bed and ripped open the brown paper covering. Her tears spilled onto the contents.

She lifted the small stuffed fish out of the box and cradled it in her arms. Tears streamed down her face. It was the first time since the night of the fire that she had really cried. It was the first time since seeing Claudia's face disappear behind the ambulance door that she had felt any emotion at all.

She flung the fish against the wall. It chipped the paint and then crashed to the floor, breaking the dorsal fin off. Feelings gushed inside her, feelings that contradicted one another, feelings that were agony, feelings that caused her guilt.

Her compassion for Claudia was monumental, but if Claudia were close enough to smack across the face, Laurel knew she would. Why was Claudia doing this? Why was she shutting her out? Didn't Claudia know she would be frantic about Lilly? Didn't Laurel's love for the girl count for anything?

"You look terrible," Anthony said to his boss the next morning.

"Thank you," Laurel grunted as she passed by her secretary's desk.

Anthony stood up and followed Laurel into her office. "I guess you haven't heard from Claudia yet?"

Laurel shook her head. "She's taken Lilly south to a Burn Center." Laurel took off her coat and hooked it over the coat tree.

"How about some coffee?" Anthony offered.

"That would be great," Laurel said, her voice thin. "But don't be too nice to me or I might melt into a puddle of tears again. For five days I couldn't cry and now I can't seem to stop." She dabbed at her eyes with a tissue.

"Why don't you go sit down on the window seat and I'll bring us both something hot."

Laurel nodded and did as she was told. When Anthony returned, he put two mugs on the window sill and sat down next to Laurel. "Why do you think Claudia hasn't called?"

Laurel stared out the window. "If you want my gut reaction, I think it's because she's crazy, I mean it, Anthony. I really think the woman is crazy."

"You're serious?" There was a nervous edge to Anthony's voice.

Laurel took a thorough look at her secretary and decided what the hell. Why not tell him everything she knew, as little as it was, about Sarah, about fires, about superstitions and unnatural causes and effects. She retrieved from her desk the bundle of poetry and pictures Lilly had given her last spring and showed them to Anthony. Then Laurel started at the beginning and told Anthony the story, sketchy as it was.

"You mean that Claudia thinks the fire is somehow Sarah's doing?" Anthony asked incredulously.

Laurel put her head in her hands and rubbed her face. "You should have seen her that night. It was eerie, really eerie. She had the eyes of a frightened child. She looked like a cornered animal. She kept saying that Sarah was there." The memory caused a shudder to travel up Laurel's spine and out her arms.

"And you also think Sarah died in a fire?"

Laurel nodded. "That's what Lilly told me."

Anthony patted Laurel on the knee. "We're two smart people. Together, we'll get to the bottom of this." Then he stood up and headed for the door. "How about if you work on trying to track Lilly down, and I'll dig up what I can about Sarah Montgomery. I can't believe I'm allowed to say her name out loud."

For the first time in a week Laurel felt not so alone. With Anthony's help maybe she could figure things out. Maybe they could unravel the mystery that had haunted her and Claudia's life for so long. She went to her desk and called Claudia's apartment. As usual, there was no answer. Not even the answering machine was on. Then she dialed her office.

"Do you know where she is?" Laurel asked nervously when one of Claudia's associates got on the line with her.

"No, Ma'am. She just said she would keep in touch."

"Did she say anything about her daughter?"

"No, Ma'am."

"Do you even know about the fire?" Laurel's voice was growing more and more shrill.

"No, Ma'am. She didn't mention anything about a fire."

"Did she say when she would be back?"

"No, Ma'am. Can I take a message?"

"Yes! Tell her to go" She hung up before her mouth declared what her mind was thinking. She turned on her computer and looked at the coming week's schedule on the screen. It was the only thing she could think to do to prevent herself from screaming. If she could just understand why Claudia was doing this to her, maybe then she could have a clean emotion. She could either feel anger or sorrow or patience -- whatever Claudia needed, whatever was true. But this way she felt trapped in a hurricane, feelings whipping around inside her with no logic as the eye of the storm.

"Her parents! Of course!" Laurel said out loud to the glowing amber screen. She got their number through information and dialed.

"Martha? What are you doing there?" she said testily when the woman's unmistakable voice answered the phone.

"Ms. Montgomery asked me to come here and take care of her parents."

"May I speak to one of them?" Laurel asked as politely as she could manage.

"They're not taking any calls."

"I'm sure they will take to me, Martha," Laurel insisted.

"No, they won't," Martha corrected sternly. "Ms. Montgomery has asked them not to."

"Then tell me where Claudia is!" Laurel tried very hard not to sound hysterical.

"I can't do that."

Laurel drummed her fingernails sharply on the desk, trying to calm herself down. "Can you at least tell me how Lilly is doing?"

"As well as can be expected."

A long breath escaped from Laurel's chest. "Do you know where she is?"

"South."

"Where south?"

"Ms. Montgomery does not want to make that information public."

Laurel became hysterical. "Martha, you know I'm not exactly the general public, for god's sake. Please tell me where she is."

"I can not do that and I must go now."

"Damn it!" Laurel screamed into the dead receiver.

Anthony poked his head into the office. "We're not losing our sense of decorum, are we?"

Laurel blushed. "I don't know about you, but I sure as hell am!"

Anthony walked over to the desk. "What seems to be the problem?"

Laurel threw her arms up into the air in exasperation. "For some reason Claudia has Martha staying with her parents and she won't let me speak to them."

"I can handle her," Anthony said, puffing out his chest.

Laurel dialed the phone for her secretary and handed him the receiver when it started to ring.

"Hello? Hello?" Anthony said in a thick French accent. "This is Leslie Montgomery's assistant calling from France. Miss Montgomery would like a word with her parents." Then Anthony put his hand over the receiver and whispered to Laurel, "I bet you didn't know she had a sister living in France."

"I knew," Laurel whispered back. "Is it working?"

"I think so . . . wait a minute." Then he hung up.

"What happened?"

Anthony shrugged. They have caller ID. Martha knew our call originated from Eastland. We could fly to Paris and try a public phone," Anthony offered weakly.

Laurel turned off her computer and grabbed her coat. "I'm tired of these games. I'm going to see her parents if I have to break down their front door."

Three hours later, Laurel was sitting on the edge of a love seat in a lavishly decorated living room, clutching a picture of Claudia in her hands. It was her college graduation picture. Her face was thinner then, a little less mature looking, but there were no other signs that twenty years had since passed. Absently, Laurel's finger traced the line of her firmly set jaw. Even then there was arrogance in her smile.

"And this is the only reminder we bothered to keep of Claudia's first partner," Mrs. Montgomery said in a sweet, motherly voice as she handed Laurel another picture, this time of Sarah.

"She was beautiful," Laurel whispered, carefully studying each detail of the young girl in the photograph. Laurel was surprised at how normal Sarah looked. There was nothing evil in the eyes, nothing haunting about the smile.

"She was pretty enough, but certainly not ravishing. For some reason though, she drove both the girls and the boys crazy, Claudia included. In my days we would have called a girl like her wicked and sexy. Of course today that would be a compliment."

Laurel gave a nervous laugh. "Do you know anything about the circumstances of her death?"

"No. I don't even know how she died, but I think it was in a fire. Claudia's sister once made some reference to it, but Claudia exploded and we have never mentioned the incident since." The older woman's eyes suddenly turned watery. "But then it's probably our fault she never talked to us about it. We disapproved of her liaisons with other girls. I'm afraid we weren't very kind to her back then and our relationship suffered for many years as a result."

"Claudia loves you very much. I know that," Laurel said, hoping to console the only ally she had found so far.

"She loves you too, dear," Mrs. Montgomery said with a furtive smile. "But even as a girl, she was careful with her feelings. She would go to great extremes to protect herself against getting hurt. That's precisely why I knew what she called her 'marriage' was a bad one. I knew that girl would end up devastating her."

Laurel looked at the picture of Sarah again. But still, she could see no reason why this woman had been able to wield such power over so many lives.

"If you really think Claudia loves me, then why is she keeping me away?" Laurel asked when she finally found the courage to discuss the subject directly.

"Whenever my daughter is frightened or confused, she withdraws -- completely. This time she took her daughter with her. In time, they'll come back."

"But this is crazy," Laurel protested. "I could be such a help to them now."

Claudia's mother took Laurel's hands and gently squeezed them. "Just give her time."

Laurel was back at her desk by late afternoon. Mrs. Montgomery had provided some answers, but the more she thought about their conversation, the less comfort she found in the older woman's advice to give it time. How much time? Laurel wanted to know. How much time could she endure this agony?

"So, how did it go?" Anthony asked when he returned from the library.

"Okay, I guess. At least Claudia's mother would talk to me."

"And?" Anthony prompted.

"And Lilly is in Baltimore. She's being kept sedated, but on the whole, the prognosis is very good."

"You must be thrilled!" Anthony cried with delight.

Tears filled Laurel's eyes. "I am."

Anthony frowned. "But?"

"But I want to be with her." Suddenly, the flood gates opened. She slammed her fist against the desk. "It's just not fair. I don't understand why she's doing this to me and then I feel guilty for feeling sorry for myself, and then I feel hurt that she doesn't want me with her and then I feel selfish for thinking that she should even spend a one moment worrying about me when her daughter is lying lifeless in some hospital bed."

"Laurel, you have to quit beating up on yourself for feeling excluded." He turned the wing chair around and perched on its arm. "The truth is, you are being excluded and if you ask me, there's something going on that doesn't meet the eye."

Laurel plucked a tissue from the box on her desk and wiped her eyes and nose. "Claudia's mother thinks it can all be explained because as a girl she was afraid of letting anyone get too close. It makes some sense, I guess."

"What makes more sense is that Sarah exerted some dark power over Claudia."

Laurel shot Anthony a glance. "What are you taking about?"

"I'm talking about the occult. The woman was definitely into some very strange things. I think she was evil."

"Where are you getting this from?" Laurel said, sitting up, fully attentive.

"As you know, twenty years ago, give or take, Eastland was a boarding school for girls. The old school records are still in the library. Sarah went here, apparently this is where she and Claudia met. Anyway, Sarah was editor of the Eastland News

during her senior year and she wrote some very strange stuff about communing with spirits and love potions and curses from the grave. It gave me the creeps."

"Yeah, but she was just a kid then."

Anthony leaned toward Laurel. "She was old enough to get pregnant."

Laurel gasped. "How do you know?"

"Well, Sarah was a senior at Eastland in the late eighties. Her senior picture shows her belly out to here." Anthony held his hands a foot from his stomach. "Sarah never graduated though. The paper says she got married over Spring break and moved to Washington, D.C. with her new husband. Apparently, he was in his senior year of college at Georgetown University."

Laurel pushed herself away from her desk. "We shouldn't be rooting around in all this stuff. It makes me feel like a peeping Tom. Really, I don't like it."

"Suit yourself," Anthony said, a hint of hurt in his voice. Then his eye's twinkled. "But, I'm going to get to the bottom of this. I have an appointment with Mrs. Helm's in two weeks. You can come if you want. I would have made it sooner but the old gal is leaving for a two-week cruise to Bermuda tonight."

"Count me out," Laurel said quickly. Then she remembered that Mrs. Helms was the original source of the poetry and pictures. Mrs. Helms had taught at Eastland when Sarah had been a student. "But ask me again in two weeks!"

The days and nights that followed were slow and methodical. Like a steam engine chugging to regain its momentum after having been out of order for a long period of time, Laurel gradually gathered the strength to piece together what was left of her life at Eastland and carry on.

Still, there wasn't a day that went by that she didn't think of Lilly. Sometimes, when Laurel would pass a meeting room and hear a young voice answer a question, her heart would freeze, thinking it had been Lilly's voice. Once, she had even run into one of the dorms, thinking she had heard Lilly's laugh. But the result was always the same. Only the memory of Lilly was still at Eastland. Nothing more.

And there wasn't a night that passed that Laurel didn't long for Claudia's touch. She could still remember the feel of Claudia's wet breath on her neck, Claudia's soft tongue against her skin, Claudia's hungry lips feasting on hers. If only she could see Claudia, she was sure she could convince her that she didn't have to live with her torment alone. If only Claudia could feel her warmth and her love, then Claudia would know that she had a partner, someone to help her fight against demons and ghosts.

But, as the second week in December passed, Laurel knew in her heart that Claudia was not coming back. Not to her. Not to Eastland. Not to any of the dreams they had started to build. Her only news of Claudia was through her mother. Lilly was slowly

getting better. Claudia was staying the same. She was keeping her distance. She was maintaining her silence. And the advice was always the same -- no, don't try to see her. She has to work this through for herself. Give it a little more time.

"I'm coming with you," Laurel announced on the morning that Anthony was to meet with Mrs. Helms.

The two of them drove in silence to the retired teacher and Eastland staff member's home. Laurel still couldn't get past the feeling that she was doing something wrong, but this whole ordeal had put her sense of order out of balance from the beginning, and she wasn't sure she could say anymore what was right and what was wrong. At least, it was no longer a simple question.

Mrs. Helms was, as usual, very warm and friendly. She had made a coffee cake and several pastries, which Laurel nibbled at to be polite and Anthony devoured, also for the same reason, so he said.

After an hour of small talk and catching up, Laurel finally broached the subject of Sarah.

"In my forty-five-year career, I taught over a thousand girls, but never one like that Sarah Malloy," Mrs. Helms began. "She was such an odd duck -- thin and willowy, and for some reason drove the boys wild,..." then she added shyly, "and I suppose the girls too. I think it has to do with scent more than sight. Don't you?"

Anthony and Laurel looked at one another and shrugged.

"You could never trust anything that girl said either. At least I never did. She was always smiling and cajoling and being sweet as pie to your face, but I knew that as soon as my back was turned, she was snarling some wicked remark."

Anthony ventured, "Was she pregnant during her senior year?"

Laurel shot her secretary a glance of disapproval.

"And she made no bones about it either," Mrs. Helms continued. "She wore that baby like most women wear jewelry. Of course, being a love child was the rage back then, but Sarah was no love child. If you ask me, she was the devil's mistress."

Anthony's eyes grew wide and Laurel shivered.

"What do you know about her death?" Laurel asked, wanting to speed up the conversation and direct it to the area she thought held the most answers.

"A car accident, I think. Would you like more coffee?"

Laurel was stunned. "Are you sure? About the car accident, I mean."

"No. I'm not sure at all. I might have just assumed it. Did you know, and I think my facts are correct on this, that seventy-five percent of all deaths of those under twenty-five are by car accident?"

"I didn't know," Laurel said, her hopes sinking. Without Claudia, she would never find out what had happened. "We really should be going," she added, resting her coffee cup on the table.

"Well, do come again," Mrs. Helms said in a cheery voice.

Laurel and Anthony got to their feet.

"Thanks for letting us pick your brain," Anthony added.

"It was my pleasure. The next time you come I can tell you all about the last time I saw Sarah. Now that's a story."

Laurel didn't think she could stand to hear another word about Sarah. "Maybe next time."

"It was the day she died, you know."

Laurel and Anthony sank back into their chairs, almost in unison.

"You were in Washington?" Laurel ventured.

"No, She had moved to Fairfield with her second child by that time, Lilly. She had dumped her son and her husband and was in relationship with Claudia. Claudia was working in New York, starting her import company, I believe. She was such a good young person, you know. I mean Claudia. A little wild at times, but always so well-mannered around me. Anyway, that final day, Sarah came to see me at the school. She was very troubled. She was as thin as a rail. I don't think she had eaten in months. Naturally, I offered to feed her, but she would have nothing to do with food. She said she was on a mission."

"Did she tell you what kind of mission?" Laurel prodded impatiently, knowing full well that the woman would tell her story in her own good time.

"In a round about way, I guess she did. She gave me some pictures of Lilly. I got the impression from her that Lilly was very ill or about to die, a fact I tried to confirm later but never could. Then she gave me a small bundle of pictures of herself and some of the poetry she had written. She asked me to save them for her. She told me she would be back for them."

Silence fell on the room. Then Laurel asked, "Why do you think she did that?"

"She said she didn't want them to burn with the rest of her things. Of course, I still have no idea why she would say something like that to me. But I do know that Sarah was like a moth when it came to fire. She was always carrying around candles

and lighting them at the most inappropriate moments -- in study hall, in the middle of a tennis lesson, even in the shower. I think the flickering light intrigued her, but fire itself terrified her. She was always saying that in her previous life she had been burned at the stake. I know it sounds foolish, but I think she truly believed it."

"Did she say anything else?" Anthony asked.

"She went on and on about Claudia being unfaithful to her. She said Claudia told her she was always working late, night after night, but she knew what Claudia was really doing. She was quite explicit, which I didn't appreciate, and of course I knew Claudia was incapable of infidelity. The poor girl was spellbound by Sarah. But Sarah really became quite hysterical on the subject, to the point where I finally told her that she would have to leave. Her last words to me were a curse of some sort, about Claudia. I was upset about the whole incident for quite some time. It wasn't until a year later that I found out she was dead."

Laurel leaned forward. "What was the curse, do you remember?"

"I don't recall the exact words, but the gist of it was that Lilly would burn in hell if Claudia ever made love to another woman. Just remembering the look in Sarah's eyes when she said it makes my blood curdle. Look, even now, I get goose bumps just thinking about it."

Laurel stared at the carpet. Her ears burned. Her heart thundered. Her mind was a total blank.

"You've been very helpful," Anthony finally said, helping Laurel out the door.

It wasn't until they were in the car driving back to Eastland, that Laurel's brain started functioning again. "When you think about it, we haven't really learned all that much," she said in a distant voice.

"We've learned plenty!" Anthony countered loudly. "We've learned that Sarah was a sicko. We've learned that Claudia was mesmerized by her. Claudia said herself that she was a superstitious woman, so I'm sure she believed that Sarah really had the power to curse her. For all we know she might have set fire to her own house!"

"We don't know that," Laurel interjected harshly.

"Okay, maybe we don't, but we do know why Claudia got so spooked the night of the fire at Eastland. Didn't you say you were about to have your wedding night a day early?"

"So you think Sarah really put a curse on Claudia?" Laurel wondered out loud.

"It doesn't matter. But I'll bet Claudia believes it."

Laurel watched the farmland speed past her, tears slowly trickling down her cheeks. Now there was no hope at all. If Claudia really did believe in the curse, then she

believed that in order to keep Lilly safe, she could never love any woman, not even her.

Things were starting to fall into place, things like why it took Claudia so long to admit her feelings for Laurel, like why, up until Laurel, her 'lady friends' were always an accessory to her lifestyle, but never an essential, things like why she was so protective of Lilly and why she was so terrorized about the past.

Even though Laurel knew there was probably more to the story, more unknowns about the night of Sarah's death, Laurel felt like she knew all that she had to know. Claudia was lost to her. And Lilly was too. Anthony was right. It didn't matter whether there was any substance to the curse or not. The only thing that mattered was that Claudia gave it substance. Claudia believed she was cursed.

And from that day on, Laurel gave up trying to reach Claudia. She stopped making calls to her mother. She stopped writing to Lilly in Baltimore. She stopped swearing at Martha. She stopped leaving messages for Claudia at her office. When a business question pertaining to Eastland arose, she had Anthony contact Claudia's business associates and through Anthony, the answer came back.

Late in January, when it came time to settle on the farm she and Claudia had planned to purchase, Laurel was presented with a choice. The farm could be purchased outright for her, in her name alone, or it could be purchased by Claudia's company and immediately put back on the market. Laurel chose the latter, without hesitation or bitterness. She didn't even mind that all communications about the property were conducted through lawyers and inch-thick documents.

When Spring finally brought an end to that cold and dreary winter, Laurel was glad for the change, but she felt nothing special when blossoms risked the danger of frost to unfold their petals and reach for the sun. The fact that the grass was turning green again and that the nights were whispering with warmth again brought Laurel's heart no joy.

She supposed she had found a certain degree of peace with herself. At least she wasn't rubbed raw every time she heard Claudia's name, and she could smile again when someone remembered Lilly.

Laurel was healing.

She was getting on with her life.

There was only one thing she had left to do. She still had to take off the commitment ring and send it back to Claudia. It was the right thing to do. She knew that. It was the mature and sensible thing to do.

Soon, she promised herself. Soon.

Chapter Eleven

"Laurel!" Anthony said, bursting into Laurel's office late one afternoon that summer. "You have a call from France. I think it's Claudia's sister."

Laurel's mouth went dry. She grabbed her phone and punched the blinking red button for line five. "This is Laurel Lewis." The words came out of her mouth sounding like sandpaper against steel.

"It's nice to finally meet you, even though it's over the phone," a pleasant, mature woman's voice replied. "I'm Claudia's sister, Leslie Johnson. Do you have a few minutes so we can talk?"

"Of course," Laurel said quickly.

"I suppose you know that Claudia and Lilly have been here with me for the past six months."

Laurel snatched a tissue and held it to her mouth. "No. I didn't know that."

"They came over just after Christmas. I'm a doctor, you know, and I operate a clinic near Toulon."

"I didn't know that either," Laurel said softly, not liking to admit, even to herself, just how little she knew about any of Claudia's family.

"It was my idea to have them come. My clinic has some of the best recuperative facilities in the world."

Laurel chewed on a corner of the tissue. Feelings she thought she had safely buried in the depths of her soul began to claw their way out to the surface. "Is Lilly all right?"

"Yes, she's fine now. It took a long time, of course. She has a few scars, but they're mostly physical. She's come through this whole ordeal with grace and fortitude. I think you would be very proud of her."

A tear fell on Laurel's desk. She dabbed at it and said, "I'm sure I would." Then she braced herself. "And Claudia?"

"She's a different story."

Silence fell between the two women, as if Leslie knew that Laurel would need to take the information in slowly, one word at a time.

"Is she ill?" Laurel eventually asked.

"Not ill, not the way you mean it." Silence. "But she's not well either." More silence. "I think she needs you."

Laurel's response was pure venom. "Me! What the hell would she need me for now?"

Leslie continued in a calm voice as if she had expected Laurel's reaction. "It's very simple. She needs you to help her heal. She needs you to understand why she did what she did."

Laurel felt like a coiled viper ready to strike again, but suddenly she wasn't sure who her enemy was. It wasn't Leslie. She was just the messenger. Obviously, Claudia was the logical target, but after all this time, she couldn't really fault her for the choice she had made. She had chosen Lilly over her, and Lilly had to come first in Claudia's life. Laurel knew that. She respected it. The fact that Claudia believed in a curse uttered by a troubled young woman sixteen years ago was beside the point, and Laurel couldn't really blame Claudia for that either. After all, who knew what had actually happened between Claudia and Sarah that night of the original fire.

Laurel cleared her throat. Her voice was soft again. "I understand more than she probably thinks I do."

"I'm sure that's true, but she needs to be told that in person."

Another tear splashed on the surface of the desk. "Do you mean you want me to talk to her now?"

Leslie hesitated before she said, "That's not exactly what I had in mind."

"It's not?" Laurel's voice was thin. She knew what was coming.

"I would like you to come here."

"No," Laurel answered before the woman had barely finished her last word.

"Laurel, I know what I'm asking of you. I too am a woman who has had her heart broken and I know just how deeply Claudia must have hurt you. But I'm also a sister and I'm desperate. I believe you are Claudia's only hope."

Laurel shook her head, slowly at first and then more vehemently. "I'm sorry, Leslie, but I can't come. Maybe if I really believed it would make a difference, I could find the strength to help you. But it's been too long for me to believe I matter now."

"You do to Lilly."

More hurt resurfaced. More tears fell. "But she never wrote even once. She never tried to call."

"She was sedated and very weak during the period she was hospitalized in the States. Claudia built a wall around her to keep out everyone, not just you, but my parents and the rest of the family as well. When Lilly regained her strength and was able to think for herself, she wanted to contact you. But Claudia made her vow that she wouldn't. Lilly sought counsel from my husband, who is a psychiatrist at our clinic, and he recommended that Lilly respect Claudia's wishes at least for a while, at least until Claudia had time to find her footing again." Leslie paused and then added. "And you know Lilly would do anything for her mother."

"And has she found her footing?"

"Partially."

"I see," Laurel murmured.

"Does that mean you will come?"

Laurel said nothing.

Leslie continued. "Lilly told me that if all else failed, I was to remind you of a promise you once made to her, the promise to be her friend no matter what happened between her mother and you. As a friend, she's asking you to come."

Laurel closed her eyes. She had no choice but to say, "I'll be there."

Two days later, after a trip she never wanted to repeat, Laurel was sitting in the back seat of a limousine, riding through a massive stone archway that was the entrance to Leslie's clinic. Expansive, rolling green lawns stretched on either side. Trees as tall as skyscrapers lined the horizon. A brilliant blue sea peeked through an occasional dip in the landscape. By the time the car stopped at the front entrance to the clinic, or 'Châteaux' as it was called by the chauffeur, Laurel was awestricken. Even the terror she felt at seeing Claudia again was waylaid for a moment while she gawked at the sheer opulence of it all.

"Laurel! Laurel!"

The chauffeur helped Laurel to her feet as she watched Lilly fly down the huge flight of stone stairs toward her. Laurel flung open her arms, raced toward her, and enveloped Lilly in a hug that would have crushed a grizzly bear. The two clung to each other until their tears could be contained.

"Let me get a good look at you," Laurel finally said, taking a step back, but still holding onto Lilly's hands. "You look sensational. I actually think you have grown a little taller."

Lilly smiled. "No I haven't, though I have put on a little weight."

"Well, you certainly look older!"

"That's what Mom says, but if she had her way, I'd still be wearing pigtails and a pinafore." Lilly pulled Laurel back into her arms, and whispered, "I knew you would come."

Laurel choked on a tear. "I'm just making good on a promise."

Lilly linked her arm with Laurel's and escorted her around the side of the huge stone mansion. "I'll show you to the guest cottage first. That's where you'll be staying. Then if you're not too tired, maybe we could go down to the boat house. Aunt Leslie is there and she's dying to meet you."

"I wouldn't mind taking a shower first. I feel like I've been in these clothes for a month."

Laurel and Lilly talked like old friends, easily and happily, as if their parting had been a normal one. Lilly recounted the details of the last few months of her recovery, but said the first few months were just a blur. She mentioned her mother, but only in passing and Laurel did nothing to encourage her otherwise.

Then Laurel filled Lilly in on the center and Anthony, and conveyed messages to her from staff members and the clients who had been in a retreat with her.

"I'll unpack while you take a shower," Lilly offered as she opened the front door to the small stone house. Inside was a bedroom, a living room, and a kitchen next to a small bathroom. It was furnished simply, with lots of wicker and bright colored pillows. Out the back was a stone patio that blended into a rose garden still in full bloom.

Laurel accepted Lilly's offer gratefully, and as she let the hot steamy water beat against her back, she congratulated herself on how well she was handling everything so far. It was wonderful seeing Lilly again, and if nothing else good came from the trip, she would at least have that comfort to go home with.

When she returned to the bedroom, Lilly had already finished unpacking Laurel's things.

"Want something to drink?" Lilly asked from the kitchen. "There's lemonade, or at least that's what I think it is."

"A small glass," Laurel said as she started to dress. She was tucking a light, cotton blouse into the waistband of her summer shorts when Lilly returned.

Lilly put the glasses down on the dresser and then reached into the top drawer. She pulled out the small black ring box. "Why did you bring this along?" she asked quietly.

The question stabbed Laurel's heart like a spear. She clutched at her finger where the ring used to be and said, "I think it's time to return it to your mother," she said gently.

Lilly's face looked crestfallen. "I was hoping that you and Mom would...."

Laurel interrupted her. "Things can never be the same between your mother and me again. You know that, don't you?" Laurel moved toward Lilly and took the young woman's hand.

"I know not right away, but with time, I don't see why not."

Laurel saw a remnant of girlish defiance hiding under the surface of Lilly's maturing face. "For one thing, it's not what your mother wants."

"How do you know what she wants?" Lilly protested, jerking her hand from Laurel's grip.

"Has she said she wants me back in her life?" Laurel's voice was harsher than she intended.

"No. But that doesn't mean anything."

"Yes it does, Lil," Laurel said, regaining her composure. "And even if she did, I don't think I could just open my arms and welcome her back either. I've been through my own version of hell too, you know."

"I know," Lilly said, her dark eyes softening. "And I know it took a lot for you to come here. I promise I won't interfere." Then Lilly shot Laurel a weak smile. "At least not more than I already have."

Laurel laughed lightly and reached out to tousle Lilly's hair. Lilly covered her head and ran into the living room, giggling. Then Laurel heard her say, "Mom! What are you doing here?"

Laurel's heart froze.

"I'd like to talk to Laurel," she said in the same deep satiny voice that Laurel remembered. "Would you mind leaving us a moment?"

"Not at all," Lilly answered quickly. "I'll be down at the boat house."

Laurel heard the door close. She heard her heart pound. But she couldn't make her feet move.

"Laurel?" Claudia called out. "Laurel?" Her voice got closer. Finally, she stood in the doorway of the bedroom, looking exactly the same as she had always looked -- strong, and statuesque. Her hair was still thick and wavy. Her lips were still full and enticing. Her eyes still captured dawn on a turquoise-blue sea.

Laurel forced a smile to her lips but she was unable to speak.

"Hello, Laurel."

Laurel nodded, the knot in her stomach tightening.

Claudia hesitated and then said, "Maybe I shouldn't have come." Her eyes were full of concern.

Whatever peace Laurel thought she had found in the months that followed the fire suddenly disintegrated. She had rehearsed this moment a thousand times, but never once did it occur to her that seeing Claudia again would so quickly end the truce she had made with her heart. Her eyes remained fixed on Claudia's, but still she did not speak.

"Do you want me to leave?" Claudia asked, taking a small step toward Laurel.

"No," Laurel finally managed to say. "That's not what I want."

Claudia took a few more steps toward her and wrapped her large fingers around the delicate post of the canopy bed. "Do you want me to put on a hair shirt and walk barefoot across a bed of hot coals?"

The beginnings of a laugh escaped from Laurel's throat. "I don't care about the hair shirt part."

A smile came to Claudia's lips. "I could exile myself to some militant Islamic country. I hear they really know how to treat a woman."

Laurel shook her head. "I'm tired of exiles."

"So am I," she said softly. She walked over to the lace covered window, put her hands in her pockets, and stared outside. "I threw a fit when I found out you were coming. I stormed around for hours, acting generally juvenile and completely self-absorbed. It was Charles, Les' husband, who helped me see the wisdom in seeing you again."

Claudia turned slightly and shot Laurel a quick glance. Then she continued. "I suppose they told you I've been talking to him. He's a psychiatrist, you know."

"Yes, I know." The fortress Laurel had built around her heart in order to survive was already crumbling, brick by brick. And although she felt herself scrambling inside to rebuild it, she knew before long only rubble would be left to protect her. Had she lost even the basics of common sense? Where was her rage when she needed it most?

Laurel folded her arms around her middle and rubbed the chill from her skin. "I've always thought that you should talk things out with someone. I'm glad you finally can."

"You shouldn't be so nice to me, Laurel. You should hate me."

Laurel unconsciously touched the finger where the ring used to be. "There were many nights that I prayed I would wake up hating you. But I never did, not even in the beginning. For a long time I was just completely dazed and bewildered. I couldn't understand why you had barricaded me away from the two people I loved most."

"I could tell you why, if that would help." Claudia turned around and faced Laurel, her large hand fingering the delicate curtain.

Laurel sat on the side of the bed and stared at her hands in her lap. Seeing Claudia again might be helping Claudia heal, but it was just opening her wounds all over again. "I already know about Sarah's curse," she said as if the words themselves were a burden. She looked up at Claudia, but her eyes revealed no impending storm.

Laurel added, "Out of all the times you accused me of prying into your past, it was the only time I really did. But I had to. I was going crazy and I needed something to latch onto, something to help me make sense of it all."

"I understand," Claudia said easily. "But there is more to it than just a curse. Sarah was always screaming curses at me. I didn't take them seriously in the beginning." Claudia stopped and took a deep breath, steeling herself for the confession. "When Lilly was almost three, Sarah's jealousy got out of control. She started to delve into the supernatural and then she started to threaten Lilly's life. I tried to involve the police a couple of times, but they said there was nothing they could do. I got really scared, but I didn't know where to turn, especially since Lilly was Sarah's biological child. And then that night, I came home late from the office and . . ." Claudia paused as if searching for the words to go on.

"You don't have to tell me if you don't want to," Laurel assured her, no longer needing to hear what had once seemed so important to her.

Claudia went to Laurel's side and lifted Laurel's head with her hand. "You're the one person in the world I do have to tell. She took another breath and then started to pace the room in large, slow strides. "That night, when I pulled into the driveway, I could see the flames, but for some reason I didn't panic. I simply turned off the car and ran into the house. I went directly to Lilly's room and picked her up. There was smoke everywhere. Her beautiful little face was all scrunched up and she was crying and coughing.

"Suddenly, I felt a blind rage. I walked out into the hall and I heard Sarah's voice begging me to rescue her. She was in our bedroom. I went to the door, clutching Lilly to my chest and I saw Sarah. She was standing in a circle of fire, clawing at the air in front of her, pleading with me to drop the baby and come get her. 'We can have more,' she kept screaming, 'We can have more.'

"I turned around, ran down the stairs and out the front door. I told myself I had to save Lilly first and then I would go back in for Sarah. But by the time I got outside, the fire fighters were there and they wouldn't let me near the house. I never got a chance to find out if I really would have gone back in to save her. I still don't know the answer to that question."

Laurel was spellbound by Claudia's story. She could picture Claudia clutching the baby. She could envision Sarah clawing the air. Now all of the torment that surrounded that night made perfect sense to her. Not only had Claudia lost her partner, she had lost confidence in her own honor as well, and to a woman like Claudia, that was the worst curse of all.

"Do you have to answer that question before you will believe in your honor again, in the choice that you made?" Laurel asked.

Claudia stopped her pacing and stared at Laurel. "How did you figure that out so quickly?"

"Because I know you better than you think, Claudia." A weak smile played on her lips. "And, in a strange way, you are the most honorable woman I know."

Claudia's eyes filled. "No. An honorable woman would never have done to you what I did."

"Then why did you do it?" Laurel asked. She stood up and leaned against the bed post only a few feet from Claudia. She wasn't sure where her sudden reserve of courage was coming from.

Claudia shook her head. "I can't even explain it to myself. All I can tell you is that I was terrified, probably even crazy." She came closer to Laurel and tentatively placed her hands on Laurel's shoulders. "You see, you are the first woman since Sarah that I was going to make love to. I really thought that I was in control of my ghost, but when I saw the flames on the East Wing, I lost everything. I became this half-crazed animal whose single-mindedness trampled on everyone who was close to me."

Laurel gazed into her brilliant blue, watery eyes. She knew she was seeing the aftermath of a violent storm, where Claudia's soul had been ravaged by an ocean that was now just a soothing sea. The trouble was, Laurel still wanted to be the safe harbor in Claudia's life. She wanted to have her and hold her and be the best she could be with her. Claudia's storm had destroyed her life too, and yet, all she could think was that Claudia was worth the pain.

"It's not fair of you to get this close to me," she whispered, moving closer into Claudia's reach. She placed her arms around Claudia's waist, her hands trembling.

Claudia's eyes searched Laurel's face, but for what, Laurel didn't know. Then Claudia bent down and placed her lips against Laurel's. Claudia's touch was tender, light, like a fluttering of petals in a spring breeze. And her kiss was gentle, a kiss for new and untried lovers, where there is no certainty or lust, just a timid daring to see if love is there.

Laurel's mind begged her to push Claudia away. Her touch is too dangerous, your wounds are too fresh, she told herself. But Laurel didn't listen. She moved her hands

up Claudia's back and pressed her chest against Claudia's. Laurel inhaled Claudia's sweet aroma as if her lungs had been deprived of air itself.

Claudia's arms wrapped around her, carefully, as if Laurel's body were made from spun glass. "I feel like I'm touching you for the first time," she whispered.

Laurel said nothing as she rested her cheek against Claudia's jersey covered chest. There was nothing new about Claudia's touch to her. It still held all the electricity that brought life deep down to her very core.

A sense of strength was seeping into her veins, fortifying her heart. The dark powers that had robbed her of Claudia before seemed less ominous and frightening now that the facts had come to light. Claudia's past ghosts were strong, and Laurel could understand her terror, even her flight, but now she knew that the bars on Claudia's prison could no longer keep her away.

Then Claudia took a step back and held Laurel at arm's length. "I shouldn't be doing this. I had myself convinced that I could live the rest of my life without you."

Laurel's body stiffened. "Are you saying that's what you want?"

"What I want doesn't matter anymore." Claudia shook her head in defeat. "All I see is the pain I have caused you. I will never be able to look at you without hating myself. I will never be able to forgive myself for what I have done to you." Claudia turned around slowly and walked away.

Wide-eyed, Laurel followed her into the living room.

"I'm sorry," Claudia whispered. "I knew you shouldn't have come." And then she opened the back door and left.

Laurel watched her as she walked through the rose garden and down the path to the boat house. Her nostrils flared as her fury came to a full head of steam. *That woman doesn't need a psychiatrist to put her out of her misery. She needs a lobotomy*, Laurel raged inwardly. She flung open the back door of the cottage and stormed in the direction Claudia had gone.

The path she followed sloped down a hill and rounded several corners. It was bordered by trees and flowering bushes. When it finally opened up, it brought her to the steps of a huge painted gazebo that stood at the edge of a dock where several large sailboats were moored. Claudia was standing in the far corner of the gazebo, leaning against a pillar, gazing in the direction of the water. Lilly was standing near her, talking to her back.

A middle-aged couple was standing in the center of the gazebo, also looking as though they were trying to reason with Claudia. When Laurel stepped onto the platform, all conversation stopped and all eyes, except Claudia's, moved in her direction. She nodded toward the couple, assuming it was Leslie and her husband, Charles, but had no time for further social graces. She had other things on her mind.

As she walked toward Claudia, Lilly backed away. When Laurel reached Claudia, she grabbed her arm and forced Claudia to turn toward her. Laurel was determined to say her piece, with or without the audience, with or without Claudia's consent.

"You'd better get one thing very clear, missy," Laurel began. Her voice was hot and fluid like molten steel. "Don't you ever walk out on me again! I am not Sarah and I refuse to become another woman whose name must be whispered behind your back."

Claudia said nothing, but Laurel had her full attention, that much was clear. "Some people shoot animals and hang their carcasses on the wall, but not you. Not Claudia Montgomery. You bring home curses and ghosts and use them as your trophies."

"Laurel," Claudia started, but Laurel wouldn't give her a chance to say another word.

Instead she gave Claudia a sharp push with the palm of her hand. "I won't be another trophy for you, Claudia. I won't be another memory you stare at as an old woman, wishing things had been different."

Laurel shoved Claudia again, her voice getting louder. "I will not be another source of pain for you! And if you can't look at me without hating yourself for what you've done, then that's just too damn bad, because I plan on being in your face for a long time to come. I'm not going to conveniently die in any damn fire, and neither is Lilly just because you and I make love."

Laurel stared at Claudia long after the sound of her voice had faded, daring Claudia to contradict a word she had said. She could see Lilly from the corner of her eye and Lilly remained motionless. She couldn't hear a sound coming from the couple either.

"Are you finished?" Claudia finally said, her eyebrow raised.

Laurel's eyes narrowed. "I'm warning you Claudia. Don't say anything stupid."

"I won't! I promise!"

Laurel could see a playful arrogance return to Claudia lips. "Then, yes, I'm finished." Then she quickly turned to Lilly, and added, "Unless you think I left anything out."

Lilly shook her head. "I think you covered all my points."

"Mine too," the other woman said in a voice Laurel recognized as Leslie's.

Then Charles spoke. "Claudia, if this is the woman you've been hiding from, then you are a lot crazier than I thought."

Claudia flashed her brother-in-law a smirk. Then she held out her hand toward Laurel. "Will I lose any significant body parts if I try to kiss you?"

"Try it and find out for yourself," she taunted.

Claudia looked over Laurel's shoulder. "What do you think, Charlie? Should I risk it?"

"What do I know about women? I'm just a psychiatrist. I'm afraid you're on your own, old girl. Come on the rest of you, let's leave the two love birds alone."

Some part of Laurel heard the three sets of footsteps walk across the wooden platform and disappear into the grass, but most of her was concentrating on the woman before her. Once again, Claudia's eyes sparkled with mischief. Once again, her stature was powerful and self-possessed.

"Have I told you lately that I love you?" Claudia said, the smile on her lips just short of lewd.

"I love you too," Laurel whispered as she buried her head into the side of Claudia's neck. Claudia held Laurel's body flush against hers, stroking and caressing with knowledge and need. Laurel pulled her face from Claudia's neck and merged her mouth with Claudia's, her tongue taking and giving -- and nothing about it was timid or sweet.

Then Claudia pulled away and looked at Laurel with sheer pride and admiration. "That took a lot of guts, coming down here and saying what you said."

"It wasn't guts. I was operating purely on survival instincts, and like it or not, you are essential to my existence." She kissed the tip of Claudia's nose. "What takes guts is admitting that to a big oaf like you!" She slipped her hands under Claudia's jersey and slid her fingers across Claudia's back.

Claudia closed her eyes and moaned softly. When she opened them back up again, Laurel could no longer see any signs of the once raging storm, no beacons of warning, no dark shadows of doom, just warm sparkles of light that invited her in. Claudia smothered her in kisses, her touch wet and possessive. Laurel leaned back, offering her what she no longer had any need to protect.

"How long will it take you to trust me enough?" Claudia asked, her voice ragged and rough.

"How long will it take you to get undressed?"

THE END

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