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in
SHADOW

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For Stephen Castle, brother and

friend, with love

Chapter One

The walls screamed at her.

"Oh, damn," Zoe Luce whispered. She halted in the doorway of the empty bedroom and stared

at the white walls. *Not now. Not today. Not this time. I really need this job.*

The walls sobbed. Terror pulsed through layers of Sheet-rock and the fresh coat of stark

white paint that covered it. The silent shrieks ricocheted off the floor and ceiling.

She put her fingers to her temples in a purely instinctive, utterly useless gesture. She

squeezed her eyes shut, bracing herself against the ragged bolts of icy lightning that were

shooting through her and pooling into a glacial pond somewhere in the vicinity of her stomach.

Davis Mason had followed her so closely down the hall that he was only a pace behind her

when she came to a sudden stop. He bumped awkwardly against her.

"Oops, sorry." He caught his balance. "I wasn't paying attention."

"My fault." With what she hoped was an unobtrusive movement, she eased out of the

doorway back into the hall. Things were much better out here. She could cope. She gave

Davis what she hoped was a bright, assured smile. It wasn't easy, what with the muffled cries

still leaking out of the bedroom.

She wanted out of this house. Fast. Whatever had happened in the bedroom

had been bad.

"Hey." Davis touched her shoulder lightly. "Are you all right, Zoe?"

She gave him another shaky smile. It was relatively easy to smile at Davis. He had elegant

lines and cleaning styling with just the right touch of roguish flair. If he'd been a car, he would

have been a sleek, European roadster. Judging by the spacious home, the hand-tailored shirt

and trousers, and the onyx and diamond ring he wore, he was also wealthy. In

short, she

thought sadly, until that moment, she had considered him the ideal client.

Everything had changed now, of course.

"Yes, I'm fine." She did a little on-the-spot deep breathing, using the techniques she had

learned in her self-defense class.

Summoning up her teacher's instructions, she sought the

calm, stable center that was supposed to be somewhere deep inside her.

Unfortunately, she

had not yet mastered that part of the program. All she could feel was a bad case of the

jitters coming on.

"What's wrong?" Davis was looking seriously concerned now.

"Just the start of a headache," Zoe said.

"I often get one when I forget to eat breakfast."

The lies came so easily these days. But, then, she'd had a lot of practice. Too bad she wasn't

yet clever enough to convince herself, she thought. A little self-delusion would

be very

welcome right now.

Davis watched her intently for a few seconds, and then he relaxed. "Missed your morning shot

of caffeine?"

"And food. It's a blood sugar thing. I should know better." Feeling an urgent need to change

the topic of conversation, she looked back into the bedroom and blurted out the first thing

that came into her mind. "What happened

to the bed?"

"The bed?"

They both looked at the large, empty stretch of uncovered hardwood flooring between two

massive, mission-style bedside tables.

Zoe swallowed uneasily. "The rest of the residence is fully furnished," she said. "I couldn't help

but notice that there's no bed in here."

"She took it," Davis said grimly.

"Your ex-wife?"

He sighed. "She loved that damned bed. Spent months shopping for it. I swear, it meant more

to her than I did. When she left, it was about the only thing she insisted on taking with her in

addition to her personal stuff."

"I see."

"You know how it is in a divorce. Sometimes the biggest fights are over the smallest, dumbest

things."

Whatever else it had been, Zoe thought,

the missing bed had not been small.

"I understand."

Davis searched her face. "Headache getting worse?"

"It'll be all right once I've had lunch and a cup of coffee," she assured him.

"Tell you what. You've seen the rest of the house. I'm sure you've got the general picture.

Why don't we take a break and get something to eat at the club? It will give us a chance to

talk over your initial impressions."

The thought of eating made her stomach churn. She knew from experience that she would not

be able to keep any food down until the chills stopped. That could take a while. This had been

a really bad experience, and it had caught her totally off guard.

It was her own fault. She knew better than to enter a room so recklessly. But she had been

caught up in her plans for the interiors, completely focused, and the rest of the spacious

residence had seemed so new, so *clean*. She simply had not been expecting trouble, and, as

often happened, she had paid the price.

"I'd love to join you for lunch, but I'm afraid I'll have to take a raincheck." She made a show of

glancing at her watch. "I've got another appointment this afternoon, and I need to prepare for

it."

Davis looked hesitant. "If you're sure – "

"I'm afraid so." She tried to inject a note

of apology into her tone. "I really do have to run,

and you're right, I've seen all I need to see for now." *And sensed far more than I ever wanted*

to know, thank you very much. "I've got the floor plan you gave me earlier. I'll make some

copies and do some sketches that will give you an idea of what I have in mind."

"I'd appreciate the drawings." Davis glanced into the bedroom and shook his head somewhat

ruefully. "I'll admit I'm not what you'd call a visual person. It's easier for me to grasp the

concept when I can see a picture."

"It's always easier when you can look at a drawing. Hang on while I check my calendar."

She reached into her voluminous tote, one of six similar bags in different colors that she

owned. Each functioned as a combination briefcase and purse. She had chosen the chartreuse

green one today because she liked the

way it contrasted with her deep violet pantsuit.

Groping in the vast depths, she pushed aside the small camera, a sketchbook, measuring tape,

a clear plastic box containing an array of colored pens and felt markers, a folder of fabric

samples and the large, antique brass doorknob attached to the ring that held the keys to her

apartment.

The appointment calendar was at the bottom. She hauled it up to the surface

and flipped it

open.

"I'll get some ideas down on paper," she said briskly, "and I'll try to have some preliminary

layouts ready for you by the end of the week. What do you say we meet in my office Friday

afternoon?"

"Friday?" Davis was clearly disappointed. "That's a week off. Do we have to wait that long? I'd

like to get started as soon as possible.

The truth is this house has been damn depressing

since my wife walked out."

Yeah, I'll bet it has, she thought.

"I understand," she said aloud, trying to sound sympathetic. It wasn't easy, given the fact

that the fine hairs on the nape of her neck were still tingling and there were goose bumps on

her arms beneath the sleeves of her lightweight jacket.

"I'm trying hard not to be bitter," Davis

said. "But the divorce is costing me a bundle. Got a

feeling I'll be getting bills from the lawyers for a long time."

All the available evidence indicated that Davis Mason had come out of the divorce in excellent

shape, financially. From what she could see, he possessed a very expensive residence, the

interiors of which he was prepared to pay her handsomely to have redesigned, and a

membership in a pricey country club.

But she did not raise those points aloud.

She was rapidly learning to be diplomatic with the newly divorced, having discovered that

they constituted a hot market niche for interior designers such as herself.

People emerging

from shattered marriages frequently yearned to redo their living spaces as a form of therapy

to help them get past the negative emotional fallout caused by the breakup.

She flipped through the pages of her calendar, pretending to study her

schedule. Abruptly she

snapped the leather-bound volume closed with a decisive air. "I'm afraid I'm booked solid.

Friday is the only day I can give you the time this project deserves. Will two o'clock work for you?"

"Looks like I don't have much choice." Davis was not pleased. He was used to getting what he

wanted. "Friday it is. Didn't mean to sound so impatient. It's just that I'm very anxious to get

moving on the project."

"Of course. Once you've made the decision to redesign a personal living space, there's a

natural urge to rush into the job." She spoke quickly, trying to inject a professional,

businesslike quality into her voice. "But redoing an entire residence is a major undertaking and

mistakes at this stage can be extremely costly."

"Yeah, I found that out the hard way." He took one more look at the bedroom. "I

got as far as

repainting this room and realized I needed expert help. I didn't think I could go wrong just

putting a coat of white paint on the walls, but as soon as I finished I realized it didn't look

right. I wanted to make it seem light and airy in here and instead – " He shrugged and let the

sentence trail off with a *who knew* expression.

And instead the bedroom had all the cozy ambience of an autopsy room or an

embalming

chamber, Zoe concluded silently. No amount of the bright Arizona sunlight dancing on the

surface of the sapphire pool outside could counteract that effect. Some of the unpleasant

sensation was attributable to the stark white paint, but she knew that the real problem had

been created by whatever it was that had happened in this bedroom. Some things could not

be covered with a coat of paint.

She also knew that Mr. Ideal Client was not consciously aware of the emotions trapped in the

walls. To her everlasting regret, she had never encountered anyone else who picked up on

that kind of stuff the way she did – as pure, raw energy. But she had seen enough instances

of others reacting in subtle, unconscious ways to the atmosphere of a particular room to be

convinced that a lot of people responded to a space on some deep, psychic level.

She had also learned the hard way to keep her inner knowledge to herself.

"You chose a stark bright white." She took another step back, putting more distance between

herself and the bedroom doorway. "I know it seems like pure white should be simple and

straightforward, but it is actually very difficult to work with because it reflects so much glare,

especially here in the desert. It also tends to create very cold shadows when you add

furnishings. Ultimately that makes for a lack of harmony and tranquility. You were right to stop

painting after you finished this room."

"Knew it wasn't the right direction."

Davis made a casual gesture that invited her to go ahead

of him down the hall. "I have to tell you, Zoe, when I decided I needed a professional

designer, I didn't really put much stock in this feng shui thing that you do."

"A lot of people have doubts about it until they experience the result."

"I knew it was trendy and all. The women at the country club are really into it. When Helen

Weymouth gave me your name, she went on and on about how you had completely

transformed her home after she got her divorce. She'd been on the brink of putting it up for

sale because of all the bad memories, she said. She credits you with changing the whole

atmosphere of the place."

"The Weymouth project was an interesting one." Not much farther to the

front door. A couple

more minutes, and she would be out of here. "Mrs. Weymouth gave me a free hand."

"She advised me to do the same thing. A few months ago, after Jennifer left, I would have

said that all this business of arranging the furniture to regulate the flow of negative and

positive energy was way too far out for me. But the longer I live here alone with everything

just the way it was when she was here,

the more I'm convinced that there may be something

to your design theories."

"I don't practice one particular school of feng shui." To her horror she realized she was talking

much too fast. *Act normal. You know how to do this.* "I use elements of several different

approaches combined with organizational principles from other classic design traditions such as

Vastu."

"What's that?"

"An ancient Hindu science that sets out principles for architecture and design. I also

incorporate what I consider the most useful elements from contemporary theories of harmony

and proportion. My style is really quite eclectic."

Actually, I pretty much make it up as I go along, she added silently. But clients did not like to

hear that.

She walked swiftly toward the front of the house, desperate to escape into the fresh air. Now

that she had been sensitized by the experience in the bedroom, she was picking up wispy

tendrils of dark, unwholesome emotions from other walls in the residence. She had to get out

of this place fast.

She reached the terra-cotta foyer at last. Davis was right behind her. He opened the front

door, and she escaped into the

reassuring warmth of the early October day.

"Are you sure you're feeling well enough to drive back to your office?" Davis asked.

Act normal.

"I've got an energy bar in the car."
Another lie. Was she getting good at this or what?

"All right. Well, take care. And I'll see you on Friday."

"Right. Friday."

She gave him what she hoped was a

bright, professional-looking smile,
tightened her grip on

the chartreuse tote, and went briskly
toward her car. She tried not to appear
as if she was

rushing away from the screaming house.

She breathed a sigh of relief when she
reached the vehicle. Yanking open the
door, she

tossed the tote onto the passenger seat,
slid behind the wheel, put her dark
glasses on, and

fired up the engine, all in what felt like a
single motion.

Her hands were still trembling.
Aftershocks from the surge of
adrenaline, she surmised. This

wasn't the first time. She could handle it.

But she had to grip the wheel very tightly
in order to steer her way out of the
exclusive

community. To her left was the long
stretch of impossibly green fairway that
served as the

approach to the sixteenth hole of the
Desert View Country Club. Elegant
homes similar to the

Mason residence were scattered artfully

around the golf course.

Beyond the vivid green links stretched the rugged expanse of the Sonoran Desert and low,

rolling mountain foothills. The golf club community and the adjoining town of Whispering

Springs were a little more than an hour's drive from Phoenix, close enough to catch some of

the spillover from the tourist trade but far enough out to avoid the traffic and congestion of

the city.

The harsh, dry landscape had seemed a strange and alien place to her when she had moved

here a year ago, but somewhere along the line her new environment had begun to feel

familiar, even comfortable. She had discovered an unexpected beauty in the desert, with its

spectacular sunrises and sunsets and the astounding depths of light and shadow. She had

always been drawn to contrasts, and there was nothing subtle about this place.

The decision to move to Whispering Springs had been a good one, she mused, but maybe she

should reconsider the career move she had made at the same time. Interior design had

seemed like a natural, logical way to go. After all, she had a background in the fine arts and a

good, trained eye, and she certainly knew how to get the feel of a living space. Best of all,

she hadn't needed any additional degrees or qualifications in order to set herself up in

business legally. But today's encounter was enough to give her some second thoughts.

A uniformed guard came out of a small building located at the gated entrance.

The emblem on

his snappy khaki jacket declared him to be an employee of Radnor Security Systems. He

greeted her politely, wished her a good day, and went back inside his air-conditioned

sanctuary to make a note on his log.

Security was tight here in this carefully

planned enclave of wealth and status, but someone in

the Mason residence had not benefited from it.

She waited until she was clear of the gates and on her way back toward the downtown

section of Whispering Springs before she picked up her phone. She punched in the only

number that she had coded into her speed dial.

Arcadia Ames answered on the third ring, giving the name of her gift shop in

her low, throaty

voice. "Gallery Euphoria."

Arcadia sold unique, expensive gifts to an upscale clientele, but Zoe was pretty sure her

friend could have sold sand here in the desert with that voice.

Arcadia was her best friend – make that her only friend. She had once had other friends, Zoe

thought. But that was a long time ago, back when she had had a real life and had not been

living in the shadows.

"It's me," Zoe said.

"What's wrong? Something happen with Mr. Ideal Client?"

"You could say that."

"He decided not to hire you after all?
That idiot. But don't worry, there will be
other good

clients like him. The divorce rate doesn't
seem to be going down very much."

"Unfortunately, Mason didn't change his
mind," Zoe said evenly. "I wish he had."

"Did the creep make a pass at you?"

"He was a perfect gentleman."

"He must be rich because everybody who lives in Desert View is, by definition, a high roller,"

Arcadia said patiently. "So what went wrong?"

"I think Mr. Ideal Client may have murdered his wife."

Chapter Two

Twenty minutes later, Zoe left her car in one of the landscaped parking lots that served the

shops and businesses of Whispering Springs. She walked down the sidewalk and turned into

the palm-shaded entrance of Fountain Square, an upscale outdoor shopping mall. Arcadia

waited for her at a small table set out on the shaded patio adjoining one of the numerous

cafe's.

Arcadia was, as usual, a study in ice and silver hues. Her very short, gamin-cut hair was

tinted platinum and matched her long acrylic nails. Her eyes were an unusual shade of silvery

blue. She was tall and slender and as languidly graceful as a haute couture model. She wore a

pale glacier blue silk shirt and flowing white silk trousers. Silver and turquoise gleamed at her

throat and ears.

Zoe was not precisely sure how old Arcadia was. Her friend had never volunteered the

information, and there was something about her that made you think twice before you

intruded on her very private space. Zoe assumed that she was in her mid-forties but she

would not have put money on it.

In another time and place, Zoe thought, Arcadia could have been an expatriate living in Paris,

drinking absinthe and recording her

observations on soon-to-be famous people in a journal.

There was about her an air of sophisticated ennui that implied too much knowledge of the

world. In reality, she had once been an extremely successful financial trader.

There was a small cup of espresso in front of Arcadia. A glass of iced tea waited for Zoe. The

neighboring tables were unoccupied.

Zoe dropped her tote onto a vacant chair and sat down, aware, as always, of the sharp

contrast between herself and her friend. On the surface they looked like they had nothing in

common. Her own hair was a dark shade of auburn brown. Her eyes were that vague,

hard-to-describe mix of green and gold that ended up going down as hazel on a driver's

license. And, unlike Arcadia, she loved bright, vivid colors.

Opposites they may have been, Zoe mused, but the bond between them was as strong as any

that could have existed between sisters.

She glanced briefly at her fingertips. They were no longer trembling. She took that as a good sign.

Arcadia's platinum brows drew together in a delicate frown. "Are you okay?"

"Sure. The worst is over. I got caught by surprise, that's all. I should know better than to just

blunder merrily into an unknown room like that."

Zoe picked up the pleasantly cold, damp

glass in front of her and took a long swallow of the

iced tea. The adrenaline that always accompanied an episode was wearing off, but it would

take a while to wash out of her system. The aftermath inevitably left her restless and oddly

hungry.

"I ordered a couple of Caesar salads," Arcadia said.

"Oh, good. Thanks."

A waiter appeared bearing bread and

rosemary-scented olive oil. He arranged the items on the table and departed.

Zoe tore off a large chunk of bread and plunged it into the olive oil. She paused just long

enough to sprinkle a little salt on the oil-saturated bread, and then she took a very large bite.

"Are you sure you're all right?" Arcadia remained unconvinced. "No offense, but you look

somewhat the worse for wear."

"I'm fine," Zoe said around the mouthful of dense, chewy bread. "The problem is: what do I do now?"

Arcadia leaned forward and lowered her voice even though no one else was seated nearby.

"You're absolutely sure this guy, Mason, killed his wife?"

"No, of course I'm not sure." Zoe swallowed. "I have no way of knowing exactly what

happened in that room. I only pick up on the emotions of the events, not the events

themselves. But I'll tell you this much, whatever it was, it was bad." She shuddered. "And fairly recent."

"You could tell that much from those weird sensations you get?"

"Yes." She thought about her impressions. "Furthermore, I've got some evidence to back up

my conclusions. At least, I think I do."

Arcadia pounced on that. "What kind of evidence?"

"Well, nothing that would stand up in

court. But the bed was gone."

"The bed?"

"He claimed that his ex took it with her."

"Maybe she did. A missing bed isn't going to get anyone's attention."

"I know, but the bed wasn't the only thing that was gone. I could see some fading *in* the

finish on the wooden floor, but there was a rectangular area near where the bed had stood

that was not faded."

"A rug?"

"Uh-huh." Zoe ate more bread. "But it's gone, too. Mason didn't say anything about the ex

taking it. Also, the walls in that room have been recently repainted with a coat of white paint

that is all wrong for that space. Mason told me that he did it himself, and it looks like it. Lousy

job. A wealthy man like that living in a high-end neighborhood, you'd think he would have hired

a painter if he didn't know what he was

doing around a bucket of paint."

"Hmm." Arcadia tapped a platinum nail lightly against the small espresso cup. "I admit this is

not sounding good."

"As far as I'm concerned it was his choice of stark white that bothered me the most. It had a

certain symbolism to it. Almost as if he was trying to cover up something very dark."

"I see what you mean."

The waiter reappeared with the salads.

Zoe picked up a fork and went to work.

"Unfortunately, he really wants to hire me," she said between bites.

"Apparently Helen

Weymouth gave me a glowing reference. I've got another appointment with him on Friday."

"You could cancel it. Tell him that you can't take on the job of redoing his residence because

there's been a huge glitch on one of your other projects that won't leave you any time for

him."

Zoe was briefly amused. "Not a bad excuse. You're good, you know that?"

"Well?"

"The thing is, I got the distinct impression that Mason isn't going to like it if I back out of this.

He's very anxious to get his house redone. Maybe on some unconscious level, he's picking up

a few of the bad vibes in that bedroom. Or maybe he's living with a guilty conscience and

thinks a change of environment will make him feel better. Either way, I've

got a feeling he'll

make an unpleasant scene."

"What's he going to do? Report you to the Better Business Bureau?"

"You're right. There isn't much he can do, is there? If he is guilty of something really awful, he

certainly won't want to draw a lot of attention to himself by creating a scene in the office of

a respectable local business person."

"So why aren't you rushing to back out of that Friday appointment?"

"You know why." Zoe ate the last anchovy, sat back, and met Arcadia's eyes. "What if he

really did murder his wife?"

"All you know right now is that something nasty occurred in that bedroom."

"Yes."

Arcadia studied her for a long moment and then sighed softly with an air of surrendering to the

inevitable. "And you, being you, can't let it go."

"It's sort of a hard thing to block out of my mind," Zoe said apologetically.

"Okay, okay, I understand." Arcadia took a dainty bite of salad. "We've got to think this

through before we make any decisions."

"Well, one thing is for sure, I can't do the logical thing and go to the cops."

"No," Arcadia said immediately. "That's not an option. They'd laugh in your face if you told

them you thought you'd picked up some bad energy vibes from a client's bedroom."

"Maybe I could phone in an anonymous tip? Pretend I saw something suspicious happening at

that house and ask them to inquire into the current whereabouts of Mrs. Jennifer Mason?"

"If no one has filed a missing person report, I doubt you'd get their attention," Arcadia replied.

"You're not a member of the family. You never even met the woman."

"True. And even if I somehow managed to convince them to search Mason's residence, they

wouldn't find much in the way of evidence. I ought to know. I went through every room

myself, this morning, including the linen closet."

"It's possible that whatever took place in that bedroom had nothing to do with the Masons.

Maybe it occurred before they bought the house."

"Maybe. But Mason told me that he and his wife moved in shortly after they were married. I

got the impression that was about a year

and a half ago. I think that what I felt in that

bedroom occurred more recently."

"But you can't be sure, right?"

"No," Zoe admitted. "When the emotions are very powerful, they can linger for a long time."

"Then it is possible that the events in the bedroom could predate the arrival of the Masons."

"Well, yes. It's possible." *But not likely*, Zoe added silently. There was a faded quality to the

old stuff that she had learned to detect, even if she could not describe the difference. What

she had felt this afternoon was fresh. "Look, it shouldn't be too hard to find out if Mrs. Mason

is still alive and well. If she's happily sunbathing topless in the South of France, I can relax

and assume that her husband did not murder her."

"Right." Arcadia looked somewhat relieved.

"What I need," Zoe said, "is a private

investigator. I'll bet an expert could go online and get

me the answers I need in half an hour."

She jumped to her feet. "Back in a second."

"Where are you going?"

"Inside to find a phone book."

She hurried into the interior of the small eatery and spotted a worn set of yellow pages on the

desk behind the front counter. She asked if she could borrow it. The clerk shrugged and

handed it to her.

She carried the phone book back outside, sat down at the table, and opened it. There were

two listings under *Investigators*.

The first was for Radnor Security Systems. It featured a full-page display ad that offered

employee background and due diligence checks, corporate security seminars, security guards

for businesses, and the latest in online investigative technology.

The second company was named Truax Investigations. The tiny ad occupied a small space

approximately two inches long and one inch high on the page. It claimed that the firm had

been in continuous operation in Whispering Springs for more than forty years. It also

guaranteed privacy and confidentiality to all clients. There was a phone number and an

address on Cobalt Street.

"Looks like I've got a choice between a

large company with a corporate emphasis or a small

firm that has been in business here in town for quite a while." Zoe studied the Truax

Investigations ad. "Probably a one-man operation."

"Go with the big company," Arcadia advised. "More resources and more guarantee of getting

someone who knows how to do the online stuff. But it will probably be pricier."

"How expensive can a simple search

like this be?" Zoe dug her phone out of the tote. "All I

want to know is whether or not Mrs. Jennifer Mason has used her charge cards or accessed

her bank account recently. Piece of cake for an investigator, I'm sure."

She entered the number for Radnor Security Systems and was promptly greeted by a

professional-sounding receptionist. She made a quick inquiry regarding fees and hung up fast

when she got the answer.

"Well?" Arcadia asked.

"In hindsight, it appears that my observation of a moment ago was somewhat naive. It turns

out that, contrary to what I assumed, this sort of search can be very expensive. Not only

was the hourly rate very high, but in addition, there is a nonrefundable minimum fee which is

equivalent to three hours of investigative time."

Arcadia raised one shoulder in a small, resigned shrug. "Obviously they don't

want to

encourage small accounts. Try the little agency. Might be hungrier." She paused. "Also might

be less chance of complications."

Zoe looked at her. There was no need to go into the fine nuances of just what the term

complications meant. They both knew how carefully this matter would have to be handled if

they were to avoid attracting unwanted attention to themselves.

"Okay, I'll call Truax." Zoe picked up the phone again, trying to stay positive. "It's probably

the best way to go, anyway. After all, if he's been in business for more than forty years, he

must be getting on. A real old-fashioned kind of investigator. I'll bet he has a ton of contacts

in the community and with the police. If Jennifer Mason is, indeed, missing, he might even be

able to convince the cops to look into the situation without explaining why."

"Just make sure he keeps your name out of it."

Zoe glanced at the ad for Truax Investigations again while she listened to the ringing on the

other end of the line. "It says right here that he's really big on privacy for his clients. I'll bet

he's built his reputation on his ability to maintain confidentiality."

"What reputation?" Arcadia asked.

"Neither of us had ever heard of him until you opened that

phone book."

"Just goes to show how good he is at keeping a low profile." She frowned when she realized

that no one was rushing to pick up the phone at Truax Investigations. She waited through a

few more rings and then gave up.

"Out to lunch?" Arcadia asked dryly.

"Looks like it. The address is on Cobalt Street. That's just a few blocks from here. I'll walk

over and talk to the person in charge as soon as we finish."

"You're sure you want to do this?"

"Yes." She closed the phone book and picked up her unfinished tea. A sense of satisfaction

flowed through her, lifting her spirits. Or maybe that was the food and caffeine taking effect,

she thought. "You know, I've got a good feeling about this. Hiring Truax is the right way to

go. I know it."

"Think so?"

"Yes."

Arcadia shook her head once, her silver-glossed mouth curved slightly in a rare, wry smile.

"The thing that never ceases to amaze me about you, Zoe, is your seemingly bottomless well

of optimism. If I didn't know you better, I'd swear you took drugs to maintain such an

irrational view of the universe."

"So I'm a glass-half-full kind of person."

"And I'm a worst-case-scenario type. Do you sometimes wonder why we get along so well?"

"The way I see it, we sort of balance each other, and we did both graduate from the same

alma mater."

"To good old Xanadu." Arcadia raised her espresso cup and clinked it lightly against Zoe's tea

glass. A fleeting rage glittered briefly in her eyes. "May it sink into an undersea volcano and

disappear forever."

Zoe stopped smiling. "I'll drink to that."

Chapter Three

Zoe's bright bubble of optimism threatened to burst when she turned the corner into Cobalt

Street. It was amazing how fast the character of a town could change within a few blocks.

The fashionable shops and the modern business district were only a short distance away, but

they might as well have been in a different dimension. Here on Cobalt Street there was a

dated, slightly seedy air.

The buildings were mostly two-story structures done in the classic Southwestern version of

the Spanish Colonial style. The stucco exteriors had rounded edges, arched doorways, and

deep-set windows. The roofs were red tile. The old trees, no doubt planted many years ago

before the city council had begun to fret about water conservation, created a shady canopy.

In the middle of the block, Zoe paused to

check the address she had written down.
There was

no mistake. She was standing in front of
49 Cobalt Street.

She crossed a small patio and studied
the grimy-windowed directory. Truax
Investigations was

on the upper floor. Most of the other
offices appeared to be empty except for
one on the

ground floor labeled SINGLE-MINDED
BOOKS.

She opened the front door and hesitated
a fraction of a second on the threshold.

She had

already learned one lesson today, she reminded herself. And older buildings were often the

worst.

Nothing terrible happened. No fierce or violent emotions emanated from the walls. The hallway

in front of her was sunk deep in gloom, but she didn't think anyone had killed anybody here. At

least not lately.

She went toward the staircase. When she

passed Single-Minded Books, she noticed that the

door was closed. The proprietor was evidently not keen on encouraging walk-in business.

She climbed the squeaky, badly lit stairs to the second floor and went warily down a dingy

hall. There were two closed, unmarked doors. The third one had a small sign tacked to it.

TRUAX INVESTIGATIONS. It stood partway open, revealing a dim interior.

She hesitated, wondering if she was

about to make a serious mistake. Maybe it would be

better to go with the larger, corporate security agency on the other side of town. So what if

its services cost three or four times as much? You got what you paid for in this world.

On the other hand, she was here and time was of the essence. And money, unfortunately,

was a factor, especially now that it looked like Mr. Ideal Client might not be quite so ideal.

She pushed open the door and stepped cautiously inside. But once over the threshold, she

relaxed. There was nothing alarming in these walls.

She took stock of the surroundings. You could tell a lot about a business and its owner by the

manner in which the office was maintained, she reminded herself.

If that dictum was true, it looked like Truax Investigations was in bad shape financially. Either

that, or the proprietor had not seen fit to

invest any of the profits back into the reception

area.

There was an old-fashioned vintage look to the heavy wooden secretarial desk and the large

overstuffed leather chairs, but they were not the kind of period pieces that would interest an

antiques dealer. People didn't collect furniture like this, but it was sturdy and built to last. The

desk and the chairs were used and worn, but they would never break down or

wear out. If

you ever decided to get rid of them, you'd have to haul them off to a landfill.

She was half tempted to take out her camera. The place would have made a great

black-and-white shot. She could see the picture in her head, brooding and moody and

atmospheric with the hazy afternoon light slanting through the blinds.

There was a phone on the desk, but she saw no evidence of a computer. That did not bode

well. She had been counting on an investigator who was conversant in technology to get her

the answers she wanted in a hurry. The lack of a secretary or receptionist was not

encouraging, either.

What really worried her, though, was the stack of cardboard packing boxes that occupied a

third of the small space. Many of them were sealed. A few stood open. She crossed to the

nearest one, glanced inside, and saw a

gooseneck lamp and several shrink-wrapped packages

of new, unused notepads in various sizes. Half were the small three-by-five type that fit into

a man's shirt pocket. The rest were large, eight-and-a-half-by-eleven legal rule tablets. There

were also several old, well-thumbed books.

Someone was packing up the office. Her heart sank. Truax Investigations was in the process

of closing its doors.

For some reason, she was unable to resist the compulsion of curiosity. Reaching into the box,

she plucked out one of the heavy volumes and glanced at the title on the spine. *A History of*

Murder in Late-Nineteenth-Century San Francisco.

She put it back into the box and took out another. *Investigating Violence and Murder in*

Colonial America.

"Cheerful bedtime reading," she muttered.

"Jeff? Theo? About time you two got back."

Zoe started and dropped the book back into the box. The voice came from the inner office. A

man's voice – not loud but dark and resonant with a natural air of authority.

Voices like that made her wary.

"I hope one of you remembered my coffee. We've still got a lot of work ahead of us this

afternoon."

Zoe cleared her throat. "This isn't Jeff.

Or Theo, either, for that matter."

There was a short silence from the inner room. The door squeaked on its hinges as whoever

was on the other side pulled it wide.

A man came to stand in the opening, one powerful-looking hand gripping the edge of the door.

He looked out from the shadows, contemplating her with an enigmatic expression that was

probably meant to pass for polite inquiry. He didn't have the kind of eyes that could do polite

inquiry well, she thought. They were an interesting shade of amber brown. She had seen

similar eyes on the Nature Channel and in wildlife shots in *National Geographic*. They usually

went with the creatures that possessed the sharpest teeth.

He was dressed in a pair of close-fitting khaki trousers, which rode low on his hips, and a

crisply pressed white shirt. The collar of the shirt was open and the sleeves were rolled up on

his forearms, revealing dark hair in both places. The spiral wire binding of a three-by-five

notepad stuck out of the chest pocket.

His stance in the doorway implied supple muscles and an innate confidence. Her self-defense

instructor would no doubt describe him as *centered*. He was not exceptionally tall, only about

medium height, but there was a sleek, compact power in his shoulders. He gave the

unmistakable impression that he was in

complete command of himself. Maybe to a fault, she

thought.

His hair had no doubt once been so dark as to be mistaken for black in the shadows. But there

were shards of silver at the temples and elsewhere now. They harmonized well with the

crinkles of experience at the corners of his eyes and the brackets that framed his mouth.

The face fit that quiet, authoritative voice – not handsome but strong and

compelling. Both

belonged to the sort of man others would automatically look to in a crisis but who could be

extremely irritating the rest of the time because he would always be in charge and would not

hesitate to let you know it.

He had a lot in common with his furniture: well used and worn around the edges, but he would

probably never break down or wear out. Like the desk and chairs, you'd have to haul him off

to the landfill if you wanted to get rid of him, and that would be no easy task.

If this was the Mr. Truax of Truax Investigations, the ad in the phone book was guilty of

severe misrepresentation. This man had some interesting mileage on him, but he certainly

wasn't heading into his dotage.

"Sorry. I was on the stepladder. Didn't see you come in. What can I do for you?" he asked.

The dark voice brought her back to her senses. She realized that she had been

holding her

breath, as if this moment and this man were very important in some way she did not yet fully

comprehend.

Let's try to stay focused here, she thought. Breathe. So you haven't had much of a social life

lately, that's no excuse to stare at strange men.

"I came to see Mr. Truax," she said with what she thought was commendable aplomb under

the circumstances.

"That'd be me."

She cleared her throat. "You are *the* Truax of Truax Investigations?"

"As of three days ago according to the date on my business license. The name is Ethan Truax,

by the way."

"I don't understand. The phone book ad stated that you've been serving the community for

more than forty years."

"My uncle put that ad in the book. He retired last month. I'm taking over the business."

"I see." She waved a hand to indicate the packing boxes. "You're moving in, not out?"

"That's the plan."

"Do you mind if I ask how long you've lived here in Whispering Springs?"

He gave that some thought. "A little more than a month."

So much for dealing with an investigator who had extensive contacts in the community and

with local law enforcement, she thought. There was still time to call Radnor Security Systems.

Of course there was the not-so-little issue of price, but maybe she could negotiate an

extended payment schedule with the larger firm.

She took a step back toward the door. "You're new to this profession, then?"

"No. I owned and operated an agency in Los Angeles for several years."

That should have been reassuring news. Why wasn't she feeling reassured?

"This probably isn't a good time for you," she said quickly. "I'm sure you're very busy getting

unpacked and organized."

"Not too busy to take on a client. Why don't you come into my office and tell me why you

need an investigator?"

It was not exactly a request, she noticed. Not quite a command, either. More of a glittering

lure designed to draw her into striking distance.

She had to make a decision. The bottom line here was time and money. She did not have a lot of either.

She tightened her grip on the handle of the chartreuse tote and tried to look like a woman

who hired seedy private investigators on a frequent basis.

"How much do you charge for your services, Mr. Truax?"

"Come in and sit down." He moved deeper into his office, beckoning her closer with the subtle

invitation. "We can discuss the financial aspects of the arrangement."

She could not come up with a good reason not to at least get a cost estimate.

"All right." She looked briefly at her watch. "But I don't have a lot of time. If we can't agree on

your fees, I will have to call someone else."

"The only other agency in town is Radnor."

"I'm aware of that," she said coolly. This was business. She did not want him to think that she

had not done her research as a consumer. "They appear to be very cutting-edge. I was told

that they use the latest high-tech methods."

"They've got computers, if that's what you mean, but I've got one, too."

"Really?" She looked around very pointedly. "Where?"

"In here. I'm still working on getting it set up."

"Oh."

"I can guarantee you that I'm less

expensive than Radnor."

"Well – "

"And there's another aspect you may want to take into consideration." His mouth curved

faintly at the corners. "Being new in town, I'm also a hell of a lot hungrier."

She almost bolted for the door. "Yes, well – "

"And more flexible."

She braced herself and walked toward the inner office. It was like walking through Door

Number Three on a television game show, she thought, the door that concealed the mystery

prize. You might get an all-expense-paid trip to Paris, or you might lose everything you had

managed to win up to that point.

She paused briefly at the threshold, waiting to see what would greet her. But there was

nothing terrible in the room, just the faint traces of sensation that she had learned to expect

in old buildings. She picked up a few

whispers of sadness, some anxiety, and a little residual

anger – all of it from long ago and very low-level. Nothing she could not block easily.

"Something wrong?" Ethan asked.

With a start, she realized he was watching her very intently. Most people never seemed to

notice her slight hesitation upon entering a room. The fact that Ethan Truax had observed

that tiny pause worried her for some reason. She reminded herself that he was

a private

investigator and people in that line were supposed to notice things.

"No, of course not," she replied.

She went quickly to the huge, overstuffed, oversized armchair that sat in front of the desk. It

almost swallowed her whole when she sat down in it.

Ethan went behind his desk, a massive, scarred hunk of oak that was even larger and sturdier

than the one in the other room, and sat

down. The chair gave a squeak of protest.

She examined the room with what she told herself was professional interest but which she

suspected was actually deep personal curiosity. Everything connected to Ethan Truax

fascinated her for some strange reason, and you could tell so much about a person by the

space he or she inhabited.

The inner office was furnished with the same kind of window treatment and the

same type of

substantial, old-fashioned, masculine pieces she had seen in the other room. She had to admit

that they invoked a certain period atmosphere and made a statement that suited the fictional

image of the private investigation business.

But in her opinion, the client chair in which she sat was far too large and too overwhelming to

make a visitor feel comfortable.

Furthermore, Truax's massive desk was

not in the right place

in the room to create the best energy flow. In addition there was a mirror hanging on the wall

that was both badly proportioned and badly positioned.

Several heavy metal filing cabinets were lined up side by side against the rear wall. They were

ancient and not particularly attractive, but she supposed an investigator needed a place for

files.

New bookshelves had been recently installed on either side of the door. Unfortunately, Truax

had chosen to go with inexpensive metal shelving that did nothing to add to the ambience of

the room. Half of the shelves were already loaded with volumes. She could see more of the

same sort of impressive, academic-looking tomes she had seen in the packing box outside.

Who would have expected a private investigator to possess a serious book collection? Maybe

her concept of the profession, formed as it had been by mystery novels, television, and old

films, was not entirely accurate.

Ethan's surroundings did not answer her silent questions; instead they raised new ones and

made her all the more curious about him.

One thing was clear, he commanded his space; it did not command him.

Ethan opened a desk drawer, took out a yellow notepad, and put it on the desk in front of

him. "Why don't we start with your name?"

"Zoe Luce. I own a design firm here in town. Enhanced Interiors."

"You're a decorator," he said flatly.

"Interior designer."

"Whatever."

"Do you have some sort of underlying hostility toward people in my profession?"

"I had a bad experience with a decorator once."

"Well, for the record," Zoe said, "I think that I'm having a really bad experience with a private

investigator. This could color my attitude toward folks in your field for years to come."

He tapped the pen on the notepad and contemplated her in silence for a while.

"Sorry," he said eventually. "Let's try this again. What do you want me to do for you, Zoe

Luce?"

"I thought we were going to talk about money first."

"Oh, yeah. I almost forgot." He put down the pen, rested his arms on the desk, and linked his

fingers. "Like I said, if you're shopping by price, you're stuck with me. My hourly rates are

considerably less than those charged over at Radnor, and I have only a two-hour minimum."

That news had an elevating effect on her mood. "What about expenses? Mileage and meals,

that kind of thing?"

"You aren't responsible for mileage or

meals within the city limits. You will be billed for

miscellaneous expenses and for any costs incurred if I have to travel outside
Whispering

Springs. Don't worry, you'll get receipts."

He thinks I'm an idiot. Annoyed, she crossed her legs very deliberately. She sat back into the

depths of the voluminous chair, trusting to fate that she would not get eaten alive by the

monster, and smiled coolly.

"In that case, I would like to purchase the minimum two hours," she said. "I'm sure the job

won't take even that much time."

"Background check on a new male acquaintance?" he asked with no inflection.

"Good heavens, no, nothing like that." She frowned. "Do you get a lot of requests like that?"

He shrugged. "Not yet. You're my first client here in Whispering Springs. But it was a fairly

common request in L.A."

"I guess that isn't so surprising." She considered the subject for a few seconds. "I mean, it

makes a lot of sense to check out a potential date if you think things might get serious."

"Especially in L.A." he agreed dryly.

"All I want you to do is locate someone."

"Who do you want me to find, Miss Luce?" He paused with an air of grave politeness. "It is

Miss, isn't it? Or should I call you Ms. or Mrs.?"

"I'm not married," she said very precisely. She did not want him calling her Miss or Ms. Luce. It

sounded ridiculously formal. She also did not want him inquiring into her past marital status.

"Make it Zoe."

"Fine. Who do you want me to find, Zoe?"

She breathed deeply and prepared to pick her way through the minefield. She needed to give

him enough information to do his job but not enough to make him conclude that

she was

loony-tunes. And she definitely did not want to give him the kind of details that would arouse

any curiosity about her personally.

"I would like you to find a woman named Mrs. Jennifer Mason. I can give you her last address

here in town. I believe she lived there until a few months ago."

He unlinked his fingers, picked up the pen again, and began making more notes on the yellow

pad.

"Friend of yours?" he asked without looking up. "Relative?"

"Neither. She's the wife of a man named Davis Mason. He lives in Desert View."

Ethan did glance up at that. "The fancy gated golf-course community just outside of town?"

"Yes. Mr. Mason recently hired me to redesign the interiors of his residence."

"Residence," Ethan repeated neutrally. "Would that be what you interior decorators like to call

a house?"

Ethan Truax was becoming more irritating by the minute.

"In the field of interior *design*," she said, emphasizing the last word, "the word *residence* is generally felt to be a more gracious term for a client's living space. The term conveys a sense

of permanence and elegance. It implies a cultivated lifestyle. People like to associate those

qualities with their homes."

"A lifestyle thing, huh?" He looked amused.

"Of course, if you have trouble with the longer word," she added sweetly, "please feel free to use the shorter one."

"Thanks, I'll do that. Any idea where Mrs. Jennifer Mason may have gone?"

"No. Davis, her husband, told me that she walked out on him a couple months ago and that

they are in the process of getting a divorce. I just want to confirm that fact."

Ethan raised his brows. "Are you sure this isn't a background check on a potential date?"

"Davis Mason is a client," she said coldly.

"If that's the case, why are you so concerned with the whereabouts of his not-quite-ex-wife?"

The question worried her. "Do you need to know my reasons before you agree to take the job?"

"No. Not at this point, at any rate."

"Your ad in the phone book stresses your concern for privacy and confidentiality."

"That was my uncle's ad, not mine."

A whisper of uncertainty tingled through her. She rested her hands on the overstuffed arms of

the big chair, preparing to push herself up out of its cushioned jaws.

"If you intend to alter what I took to be the longstanding business practices of this agency,"

she said, "I'd like to know about it before this conversation goes any further. As you pointed

out, I do have another option."

He put down the pen and leaned back in the chair. "There will be no change in this firm's

concern for client confidentiality."

"Good." She relaxed a little.

"But I like to know as much as possible about what I'm getting into before I start an

investigation."

It was her turn to raise her brows. "I'm here because I was under the impression that one

consults a private investigator when one

does not wish to explain all the reasons why one

needs that particular type of professional assistance."

His hard mouth quirked a little. "Is that right?"

She was simmering now, but she felt trapped by financial considerations and the tight time

frame. She needed answers and she needed them before Friday. "Do you want this job or not,

Mr. Truax?"

"I want it. Sorry, if the questions bother you, but I'm just gathering information. It's what I do, Zoe."

"All I want is for you to locate Mrs. Jennifer Mason. How hard can that be for a professional investigator? Surely it's just a matter of checking to see if she's using her credit cards or checkbook, right? Any high school kid could probably do it."

"Yeah. Lately I've started to worry a lot about the competition from high school

kids."

Now she knew for certain that he was mocking her. She shoved herself halfway up out of the

chair. It wasn't easy disengaging herself from the mouth of the beast.

"If you feel that the job is beyond your abilities," she said grimly, "or that you can't do it

without additional information, just say so and I'll go find myself a bright high school kid."

"Sit down." He paused. "Please."

It was not an order, not exactly. How could it be? It wasn't as though he could force her to

sit back down in the big chair. The problem was that she had been bluffing, and he had

guessed as much.

She sat. "Do you or do you not intend to investigate?"

"I'll find Mrs. Jennifer Mason for you. But I'd better make one thing clear. I'm not going to give

you any contact information unless and until I'm sure she wants you to know

where she is.

Understood?"

That caught her off guard. "Wait a second. Do you think I want to know her current address

so that I can do something to her?"

"It happens."

She shuddered. "Yes, I suppose it does. Well, rest assured, I don't care where she lives. I

have no intention of contacting her."

"You just want to know that she's out of

Davis Mason's life, is that it?"

He wasn't going to let it go until she came up with a convincing reason for wanting to check

on the whereabouts of Jennifer Mason. Maybe the easiest way to handle this was to take the

first excuse he had offered.

"All right," she said, trying to sound resigned. "As you suggested, this is a personal matter for

me. Davis is a client but he is also a successful, intelligent, attractive man, and he seems

interested in me, if you know what I mean."

"Uh-huh. I know what you mean."

She glared, suspicious of his tone, but he just sat there, waiting. She recognized the tactic.

Dr. McAlistair, her therapist at Xanadu had employed it. The interrogation technique was

based on the fact that most people were uncomfortable with silence, got nervous, and tended

to start talking to fill the vacuum.

The realization that Truax was attempting to use the same approach as McAlister pissed her

off. She reminded herself that it was nothing personal in Truax's case. He just wanted

answers.

"As I told you, Davis led me to believe that he's getting divorced. I'd like to be sure that he's

genuinely free, or about to become free, to engage in another, uh, serious, committed

relationship."

Ethan did not move, but his eyes never left her face. "Okay."

She was not sure how to take that. "Okay? You mean you'll get busy and investigate now?"

"No."

"That does it, I've had enough." She did get out of the chair this time. All the way out. "I've

asked you to do a simple search and I've given you my reason, even though it was extremely

personal and I resent the probe into my private life. What more can you possibly

want?"

"An advance for two hours' worth of my time. Credit card, check, or money order will be fine."

"Does this mean you're taking the job?"

"Yes, ma'am. Like you, I'm not in a position to be real choosy at the moment. I'm trying to get

a business up and running here."

She yanked open the tote and pulled out her wallet, removed a credit card, and tossed it onto

the desk. "Here. Get busy."

He picked up the card, got to his feet, and went to a small side table where a credit card

machine sat.

She watched him punch in some numbers and swipe her card. "You know, I can't help but

notice that even though you haven't had time to set up your computer, you've managed to

get your credit card authorization machine connected."

"First things first."

"I can certainly see how you rank your priorities, Mr. Truax. Always get paid in advance, is

that it?"

"I'm not running a charitable foundation."

"Don't worry, I'd never in a million years make the mistake of thinking that you might be the

benevolent type." She gave the office another critical glance while she waited for the machine

to spit out the credit card slip. If she had any sense, she would keep her mouth shut, she

thought. But she could not resist the urge to give him some free advice. "You know, if I were

you, I'd get a smaller client chair. This one is too large. It's not inviting."

"Maybe you're just too small for the chair." He sounded supremely disinterested. His attention

was fixed on the slip of paper coming out of the machine.

That's it, she thought. *Not another word, so help me.* If the man was too stubborn to take

some good advice, that was his problem.

But the desk worried her even more than the chair.

And then there was the poorly positioned mirror.

She cleared her throat.

"It would also be a good idea to move that desk over there near the window, and I'd suggest

that you take down the mirror or at least shift it to the other wall," she said in a little rush. "It

would create a more calming energy flow."

He gave her a sidelong look. "Energy flow?"

She had been right. This was a complete waste of time. "Forget it. You're probably not familiar

with design theories such as feng shui that are used to organize a harmonious environment."

"I've heard of them." He ripped the paper out of the machine and handed it to her. "But I'm

not into decorating trends."

"Why am I not surprised?" She snatched the credit card slip from him, glanced at

the total

amount, and winced. Less than Radnor but certainly not exactly a bargain, she thought.

As if he knew what was going through her mind, Ethan's mouth curved humorlessly. "I'm

cheap, but I'm not free."

She sighed, picked up a pen, and scrawled her name.

He took the signed slip from her and examined it with an expression of keen satisfaction. "You

know, this is a special moment for me."

"In what way?"

"This represents my first professional business transaction here in Whispering Springs. I should

probably frame this. Just think, your name could hang on my wall for years."

"Along with my credit card number. No thanks. If I were you, I wouldn't get too excited about

this, Mr. Truax. I have no intention of becoming a repeat client."

"You never know. If this Mason guy

doesn't work out as a suitable candidate for, what was it

you called it? Oh, yeah, *a serious, committed relationship*. If he doesn't make the grade due

to failure to obtain a divorce, you may want me to run a background check on some other

man for you."

For some idiotic reason, she suddenly wondered if Ethan Truax was into serious, committed

relationships. She glanced at his hand and noticed that he was not wearing a

wedding ring.

What would she discover if she had someone run a background check on him? A lot of

ex-girlfriends, no doubt, maybe an ex-wife.

Damn. Now she was speculating on his marital status. This was not good.

She dropped the pen she had used to sign the credit card slip into her tote and gave him a

very bright smile. "Don't hold your breath."

She hoisted the tote over one shoulder, swung around, and went toward the door. At least

she would have the last word, she thought.

"Just a minute," Ethan said.

She glanced back over her shoulder.

"Now what?"

"That's my pen you're walking off with in your bag. Mind giving it back? I'm trying to keep a lid

on overhead and office expenses."

Chapter Four

Leon Grady 's heartburn always flared up in the hushed atmosphere and plush surroundings of

his employer's office suite. He had grown up in a working-class neighborhood where, if you

were lucky, walls got painted, not paneled, and the furniture was trimmed in plastic made to

look like wood, not veneered with exotic species of actual trees.

Dr. Ian Harper had once told him that his

office had been designed to calm patients and

reassure their families. But all the fancy carpeting and the expensive pictures on the walls had

the opposite effect on Leon. He really hated this room. Talk about stress triggers. Hell, he'd

been standing here, waiting for Harper to get off the phone for only a few minutes and already

he could feel the fire starting in his chest.

Maybe it was one of those weird

psychological hangups, he thought, the kind of crazy shit the

folks who worked here at Candle Lake Manor were always going on about. A phobia or

something. Maybe he didn't like being in this office because he associated it with his

worsening stomach problems. In his position as head of security for the Manor, he'd endured

several extremely unpleasant conversations in this office over the course of the past year.

Things had been going halfway decently until the two female patients had disappeared. The

job here at the Manor had been the best one he'd ever had. Bonuses, even. For the first time

in his life he'd seen some good money coming in. And going out just as fast. Not his fault; he

had expenses. The payments on the Porsche and the fancy sound system were steep.

He'd never been much good with money, mostly because he'd never had enough of it. Cash

went through his fingers like water, but here at the Manor that had been okay because there

was always another paycheck next month.

But then the two patients had skipped, and his cozy setup had gone sour. His stomach had

followed.

The time right after the escape had been especially bad. Harper had ranted and raved and

blamed the lousy security. Leon had feared for his job. It wouldn't be easy

turning up another

one, and he sure as hell wouldn't find anything else with the kind of perks he got here at the

Manor. He had some problems with references.

He'd felt cornered and panicky when Harper demanded that the two patients be found and

returned to the Manor. He'd had no idea how to conduct a serious investigation. The Bitch

Goddess, Fenella, who served as Harper's administrative assistant, had

acidly suggested that

he hire a real investigator, one of those modern, high-tech types who used a computer.

To his private astonishment, he'd gotten lucky. A few weeks after the patients had

disappeared, word had come back of a small story in a Mexican newspaper detailing the

deaths of two women who had perished in a hotel fire. No identification had been found at the

scene, and the authorities had been

unable to locate any next of kin. The only clue to the

women's identities were a ballpoint pen and some slippers. All three items had been

monogrammed with the words Candle Lake Manor.

Leon had been relieved just to have an answer. Sure, it meant a loss of income for Harper,

but the guy was a businessman. Harper had to understand that sometimes you took a

financial hit, but that life went on and

you brought in new sources of revenue.

Actually in this case, Harper was still mining the old sources. Leon was impressed. The doc

had balls. Shrewd operator that he was, Harper continued to bill the Cleland woman's relatives

and the other woman's trust fund for the very expensive fees charged here at the Manor.

It was conceivable that Harper's clients might remain in blissful ignorance for a very long time.

The Manor was a very private, very

exclusive, very expensive psychiatric hospital situated on

the shores of a remote lake in the mountains of Northern California. The sleepy little town of

Candle Lake was nearby, but other than a scattering of summer boaters and campers, and

some hunters in the fall, the place was all but forgotten on the maps.

Leon knew that the hard-to-reach location was one of the things that made the Manor

attractive to Harper's clients. The

hospital raked in big bucks from folks who wanted their

crazy family members warehoused out of sight and out of mind. Like so many other patients

whose relatives had paid dearly to have a relative committed indefinitely, the two women had

not had any visitors.

But Harper could run his scam on the clients who were paying the fees for the two women

only for a limited time, Leon thought. Sooner or later someone connected to

one or both of

the missing patients would have a reason to come to Candle Lake. When that day came,

Harper would be in a bind because he would not be able to produce them.

After learning that the two patients had apparently died in Mexico, Leon had begun to hope

his problems might be over. Then, last week, he'd been contacted online by the creep who

called himself, simply, GopherBoy.

*"... understand you are looking for a missing patient. I can help. My fees are as follows and
are nonnegotiable..."*

That was when Leon's heartburn had kicked in again, big time. It was getting worse by the hour.

Harper put down the phone, slowly removed his glasses, and looked at Leon.

"I'm very busy today, Grady. I have two intakes to deal with this afternoon. I trust this is

important?"

Even Harper's voice affected his heartburn, Leon thought. It was classy sounding, a rich man's

voice. It reminded him of all of the differences between them. Harper was a hustler, but unlike

himself, the doc had gotten all the breaks.

Harper was good-looking, with a lot of thick, silver-gray hair and a trim, tennis player's build.

Somewhere along the line, he'd gotten a good education. He also had the kind of

charm that

he needed to snow his wealthy clients.

"The hacker came through," Leon said.

"It cost us, but it looks like we may have some hard

information on the Cleland woman."

"Not the other one?"

"No."

Harper frowned, but he did not look severely disappointed, just mildly regretful. It was as if

Leon had told him that one of the stocks

in his portfolio had tanked but that another had

turned in a higher-than-expected earnings report.

"Well, she wasn't nearly as lucrative as the Cleland woman," Harper said. "What have you got?"

"According to GopherBoy, she's alive and well and living under another name. He says some

online ID broker set up a program to feed false and misleading information about her to anyone

who goes looking. That was why that investigator we hired back at the beginning didn't turn up any real leads."

"Where is she?" Harper asked sharply. "I want her picked up immediately."

The fire in Leon's chest flared higher. He needed some of the tablets he kept in his pocket,

but he didn't think it would look good to chew them in front of his boss. He wanted to look like

he was calm and in control here.

"Not gonna be that easy, sir," he said.
"She's being real careful. All
GopherBoy could tell me is

that she's somewhere in L.A. He did not
have an exact location."

"Somewhere in L.A.?" Harper's well-
manicured hand clenched around a gold
pen. "What good

does that do us? L.A. covers a lot of
territory."

"Yeah, but now that I've got a name and
some details about her new ID, it won't
take me long

to track her down. With your permission,

sir, I'll leave this afternoon."

"Don't try to bring her in on your own. When you've located her, stay out of sight and keep

her under surveillance. Call me immediately. I'll send Ron and Ernie to assist you. They can

handle the medications that will be needed."

"Yes, sir." Leon cleared his throat and tried to keep his tone respectful. "But I'd like to point

out that once I've found the patient, we're gonna need to think about how we want

to bring

her in."

"The meds will make her easy to handle."

For all his fancy degrees, Leon, thought, sometimes Harper could be as dumb as a brick.

"The thing is, sir, the Cleland woman has been living under another name for a year. She

probably has a job by now. That means there will be co-workers. Friends. Neighbors. Folks

who will notice if we just grab her off the street."

"Yes, of course." Harper tossed the gold pen aside and got to his feet. He went to the

window. "I see what you mean. We'll have to do this discreetly."

"Right. So what I'm thinking is, I go to L.A. find the woman, and watch her for a while. Get a

feel for her daily routine. When we nail that down, we can figure out the best way to pick her

up without causing a fuss."

Harper gazed fixedly out at the lake while he considered Leon's logic.

Leon's chest burned.

"All right," Harper said eventually.

"That makes sense.

The last thing we want to do is to draw attention to this situation. The retrieval must be

handled as quietly as possible."

Leon allowed himself a small sigh of relief and took a step back toward the door. "I've already

made my plane reservations. All I need

to do is go home and throw some things in a suitcase.

It's a long drive to the airport, so I'd better get moving."

"Keep me informed."

"Yes, sir."

"I don't like this," Harper muttered. "But I suppose we can only be grateful that this GopherBoy

person contacted us instead of Forrest Cleland."

Leon shrugged. He knew there was no mystery about why the hacker had

approached

someone at Candle Lake Manor first. GopherBoy was clever enough to figure out how the

place worked. He obviously understood that the management here had solid financial reasons

for wanting to get the Cleland woman back without raising a fuss and that privacy and a real

low profile were crucial to Harper's profitable operation.

Leon cleared his throat. "Going to Cleland would have been a whole lot

riskier. Cleland is a

wealthy, powerful man, and he has no particular reason to keep things quiet. Hell, he might

have called in the cops, which would have screwed GopherBoy's plan royally."

Harper frowned. "How did GopherBoy reach the conclusion that I would be willing to pay for this information?"

"Who knows? Probably something in that ID broker's files he hacked into that mentioned just

how much money Cleland is paying to keep his relative under wraps here at Candle Lake.

GopherBoy's gotta know what that income means to this place. Maybe more important is that

he's figured out that the big thing you're selling here is a guarantee of silence. This place

can't afford any bad press."

Harper clenched and unclenched the fingers of one hand.

Satisfied that he had made his point, Leon turned and walked swiftly across

the thick beige

carpet to the door.

In the outer office, Fenella Leeds looked up from a file she had open on her desk. She was a

centerfold dream, blonde, blue-eyed, and gorgeous. She was probably the most beautiful

woman he had ever seen in real life, but he treated her pretty much the way he would have

treated a cobra that happened to be coiled on the chair behind the desk.

He was fairly certain she had screwed Harper for a while, but there was now some gossip

going around that she was getting it on with the guy in accounting. He did not envy either

man. If you slept with snakes, you tended to get bitten.

"You're going to L.A to find the Cleland woman?" Fenella queried.

It did not surprise him that she had somehow listened in to the conversation he'd just had

with Harper. He wouldn't put it past her

to have a tape recorder under her desk.
He had a

hunch she kept real good tabs on
everything that went on around Manor. It
was one of the

reasons why he had to be very, very
careful until he was clear of the place.

"Yeah." He glanced at his watch and
kept moving. "Gotta get going or I won't
make my flight."

Fenella did not wish him a safe trip. She
went back to work on the file.

By the time he reached the relative
safety of the hall, the burning in his chest

was the worst

it had ever been, almost unbearable. He took the bottle out of his pocket, unscrewed the lid,

and poured several tablets into the palm of his hand. He shoved them into his mouth and

chewed frantically.

He knew why the heartburn was so bad today. It was because he had made his decision and

that had involved lying outright to Dr. Ian Harper. It was a scary thing to do because it meant

that he was burning all of his bridges.

He had told Harper that GopherBoy had given him only the Cleland woman's new name and the

fact that she was somewhere in L.A. But that was pure crap. GopherBoy was a hell of a lot

better than Leon had led Harper or Fenella to believe.

According to the information the hacker had provided, the Cleland woman was not in L.A. She

was in a place called Whispering Springs, Arizona. GopherBoy had come

up with an address

and phone numbers, office and home. Everything, in short, that Leon needed to find her.

If the information had come through a year ago, right after the women had escaped, Leon

knew that he would have gone straight to Harper with the data. But at some point, probably

the day he noticed that he was popping the antacid tablets every couple of hours, he'd

arrived at a blinding realization. He no

longer wanted to work for Dr. Ian Harper, regardless of

how much the bastard paid.

The problem was that, due to his expensive lifestyle and his lifelong inability to hang on to a

dollar, he lacked the kind of nest egg he required for a comfortable retirement.

When the

hacker had turned up the location of the Cleland woman, however, Leon had been struck with

a rare burst of creativity.

Chapter Five

"Jeff and Theo told me that you got your first client today," Bonnie said from the other end of the table.

"Sure did." Ethan forked up a bite of grilled halibut and looked at his nephews, sitting on either side of the dinner table. "I wouldn't say she was overly impressed by my professional style, though. She was in such a big hurry to leave that she nearly ran you guys down

on the stairs

on her way out."

"But you got her to pay you in advance," Jeff said around a mouthful of mashed potatoes.

"I may not have graduated first in my class from charm school," Ethan said, "but I do know

something about running a business. The first rule is always get the advance before the client

leaves the office."

Jeff grinned. He was eight, two years

older than his brother. He still had all the awkwardness

of boyhood, but when he smiled like that, Ethan thought, the kid looked exactly like his father.

Ethan glanced down the table and caught the wistful expression that came and went in

Bonnie's eyes. It had been almost three years since Drew's death, and he was pretty sure

that his sister-in-law had come to terms with the loss, but he knew that she would never be

able to look at her sons without thinking of her husband. She had loved Drew deeply.

She was not the only one who thought about Drew Truax whenever Jeff or Theo smiled their

father's smile, laughed their father's laugh, or exhibited his keen intelligence and outgoing

nature. Ethan thought about his brother in those moments, too.

Drew had been four years younger. They had been close, but no one who knew them well was

quite sure why because, when it came to personality and temperament, they had been polar

opposites. Drew had been the enthusiastic, optimistic visionary. Whip-smart and endowed

with gifts for management and finance, he had been a natural for the corporate world. He had

risen far and fast.

Drew had disappeared seven months after the board of directors of Trace & Stone Industries

had voted him into the CEO's chair. A

big chunk of the company's financial assets vanished at the same time.

The police arrived at the logical conclusion that Drew had taken the funds, blown off his

family, friends, and the life he had known in L.A. and was probably Living under another name

somewhere in the Caribbean. It happened, the cops said.

Ethan and Bonnie had known better. But while Ethan had sensed deep in his gut that his

brother was dead, Bonnie had held fast to hope. The situation had become a thousand times

worse after the con artist claiming to be a psychic had fueled Bonnie's belief that Drew would

be found alive.

Ethan had dealt with his grief the only way he knew. He had gone after the truth with a

vengeance and a fury that stunned even those who knew him well, including his wife.

Shortly after he started asking questions,

a walking skeleton of a man with basset
hound eyes

had paid him a visit in his office at
Truax Security. He had worn a cheap
brown suit

distinguished only by its incredibly poor
tailoring.

"I represent some people," the man had
said in a voice that had been damaged
somewhere

along the way.

"Sort of figured that out for myself."
Ethan had leaned back in his silver-gray
leather desk

chair. "Can I assume these people are concerned about my ongoing investigation?"

"Yeah. The general opinion seems to be that your brother is not dead, but if it turns out that

he is, these people want you to know that they are sorry for your loss."

"Compassionate."

"Very. But they also want you to understand that they had nothing to do with it."

"Swell. Then they have nothing to worry about, do they?"

"Thing is," the man had said, "they got a lot of money invested in a certain company, and

they would prefer that you did not meddle in this situation at this time. This is a delicate

stage, financially speaking."

"What do they suggest I do?"

"Leave the investigation to the cops."

"Who are getting nowhere fast."

"My employers urge you to be a good citizen and rely on the duly authorized forces of law

enforcement to handle this case."

"Tell me, if you were sitting where I'm sitting would you rely on the duly authorized forces of

law enforcement to deal with this?"

The man had not responded to that. "My employers also want you to know that if you stop

asking questions, they will see to it that a large amount of money will be placed in your

company's bank account."

Ethan had thought about that.

"Who are your employers?" he had asked.

"I am not authorized to provide you with that information."

Ethan had sat forward. "In that case, you can give them a message from me. Tell them I said
to go fuck themselves."

"This is not a good idea, Mr. Truax. Trust me."

"Get out of here," Ethan had said softly.

The man had studied him for a long time. "You're not gonna change your mind, are

you?"

"No."

"I can see that."

Then he went to the door without further comment and walked out.

Ethan's investigation into Drew's death produced far-reaching consequences that ultimately

destroyed a Trace & Stone competitor and the powerful man who had been attempting to

manipulate it from behind the scenes. The fallout from the scandal also sent

shock waves

through a shadowy consortium of power brokers, politicians, and businesspeople, many of

whom had invested heavily in the rival firm on the basis of insider knowledge.

Ethan eventually found Drew's body in a shallow grave in the desert. The contract shooter

and the man who had hired him, Simon Wendover, a majority shareholder in the competing

firm, were both arrested. The shooter got killed before he could testify against his

employer,

and Wendover walked out of the courtroom a free man.

Wendover died a month later in a boating accident.

Karma was a funny thing.

Trace & Stone's rival was forced into bankruptcy. It was not the only firm that went down in

flames as a result of the investigation.

Truax Security, the company Ethan had built from the

ground up, foundered the following year.

His third marriage disintegrated at about the same time. Everyone else in the family blamed

the collapse on the stress of the investigation and the tumble into bankruptcy. Ethan didn't

correct the impression, but privately he came to the conclusion that he wasn't any good at

marriage.

The small mention of the demise of Truax Security in the business section of the L.A papers

attributed the financial failure to poor

management.

But Ethan knew what had really happened. So many abrupt decisions made by so many

Southern California firms to shift their business to other corporate security companies at

precisely the same time had not been an unhappy coincidence. The mass exodus of clients

was engineered by his visitor's angry employers in retaliation for obliging them to weather

some annoying losses.

The man had paid Ethan another visit. The occasion was the public auction of the last

remaining assets of Truax Security.

He had approached Ethan, who was leaning against his former office desk, arms folded,

watching the progress of the sale. The desk was an impressive piece of furniture composed of

polished steel and a massive slab of curved glass. The decorator who had done the interiors of

Truax Security had assured Ethan that it

made a *statement*.

For a while the man had not spoken. He had seemed fascinated by the patter of the

auctioneer, who was trying to work up some enthusiasm in the crowd.

"You ever wonder how they learn to talk like that?" he had asked eventually.

Ethan had said nothing.

The man had released a world-weary sigh. "You shoulda stopped when you had the chance.

You woulda come out of this okay, you

know? You woulda been sitting in a very nice place

right now if you hadn't meddled. Maybe still be behind that desk."

Ethan had looked at him. "You never got around to telling me your name the last time you

came to see me."

"Name's Stagg. Harry Stagg."

"How does it feel, Harry Stagg, to sell your soul for a bunch of bastards who probably can't

even remember your last name and who

could not care less if you have a heart attack or

crash your car tomorrow because they know that you can be replaced in five minutes?"

"It's a living."

Ethan had gone back to watching the auctioneer.

Stagg had stirred a little. "You asked me a question that time I talked to you in your office.

You wanted to know who I was working for. I didn't answer."

Ethan had said nothing.

"They're all members of a fancy private club," Stagg had said. "Got everything in that club,

you know? Two big swimming pools and saunas and steam rooms and handball courts. There's

this big golf course and a bar and everyone who works there, male and female, looks like a

fashion model. They say that if you're a member of that club, you can get just about anything

you want."

Ethan had listened to the auctioneer labor heroically to elicit bids for a pair of leather and

steel chairs that had once graced the reception lobby of Truax Security. The chairs had come

from Italy, and they had cost a bundle. He had objected strongly to the purchase, but the

frustrated decorator had waged a passionate campaign on the grounds that first impressions

on potential clients were crucially important. The chairs, according to the decorator, were an

investment.

The chairs had finally sold for a tiny fraction of their original cost. Some investment, Ethan

had thought. *As God is my witness, I will never trust another decorator.*

"What's the name of this private club?" he had asked, not really expecting an answer.

"Won't do you any good. You can't touch those guys. No one can. They're always real careful

to keep their hands clean."

"You going to give me the name?"

"They call the club The Retreat," Stagg had said. "The man who told me to talk to you back at

the beginning of this thing? His name is Dorney. He was the president when the situation

involving your brother first went down."

Ethan had recognized the name. You could conjure with it in Southern California.

"If it means anything," Stagg had said, "the club's board of directors fired Dorney and elected

themselves a new president a few months ago. Presidents only get to hold the job as long as

things are going the way the club members want them to go. Mistakes are expensive."

"Sounds like The Retreat runs pretty much like any other business enterprise."

"Yeah." Stagg had turned to leave. He had paused. "By the way, I quit working for them right

after I heard you were having financial problems."

"What are you doing now?" Ethan had

asked.

"I'm a security consultant."

"Any money in it?"

"It's a living. Even got my own business card." Stagg had pulled out a small leather case,

removed a cream-colored card, and handed it to Ethan. "Let me know if you need any

consulting."

He had walked away through the crowd and disappeared.

Ethan had stayed at the auction until the bitter end. His personal desk had gone for a lousy

one hundred seventy-five bucks. Some statement. On the other hand, maybe it had said it all.

Bonnie glanced at Ethan while she passed the potatoes to Jeff. "What kind of job does your

new client want you to do?"

Ethan pulled his mind back to the present and reached for another dinner roll.

"Routine

background check on a guy she's thinking

of getting involved with. Take about ten minutes."

"Did you do it already?"

"Not yet." He buttered the roll. "Ran into some glitches when I tried to set up the office

computer this afternoon."

"Uncle Ethan is going to have to update his apps," Jeff said. "They're not compatible with the

operating system on the new computer."

"I've got my laptop back at the house," Ethan said. "I'll run the check on it when

I go home

tonight. My client will have her answers in the morning."

Bonnie frowned. "Speaking of that pink monstrosity you now call home, did you give any more

thought to my idea of putting it on the market?"

"Who'd buy it?" Ethan took a bite of the roll. "The only reason I got it so cheap from Uncle

Victor is because he couldn't sell it before he moved to Hawaii. At one time or another, he had

it listed with every broker in Whispering Springs."

"I think Nightwinds is cool," Theo announced. "And it has a pool."

"And a real theater with a big-screen TV," Jeff added. "And a popcorn machine."

"The TV and popcorn machine were Uncle Victor's only serious upgrades, outside of some work

on the wiring," Ethan said. "At least he had his priorities straight."

"I wish we lived there instead of here," Jeff said. "That way we could watch TV

on a giant

screen *every* night."

"Yeah, this house is really, really boring," Theo said.

"The only problem with Nightwinds," Jeff said with a grimace, "is that it's pink."

"That's because the wife of the original owner liked pink," Ethan explained. "A lot."

"Uncle Victor told me that it's haunted by her ghost," Theo said. "Mrs. Legg or something."

"Foote," Ethan said. "Her name was Camelia Foote. She was an aspiring actress."

"What's *aspiring* mean?" Theo asked.

Ethan exchanged a look with Bonnie. "It means she never became famous."

"Oh." Theo digested that and evidently did not consider it important. "Well, anyhow, what

happened was, she died and old Mr. Foote went crazy. He lived all alone in that house for the

rest of his life and never changed a thing."

"Unfortunately, none of the later owners changed very much either," Bonnie said dryly. "You'd

think that somewhere along the line someone would at least have had it painted."

"It stood empty most of the time until Uncle Victor picked it up for a song ten years ago after

Aunt Betty died," Ethan said. "He couldn't afford to have the place remodeled either."

"You'll notice that your great-uncle did not choose to retire in Nightwinds." Bonnie pointed

out. "He headed straight for Hawaii the day after he sold his business to you."

"He told me he was tired of the desert." Ethan helped himself to more potatoes. "Said he

wanted an ocean and a beach."

"He told *me* that he wanted to look at girls in bikinis, all day," Jeff announced.

"Yeah," Theo added. "He said there's even beaches where some of the ladies don't wear any

swimsuits at all."

"No kidding?" Ethan paused, a forkful of

potatoes halfway to his mouth. "I've got Uncle Victor's

address in Maui. Maybe I'll pay him a visit next time I get a few free days. Take a tour of the

beaches, or something."

Jeff chortled so hard that he nearly fell out of his chair.

Theo kicked the bottom rungs of his chair. "You really like to watch bare naked ladies, Uncle

Ethan?"

"Well," Ethan said. "Given a choice

between working and watching naked ladies on the beach,

I've gotta say that – "

"I think," Bonnie interrupted firmly, "that you've all said enough on the subject of naked

ladies." She looked at Ethan. "Getting back to Nightwinds, Jeff said something about your new

client being an interior designer?"

"Decorator. What's that got to do with Nightwinds?"

Bonnie ignored that. "It occurs to me that

after you handle her case, you could hire her to

help you do something with that pink elephant."

"Residence," Ethan corrected.

"I beg your pardon?"

"I have it on good authority that you're supposed to call a house a residence. Classier

sounding word. But, trust me, there's not a chance in – "

He realized that Theo and Jeff were watching him with thinly veiled

anticipation. Catching him

in the act of using a forbidden word was one of their favorite spectator sports.

"I will definitely not be hiring Ms. Luce to remodel the place," Ethan finished smoothly.

Disappointed, Jeff and Theo went back to their food.

"Why not?" Bonnie asked.

"Two reasons." Ethan finished the last of the potatoes. "First, I can't afford to hire a

decorator at this point even if I were

inclined to redo the place. Second, I doubt that Zoe

Luce would make it past the front door of Nightwinds without fainting."

Jeff stopped in mid-chew, eyes bright with curiosity. "Why would she faint, Uncle Ethan?"

"You think maybe she'd be scared of the ghost?" Theo asked.

"I doubt that Zoe Luce would be scared off by a ghost," Ethan said. "But I'm sure that her

delicate designer sensibilities would be severely traumatized by the sight of the

inside of my

new residence. Let's face it, Nightwinds isn't going to win any house-of-the-year awards."

"That's putting it mildly," Bonnie murmured. "Talk about Hollywood tacky."

"You think Ms. Luce would be so stunned she'd just fall down right there in the front hall?" Jeff

asked.

"Wouldn't surprise me," Ethan said.

"Maybe she'd start to twitch or

something," Theo suggested.

"Yeah, like this." Jeff jerked his left arm wildly.

"Or like this." Theo wobbled his head from side to side.

Both boys began to cackle gleefully. Their spasmodic movements got more creative.

Ethan watched both performances with open admiration. "Not bad. Yep, I'll bet she'd collapse

and start to twitch just like that."

At the other end of the table Bonnie gave

a long-suffering sigh. "Why does dinner always end

like this when you eat with us, Ethan?"

"What can I say? It's a gift."

* * *

He drove back to Nightwinds an hour later. When he got out of the car, he stood in the drive

for a moment and surveyed his new *residence*, wondering for some inexplicable reason what

Zoe Luce would think of it. Okay, so the place did look like a Hollywood fantasy

version of a

Spanish Colonial mansion. And it was definitely pink, not the faded, sunwashed pink of old

adobe – more like bubblegum pink. So what? It had character. Or something. And it was

spacious. Plenty of room for his books and personal stuff.

Best of all, it was fully furnished, which was a very good thing because the combined financial

disasters of his business and his last divorce had left him with very little in

the way of

furniture.

The hell with Zoe Luce's opinion. Why should he care what she thought of Nightwinds?

He summoned up his impressions of her that afternoon. Sleek red-brown hair in a

stylish-looking knot, vivid, compelling face, and smoky, mysterious eyes that probably held

some interesting secrets. And a very strange taste in clothes. If he recalled his kindergarten

painting lessons properly, that shade of acid green wasn't supposed to go with that purple

color. There were rules about these things. At least there had been back in kindergarten.

Something told him that Zoe had probably never stuck to coloring between the lines. But,

then, neither had he.

He knew that he should definitely not be thinking about her in such personal terms. She was a

client, and long ago he had learned the

hard way not to date clients. Besides,
she would

probably clash against the pink interiors
of Nightwinds.

He climbed the steps, crossed the front
entry with its pastel pink stone pillars,
and let himself

into the flamingo pink hallway.

In fairness, the interior of the house was
not one hundred percent pink. There was
a lot of gilt

work and some white wooden molding.
The giant leaves of the huge, deep pink
orchids woven

into the carpeting were green.

Switching on lights as he went, he made his way through the sprawling house to one of the

rooms overlooking the gardens and the shallow canyon beyond.

He wove a path through the boxes of books that he had not yet had time to unpack and sat

down at the grand gilt-and-pink desk near the window. Switching on the laptop, he opened a

drawer to retrieve the notes he had made when he had interviewed Zoe Luce that

afternoon.

He started with the usual online information resources. If all went well, it would take him

about ten minutes to locate Mrs. Jennifer Mason, just as he'd told Bonnie. Easy money and

Lord knew he needed it.

All did not go well.

There was no indication that Jennifer Mason had used her credit cards or written any checks

in the past few months. Intrigued, he

went deeper.

He found no evidence that Jennifer Mason was involved in the process of obtaining a divorce

from Davis Mason. There was no sign that she had hired any of the local moving companies to

assist in relocating to another town or city.

Forty-five minutes later he sat back, stretched his legs out under the desk, shoved his hands

into his pockets, and contemplated the glowing screen.

Jennifer Mason had disappeared. He had a hunch Zoe Luce had already guessed as much

before she hired him to find the woman.

Chapter Six

Zoe picked up the desk phone on the first ring.

"Enhanced Interiors."

"You lied to me," Ethan said on the other end.

He made the accusation in a stunningly casual tone, as if he was accustomed to having

people lie to him. Maybe that was true, given his line of work, Zoe thought.

She went very still in her chair, staring

unseeingly at the three framed black-and-white

photographs that hung on the opposite wall.

She had taken three photos of the fanciful old house steeped in the shadows of the desert

twilight. Later, she had tried to choose the most evocative shot but each had caught some

elusive element, and she had been unable to select just one. She had wound up framing all

three.

A client had noticed the photos hanging on the wall a few days later and had informed her

that the house was known locally as Nightwinds.

"Are you there?" Ethan asked.

Don't panic yet, she thought. Maybe it's not as bad as it sounds.

"Yes, of course," she said tonelessly. How much had he learned about her in the process of

searching for Jennifer Mason? Had he somehow stumbled onto the truth? Had he found a chink

in the firewall that had been erected between her past and her present? And what about

Arcadia? Oh, Lord, what if she had blown her friend's cover as well as her own? She had been

an idiot to hire a private investigator.

Get a grip, she told herself. Breathe. Think.

The new identities that she and Arcadia had purchased had been first class. Arcadia had

insisted on paying the huge amount of cash required to get the very best

quality. Ethan Truax

could not have dug deep enough to uncover the truth, she assured herself, not in such a

short period of time.

Besides, he'd had no reason to go looking into her past. She had paid him to search for

Jennifer Mason. Why would he waste time probing into his client's background, instead?

"I don't know what you're talking about," she said, trying to keep her voice cool and even.

"Did you locate Jennifer Mason?"

"No," Ethan said.

She clutched the phone more tightly to her ear. "You couldn't find her?"

"No," Ethan said again. "What's more, I don't think you expected me to find her. And that's

what makes this all so damn interesting, you see."

"I don't understand."

"We need to talk," Ethan said. He ended the call abruptly.

Anger shafted through her. "Damn it, don't you dare hang up on me, Truax."

The door of her office opened without warning, jolting her. She swung around in her office

chair.

Ethan walked into the room looking as if he had just come from a construction site. He wore a

pair of grungy paint-stained jeans, a denim shirt, scuffed work boots, and a peaked cap

emblazoned with the logo of a local tavern, Hell's Belles. She recognized the

name of the

establishment. It was a sleazy dive that catered to guys who drove trucks and motorcycles.

She had never been attracted to the kind of male who frequented such places.

So why was she experiencing these little hot and cold chills of awareness at the sight of

Ethan? She had clearly gone a little too long without a date.

Ethan slid his phone into the pocket of his shirt. "I happened to be in the neighborhood.

Thought I'd drop by."

She put down her own phone with great care and tried to compose herself. At least this time

she had the advantage of being the one on the business side of a desk.

"Is the dramatic entrance one of the tricks of the trade, Mr. Truax?"

"Like I said, we need to have a conversation and we need to have it right now." He started

toward one of the two client chairs positioned across from her desk. Then he noticed the

three black-and-white shots of Nightwinds and stopped. "Who took those?"

"I did."

"Huh."

"Forget the pictures, Mr. Truax." She sat forward, impatient and anxious, and folded her hands

on the desk. "Sit down and tell me exactly what is going on."

He took one last look at the three photos and then obligingly settled into a chair. She

immediately regretted asking him to take a seat. The expensive upholstery on her client chairs

had never been intended to withstand dirty work clothes.

Ethan appeared oblivious to any impact he might be making on her precious chair. Lounging

back against the honey-colored leather, he extended his legs and crossed his booted feet at

the ankles. He removed a small notepad from the pocket of his shirt and flipped it open.

"I found no evidence to indicate the Mrs. Jennifer Mason is celebrating her newly acquired

status as a soon-to-be divorced woman." He studied his notes. "She has not used any credit

cards recently. She has not used an ATM machine to remove any cash from the couple's joint

checking account nor has she written any checks on that account." He looked up. "The

account is still open, by the way. Davis Mason has not bothered to close it."

"What does that mean?"

"Wild guess? He's not particularly worried that his soon-to-be-ex will clean out the account."

"Oh." This was going to be as bad as she had feared.

"Jennifer Mason appears to have had no close friends here in town. I'm still checking that

angle, but it's not looking good. She was not a longtime resident of Whispering Springs and

apparently the only socializing she did after her marriage was when she helped

Mason

entertain business clients. That was not a frequent occurrence."

"Relatives?" Zoe inquired.

"Just a couple of distant cousins and an elderly aunt who live in Indiana. I called them this

morning. None of them have heard from her recently nor is anyone concerned. They all said

that they hadn't seen Jennifer since she was a child and had lost contact years ago. Not

what you'd call a close family."

"In other words, no one is going to rush to file a missing persons report."

"Unlikely," Ethan said. "There is one more thing. I checked the legal angle. There is no divorce in progress."

This was definitely the worst-case scenario, she thought. Jennifer Mason fit the classic profile

of an abused wife who enjoyed no close contact with family or friends. What was she going to

do now?

She picked up a pen to give herself something to do, clutching it so tightly that her knuckles

whitened. "Thank you for looking into the matter for me, Mr. Truax. Do I owe you anything

more than the minimum I paid you yesterday?"

"Oh, yeah. A lot more."

She frowned. "How much?"

"Let's start with some answers. What do you think happened to Jennifer Mason?"

She said nothing.

"Did you know her before she disappeared?"

"No. Never met her."

"You think Mason murdered his wife, don't you?"

She hesitated and then nodded, saying nothing.

"That's a fairly serious conclusion," Ethan said dryly. "Mind if I ask what it was that made you jump to it?"

"Just a bad feeling I got when I went out to view his residence yesterday."

"A bad feeling," he repeated neutrally.

"Call it intuition."

"Okay, I've got some respect for intuition. Been known to use it myself. Anything else?"

Act normal. Think normal.

"The bed in the master bedroom is gone," she said evenly. "It and a small area rug are the

only furnishings that are missing. There's a fresh coat of paint on the walls of that

room."

His brows rose. "And that was enough to make you think Jennifer Mason had met with foul

play?"

She decided to try a more assertive approach. "Mr. Truax, I am a professional interior

designer. I get the strong impression that you don't think much of my career choice, but I

assure you that designers are, by training and inclination, observant. Something is wrong at

the Mason residence. I'm sure of it."

"Okay, take it easy. You sure Mason didn't sell the bed?"

"Davis told me that his wife had taken it because it was important to her. It was a very large,

very expensive bed, he said. But – "

"Yeah?"

"But I saw two full sets of three-hundred-and-twenty-thread-count Italian sheets in the linen

closet. The sheets and pillowcases were still in the original packaging. " "So

what?"

She tapped the tip of the pen on the desk top. "Do you have any idea what two full sets of

king-sized sheets of that quality cost? If Jennifer Mason took the bed, I'm sure she would

have taken the sheets that she bought to go on it."

Ethan meditated on that for a few seconds. Then he nodded. "You've got a point. Did Mason

indicate that his wife put the bed into storage?" "No."

"Did he say how she arranged to pick up the bed?" "No." The steady litany of questions was

getting on her nerves. "You're the private detective here, not me."

"Oh, yeah, that's right. I keep forgetting." He took a pen out of his pocket and wrote

something down in the notebook. "Was there anything else that made you suspicious when

you went through Mason's house yesterday?"

Aside from the screaming walls? She

wondered silently. *Gosh, no, that was enough for some*

obscure reason. "There was one other strange thing," she offered slowly.
"What?"

"The shower curtains." "What about them?"

"The master bath has a large, glass-walled shower and separate tub arrangement, but the

other two bedrooms were obviously designed as guest rooms. They each have adjoining baths

with standard combination shower-tubs

with curtain enclosures. But the shower curtains in

both of the guest baths are gone."

He gave her a politely blank look. "Explain." "Both rooms were fully outfitted with soap, towels,

and amenities. The shower curtains should have been there, too. But they were gone." She

shrugged. "I just found that a little odd, that's all." He looked at her for a long time.

"You do realize," he said eventually, "that we haven't got enough yet to take to

the cops?"

"Of course I do. That's why I hired you to look into it."

"Correction, you came to me because Radnor was a lot more expensive, but we'll let that pass

for now." He closed the notepad and dropped it into his shirt pocket. "We've got other things

to do."

"Such as?"

"I want to get a look inside the Mason house. I beg your pardon, the Mason

residence."

She stared at him, intrigued in spite of her misgivings. "You're going to break in?"

"Hell, no. Private investigators only get to do stuff like that on television. You think I want to risk my license?"

"No, I suppose not."

His reaction to her question was entirely logical, but for some reason she felt a flicker of

disappointment. Maybe she had allowed

her fantasies about private investigators
to run

amuck.

"It probably wouldn't be possible for
you to sneak in, anyway," she said
coolly. "Desert View is

a very secure, gated community. I doubt
if you would have been able to get past
the guards."

Ethan said nothing, just sat there doing
enigmatic. For some reason, she was
suddenly

uneasy.

She wondered if she'd offended him or, worse yet, made him feel awkward or embarrassed.

Truax Investigations was a one-person agency, she reminded herself. He did not have the

resources of a large security firm such as Radnor. She could not expect miracles. And you got

what you paid for, she reminded herself for the ninth or tenth time.

She cleared her throat. "I assume you've used up the two-hour minimum advance I gave you."

"You assume right," he assured her a little too easily. "Blew right through it last night."

"I was afraid of that." She drew herself up and fixed him with what she hoped was a steely

glare. "How much more is this investigation going to cost me?"

"Can't say for sure, yet. Could be another day or two before I figure out what's going on

here."

"Another *day* or *two*?" She was appalled. "I can't afford to pay you for

that much time. Not at
your rates."

"Relax. I think we can work something
out. After all, I'm trying to get my
business up and

running here in Whispering Springs and
you're my first client. I want to make a
good

impression. Got to think of future
referrals."

"What terms are you offering?" she
asked warily.

"My sister-in-law came up with an idea.

I didn't pay any attention at the time, but last night

when I realized this case was going to take longer than expected, it occurred to me that her

plan had some possibilities."

"Describe these possibilities."

"I need a little interior decorating work," he said.

That made her pause. "I rather like the look of your office. It has a certain shabby charm."

"Shabby charm?"

"If you just replaced that oversized client chair and moved your desk into a better position

and got rid of that mirror, I think you'll find that the energy flow works very well."

"The energy flow works fine the way it is. The oversized chair is useful because it makes

clients aware that they aren't the ones in control in that room. Makes 'em want to turn all

their problems over to me. And if the desk interrupts the energy flow that's okay, too. I like it

right where it is. Ditto with the mirror. It's not my office that needs redecorating."

"What, then?"

"My new house." He smiled. "I mean, my new residence."

"Your *residence*?" She flattened her hands on the desk and shot to her feet. "Are you serious?"

You expect me to redesign your entire living space in exchange for a little more detective work?"

"Sounded fair to me."

"Well, it certainly doesn't sound that way to me. It sounds like you're trying to – " she broke

off abruptly, aware that the phrase, *screw me* did not seem appropriate.

Ethan watched her, politely expectant. Something in his expression told her he knew exactly

what she had been about to say. She felt the heat rise in her cheeks.

She straightened her shoulders and folded her arms. "It sounds as if you intend for me to get

the raw end of this deal. My fees for redesigning an entire residence are quite high, Mr. Truax.

There is no way that I would spend that much on your detecting services."

"Okay, like I told you, I'm flexible. How about one room?"

She hesitated and then shrugged. "Okay, one room."

"Deal. But I get to pick the room."

"Fine. Deal. Now tell me: how you plan to get into the Mason residence?"

"That's the easy part." Ethan replied.

"You're going to get me inside." "How?"

"You can start

by calling me Bob."

* * *

An hour later Ethan stood in the center of the master bedroom of the Mason house and tried

to ignore the little tingle of adrenaline that was humming through him. He understood the

source of the sensation. If he and Zoe were right about Jennifer Mason's fate, they were

standing in the same room as a killer.

At least he was standing in the same room with Mason, he thought. Zoe, on the other hand,

still had both feet out in the hall. She hovered in the bedroom doorway, arms crossed tightly

beneath her breasts. Until now she had been doing a very good job of acting but he had

noticed a new level of tension in her when they had reached this bedroom.

Davis Mason watched him from a short distance away. Zoe had reported that

he'd sounded

somewhat surprised when she'd phoned to say that she wanted to bring a contractor to his

house. But he had not had a problem with the suggestion. In fact, he had offered to leave his

office early to meet them.

"What do you think about my lighting ideas for this space, Bob?" Zoe asked from the door.

"No problem," Ethan said easily. "Plenty of room in here to drop the ceiling and put in recessed

lighting. You want me to work up a detailed estimate?"

"Not at this stage," she said. "I just wanted your opinion on whether or not you thought the

concept was feasible."

"Hell, yeah, it'll work. The lighting won't be a problem. Picture on the ceiling sounds weird,

though."

Davis looked at Zoe. "You're going to paint a picture on my ceiling?"

"It's an option that interests me. There

are some excellent mural artists here in town who

could do something very special in this space. An evening sky scene, perhaps."

Davis nodded thoughtfully. "I like the idea. Never would have thought of it myself."

"Gonna be expensive," Ethan warned him. "The recessed lighting she wants to illuminate the

ceiling doesn't come cheap, and Lord only knows what the artist will charge."

Zoe fixed him with a steely look. "The cost is not your problem, *Bob*."

"She's right," Davis said. "Price is no object for me. My wife and I recently parted ways. I

want a whole new look for this bedroom."

"Oh, man," Ethan whistled softly. "Been there, done that a few times myself. I know all about

the bedroom thing."

He caught Zoe's startled reaction to that comment, but he ignored it. He was more interested

in Davis's frown.

"The bedroom thing?" Davis stood unmoving. "I don't understand."

Ethan shook his head. "This is the voice of experience talking. I've had three wives walk out

on me and file for divorce. Just no pleasing some women, I guess."

"No," Davis said evenly. "Women can be difficult." He did not look in Zoe's direction.

"Difficult and damned expensive," Ethan said. "Especially when it comes to beds. Beds cost a

lot of money, you know."

"What does this have to do with beds?" Davis asked.

Ethan shrugged. "The first thing you do, after you finish paying off your ex and the lawyers, is

you start dating again, right? Hell, maybe you don't even wait until the paperwork is finished.

Maybe you need some understanding companionship right away, know what I mean?"

"No, Bob," Zoe said coldly from the hall. "I, for one, don't know what you mean."

"No offense, Ms. Luce," he said, making a show of exaggerated patience, "but these are facts

of life for a guy in this situation. Like I was saying, you want to start dating again so you

bring a new lady friend home. You turn on the music, have a couple of drinks, and you tell her

your sad story." He winked at Davis. "Am I right?"

"I don't know yet," Davis said. "I haven't resumed my social life."

"Yeah, well, take it from me, this is how

it works. Anyhow, things are going fine out in the

front room, so you suggest that the two of you adjourn to the bedroom. She's okay with that.

So far, so good. The two of you walk down the hall, enter the bedroom, and wham, no

warning at all, the lady takes one look at the bed and stops cold."

Davis and Zoe were both watching him as if he had turned them to stone.

"Why does she stop?" Davis sounded baffled.

"Because of the damned bed, of course," Ethan said. "She gets this weird expression on her

face and she looks right at you and she asks you if that's the bed where you and your ex-wife

slept. Talk about a loaded question."

"Loaded is right," Davis grimaced. "I think I'm beginning to get the picture here."

"Women don't like to sleep or do anything else in the same bed you used with the ex, you

see?" Ethan said. "Some kind of female

thing, I guess."

He glanced at Zoe. She looked pained, but she kept silent.

Davis, on the other hand, was at ease again, relaxed and smiling. He gave Ethan a knowing,

man-to-man look. "I must admit, I hadn't thought about that angle. Now that you've pointed

it out, I can see where an old bed could be a bit awkward. However, that is one problem I'm

happy to say that I don't have."

"Yeah." Ethan surveyed the large empty space in the center of the room. "I can see that. The

bed's gone."

"My ex took it with her when she left."

"Just backed up a truck and hauled it off, huh? Talk about insensitive."

"Along with the rest of her personal possessions. To be honest, I helped her pack."

"Yeah, I've done that a few times, too," Ethan admitted. "I know where you're coming from."

Well, as far as the bed goes, count yourself lucky. It'll cost you to replace it, but in the long

run, it will be worth it. Trust me."

"I'll take your word for it, Bob," Davis murmured. "As you said, yours is the voice of

experience. Three divorces?"

"My lawyer sends me cards on my birthday and most major holidays."

"Sounds like he should send flowers," Zoe said tightly. She took a decisive step back, moving

away from the bedroom door. "I think we've seen enough, Bob. We'd better be on our way. If

you will work up a rough idea on where you think the fixtures and electrical outlets could be

located, I'll include the information in my presentation to Davis on Friday."

"Sure." Ethan paused in front of Davis and stuck out his hand. "Nice to meet you, Mason.

Good luck with the remodel. You can't go wrong with Ms. Luce, here. She really knows her

stuff."

Davis shook hands briefly, but his eyes were on Zoe. "I'm looking forward to working with her."

"Me, too," Ethan said. "It's always interesting, know what I mean?"

Zoe did not respond. She turned on her heel and disappeared down the hall.

She was certainly in a big hurry to leave the bedroom, Ethan thought. He wondered about

that as he followed her outside to her car. He was aware that she had been tense when he

had explained his plans for getting inside Mason's home, but she had cooperated willingly. Her

nerves had seemed steady enough throughout the tour of the house. But all that had changed

when they'd reached the master bedroom.

He got into the passenger seat and closed the door. Zoe slipped behind the wheel, fastened

her seatbelt, started the engine, and drove away very quickly.

He put on his dark glasses and studied

her taut profile. Her delicate jaw was tight. She had a

death grip on the wheel. She drove with the focused concentration of a professional race car

driver closing in on the checkered flag.

"Are you okay?" he asked when she slowed to approach the guardhouse.

"Of course I'm okay."

"You did fine back there at Mason's place," he offered. "If I didn't know you were a decorator,

I'd have said you'd had some experience

in my line."

Her knuckles whitened. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Just that you did the undercover thing with flair."

"Flair."

"Yeah. Flair. At least until we got to the bedroom. You started to get a little shaky at that point."

"Maybe it was because you and Davis got into that ridiculous conversation about changing

beds when you changed wives."

"Wasn't ridiculous. It's a fact. Like I told Mason, I've run into the problem a few times."

"You really have been through three divorces? I thought maybe you'd made up that story to

get him to talk about the missing bed." "It was the truth."

"Good grief." She sounded dazed.

"Children?" "No." Okay, so she obviously did not think that he

was Mr. Perfect. He already knew that. Why the hell did he care about her

opinion on the

subject? "What about you? I take it you're not married?" "No."

"Divorced?"

"No." She braked for the guardhouse. "I was with someone for a long time. It didn't work out."

He could have heard the slamming of that door from a mile away, he thought. Whatever it was

that had happened in that relationship, it had left scars.

Slammed doors always piqued his

curiosity. He wondered what would happen if he probed a

little deeper.

At that moment, the guard emerged from the security station. Zoe lowered her window and

murmured something brisk and polite. The guard nodded and wished her a good day.

Zoe put her foot down on the throttle and sent the vehicle hurtling through the gates and out

onto the main road. She was obviously keen to get away from Desert View.

"Well?" she said. "Did you pick up any useful clues back there?" "Maybe."

She shot him an irritated look. "That's the best you can do? Maybe?"

"For the moment." He glanced back over his shoulder. The security guard was making an entry

in a log. Methodical type. Radnor Security Systems was big on procedures. It was probably

the secret of their success. "What do we do now?" Zoe asked.

He turned his attention back to the road. "Now I find the missing bed."

"Why on earth do you want to waste time tracking down the bed?"

"Something tells me that when I find it, I'll find out what happened to Jennifer Mason."

Chapter Seven

The following afternoon, Zoe stood alone in the front hall of the Taylor residence and savored

the gracious warmth that flowed through the space.

After a year in her new profession, she had discovered that this was her favorite moment in

the design process. Every detail from window treatments to carpets was in place. The

furniture had been delivered and

positioned. The craft and construction people were gone at

last. Her creation was complete, but the owners had not yet moved into their new home.

She had the place to herself. It was the only chance she would ever have to walk through the

spaces alone and critique her own work. It was her one opportunity to decide whether or not

she had achieved her design goals.

This large residence had been one of her first big projects, and it had been a

challenge. She

had worked on it for months. After giving her a detailed list of their requirements, the Taylors

had announced that they were leaving everything in her hands and had taken off on a world

cruise.

"My husband and I went through one complete interior design experience together early on in

our marriage," Mary Taylor had explained with a shudder. "We almost got divorced because of

the stress. We do many things well as a couple, but interior design is not one of them. This

time around, we want a turnkey operation. When we get back, I want to walk back into a

complete, finished home."

The Taylors were due to return next month. Zoe thought they would be pleased. They were in

their sixties, successful, high-energy, gregarious people with an active lifestyle. She had set

out to create a serene background against

which their vivacious natures would shine.

The residence was brand-new with well-proportioned lines, high ceilings, and sweeping vistas.

She had worked closely with the architect because she had wanted to be certain that her

designs enhanced his well-executed spaces. Granted, she had been new at the job, but her

instincts and her degree in fine arts had both told her that harmony was best achieved when

the architectural and interior elements worked together.

She slipped the heavy crimson tote off her shoulder, put it down on the tile of the front hall,

and walked into the spacious great room. The small, intimate seating groups that she had

used to bring a comfortable sense of scale to the vast interior worked well. She imagined the

room filled with a hundred guests. The energy and noise of a lot of people gathered in one

space could be difficult to orchestrate, but she was confident that this room could handle the job.

She continued her walk-through, making tiny adjustments here and there. A sense of calm and

tranquility enveloped her. It occurred to her that she had come here today not just because it

was a good opportunity to take one last look at her work, but because she had been badly in

need of the serenity she had designed

into this residence.

The second visit to the master bedroom in Davis Mason's house had left her more disturbed

than ever. The screaming in the walls had not dimmed. The invisible pain was at such an

intense level that she could not understand why others failed to notice it.

Davis had appeared oblivious, just as he had the last time. But there had been a few seconds

there when she had wondered if Ethan had unconsciously picked up some trace

of what she

felt emanating from the terrible room. It had to do with the way he had moved in that space,

she decided. It was as if he'd become more alert or something. He hadn't walked or strolled

through the room; he had prowled.

Then she had realized that it wasn't a subliminal awareness of the energy in the walls that

was affecting him. What she had seen in Ethan was the anticipation of the hunter on the trail.

She came to a halt in the center of the gleaming copper-and-granite kitchen and thought

about that. A tiny chill flickered through her. Ethan Truax could be dangerous under certain

circumstances.

That realization would not have bothered her quite so much were it not for the extremely

unsettling knowledge that she was attracted to him. She had finally faced that fact today.

She did not understand the little tingles

of excitement she experienced in his presence, but

there was no point denying them.

The really weird part was that she had not given any man so much as a second glance for

two years, and now, here she was, fantasizing about a low-rent private investigator who had

admitted to three marriages and as many divorces.

Ethan Truax was very definitely not her type. Preston, with his love of art and history and his

gentle ways, had been her type.
Whatever it was she was feeling for
Truax, it probably only

involved a lot of hormones that had been
dormant for a long time.

She left the kitchen with its large
adjoining pantry and walked past the
handsome, polished

steel door of the new walk-in, climate-
controlled wine cellar. In addition to
their extensive

entertaining needs, the Taylors collected
rare and exotic vintages. The cellar was
empty and

unlocked at the moment because the valuable collection of wines had not yet been moved.

Edward Taylor had made it clear that he wished to supervise that delicate process personally

when he returned from the cruise.

She continued along the spacious central hall, admiring the artful patterns worked into the

floor tiles. When she reached the fully equipped exercise and sauna room, she paused to

check that all of the high-tech machines

were properly positioned.

She was on her way to the guest wing when she heard the faint whisper of sound from the

back of the house.

She froze; her palms felt as though she had just plunged her hands into ice water.

It had been only a tiny, hushed creak that could easily be written off as a figment of her

imagination. It was just the sort of thin little noise that you could expect to hear in a large

empty space where small sounds tended to echo. But it seemed to her that the flow of air

down the hall had altered a little. One of the French doors that separated the kitchen area

from the pool terrace had just been opened.

She was no longer alone in the big house.

* * *

"Hurry up, okay, man?" The storage locker attendant worked the code to open the door on

the second floor of lockers. He glanced nervously over his shoulder. "Someone might come

along, y'know? If the boss finds out I let you in, he'll fire my ass."

"This will only take a couple of minutes." Ethan shoved a few crisp bills into the man's hand.

"Go back to your desk. I'll give you the rest on my way out."

"Just make it fast, okay."

"Sure."

The attendant pocketed the money and

hastened off toward the stairwell.

Ethan went down the long hall of locked doors until he came to number 203.

According to the

attendant, this was the one that had been rented to a man matching Davis Mason's

description. Mason had used another name and paid in cash, but the attendant had

remembered the bed. *A really big one. Said his wife had left him and he didn't want it. He*

gave me twenty bucks to help him unload it and get it into the locker.

Ethan opened the small box of tools he had brought along and selected the pick he thought

would do the job.

He got the standard issue padlock open in less than fifteen seconds and rolled the garage

door-style closure up into the ceiling.

He saw the headboard first. It was propped in the shadows against the left wall, a massive,

ornate chunk of furniture.

The cold glow of the fluorescent fixture

in the hall did little to illuminate the interior, but he

could see the ends of the supersized box spring and mattress.

The mattress was wrapped in several yards of opaque plastic.

He took out the small flashlight he had brought, switched it on, and played the beam around

the room. In addition to the bed, there were a number of packing cartons stacked inside the

locker.

He took a knife out of the tool kit and slit open the nearest carton. He was not surprised to

find a tangled heap of feminine clothing inside.

A good start, he thought. His new client might even be impressed. But it would be nice to

have a little more to take to the cops.

He found what he needed when he went to work cutting away the layers of plastic that

shrouded the mattress.

The massive bed was badly stained with a liquid that had dried to an unmistakable shade of brown.

Blood.

* * *

Panic hit hard and fast. Had the bastards from Xanadu managed to track her down? Or had

she had the extremely bad luck to time her lonely walk-through on the same afternoon that a

burglar had decided to enter the vacant

residence? She had deactivated the sophisticated

alarm system when she had entered a few minutes ago, making it all too easy for him.

Whatever the answer, she was trapped. Her tote, with the phone inside, was a million miles

away in the front hall. Even if she had it in her hand, she could not risk using it because the

intruder would hear every word she said in the echoing silence of the empty house.

The phone was not the only thing that was a long way away. Her car keys were also in the tote.

The only advantage she possessed was an intimate knowledge of the interior spaces of the large residence.

Pulse thudding heavily, she slipped out of her sandals and began to work her way back along the guest wing hallway toward the kitchen.

"I'm going to have to punish you, Zoe."
Davis Mason spoke from somewhere in
the great room

area. "Just as I did Jennifer. You're like
her in some ways. I couldn't trust her,
either. I didn't

want to hurt her, but she forced me to
punish her frequently. And then she
started talking

about getting a divorce. Well, I couldn't
allow her to do that, could I? I had to
kill her, you

see."

She almost stopped breathing. Davis

Mason. Not someone from Xanadu or a passing burglar.

Talk about your good news, bad news days.

"You're probably wondering how I figured it out." Davis sounded as though he was addressing

the weekly meeting of his business club.

"I'm not stupid, you know. That first day when you

came to look at my house, I realized that you must have seen something in the bedroom. Until

that moment, everything had been fine.

But then you suddenly tensed up. I could tell that

you were nervous. You couldn't wait to get away. And you asked about the bed."

She could hear his footsteps on the tiles of the grand central hall. He was not making any

effort to conceal himself. He sounded so arrogant, so confident that she knew he must have a

gun.

"I followed you back to your office," Davis said. "I saw you meet your friend at that cafe. I

thought maybe I'd been wrong about you. Maybe it was all okay, after all. But just as I was

about to drive away, you got up from the table and walked several blocks to the office of that

private investigator on Cobalt Street."

Her bare feet made no sound on the cool tile. She took another step toward her goal.

"I told myself that you might have some personal reason for meeting with a PI. A reason that

had nothing to do with me. After all, if

you suspected I'd killed Jennifer, you'd have gone

straight to the police, right? But then you called me yesterday morning and asked to bring a

contractor to the house. After telling me that you didn't have any time for me until Friday. I

knew then that you were lying, just like Jennifer used to do." He was getting closer.

"When that damned contractor started talking about beds, I knew that he was probably that

PI from Cobalt Street and that you must have asked him to find Jennifer. I knew then that the

reason you didn't go to the cops was because you had no proof." She took another step.

"You know what, Zoe? Your investigator never will find any proof. I put that bed into storage.

Got any idea how many hundreds, maybe thousands of rental storage locker companies there

are in this state?" Davis chuckled.

"Neither do I. Talk about a needle in a haystack. Even if it

occurs to Truax to check out the storage locker angle, he wouldn't know where to start." Her

hand brushed against a cool, steel surface. "I'm afraid you're going to be the victim of a

burglar you surprised when you walked into this house alone today, Zoe. You know, it's really

too bad things had to end this way. I could have used some good feng shui."

* * *

Ethan stood in Zoe's office and listened to the ringing of her cell phone.

Eventually he fell into
voice mail.

*"This is Zoe Luce. Please leave a
message."*

"This is Truax. Call me as soon as you
get this message." He rattled off the
number and

dropped the phone into his jacket pocket.

The edgy tension vibrated through him
like electricity through a wire.
Everything felt wrong.

He looked at Zoe's calendar again, but
nothing had materialized in the space

reserved for that

afternoon since he had last checked it a few seconds ago.

Where the hell was she? He hated it when clients disappeared like this. It always meant

trouble.

He flipped through her telephone card file, found Mason's office number, and dialed it. A

woman with a pleasant voice answered.

"Mason Investments."

"Davis Mason, please."

"I'm afraid Mr. Mason is out of the office this afternoon. May I take a message?"

"No, I'll be in touch."

He checked the speed-dial function on the phone and found only one number had been

entered. There wasn't even a name, just the letter A.

He called it.

"Gallery Euphoria," a woman said in a voice that belonged to a nightclub singer.

"I'm looking for Zoe."

"Who is this?"

"Ethan Truax. I'm working for her. It's important that I locate her immediately. Any idea where

she is?"

"Truax Investigations?"

"Yes."

"I'm a close friend of Zoe's. Is something wrong?"

"She's not here. Her calendar is blank for the afternoon."

"Is this about Davis Mason?"

"Yes," he said trying to hang on to his patience, "Just tell me where you think she might be right now."

"I saw her at lunch. She told me that she was going to do a final walk-through at the home of a client today."

"Give me a name."

"The Taylors. There should be a number and an address in Zoe's files. What's this all about?"

Did you turn up something important, Mr. Truax?"

"The bed."

* * *

Zoe's car was parked in the drive. There was no indication that Mason or anyone else was in

the vicinity.

Ethan told himself that was a good sign, but his gut wasn't buying it.

He removed his pistol from the center console and got out of the car. There was no need to

worry about alarming the neighbors. The lots were large in this neighborhood.

The nearest

house was almost a quarter mile away.

He went to the front door. The knob turned easily in his hand.

He let himself into an elegant front hall. The first thing he noticed was a red tote. The second

thing was a slight draft. There was another door or a window open in the house.

"Zoe?"

There was no response.

There was an intercom panel on the wall. At the top was a button labeled SEND ALL. He

pressed it.

"Zoe, this is Truax. Talk to me."

The words echoed through every room in the house.

"Ethan, get out," Zoe shouted through the intercom. She had also hit send all. Her warning

blared from every speaker in the place. "Mason's here. He's got a gun."

"Big deal. I've got one, too. Are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm inside the wine cellar." She sounded breathless, but coherent. "The door is locked.

He can't get to me. A few seconds ago he was in the kitchen, but I don't know where he is

now. For God's sake, get out of here. Call the cops."

He did not respond. He was out of his shoes, moving silently down a long, airy central hall with

arched openings. He could see the living

room and kitchen area.

Footsteps erupted suddenly from the vicinity of the kitchen. Mason burst into view, fleeing

toward French doors that opened onto a walled patio and pool.

"Stop. It's over, Mason."

Mason spun around, gun coming up.

Ethan dove behind the nearest solid object, an ornate wooden chest.

Mason fired wildly.

A glass case containing a collection of

antique silver and turquoise jewelry exploded nearby. A

cold rain of shards fell around Ethan.

"You can't touch me," Mason shouted.
"You'll never prove anything. You hear me? You'll never

prove it."

The gun roared again. Shots thudded into the heavy chest.

The guy had gone over the edge, Ethan thought.

He made his way to the far end of his wooden barricade, leaned around the

corner, and

squeezed off a single shot.

Mason yelped, jerked, flailed wildly, and then crashed headlong onto the tile floor. He dropped

the gun to clutch his right leg.

Ethan counted to five before getting to his feet. Pieces of glass fell from his shirt and hair and

skittered on the tile.

"Ethan, wait." Zoe was flying toward him down the hall, sandals in her hand. "There's glass

everywhere and you're already bleeding."

He did not take his eyes off Mason.
"You shouldn't have come out here alone today."

She ignored that and slid her feet into her sandals.

"Hang on," she said with startling gentleness. "I'll get a rug to cover the glass."

She was talking to him as if she thought he was in shock, he realized. Maybe she didn't know

he was just furious.

"Get Mason's gun first," he said.

"Right." She scooped up the weapon and brought it back to him. Then she seized a long

carpet runner and tossed it down across the worst of the glass.

When she straightened, he got a good look at her face. She appeared too pale, but she was

obviously in control.

She gave him a quick, frowning survey, and then she untied the little red and orange silk scarf

she wore at her throat and handed it to him. "That cut doesn't look too bad, but it's getting messy."

He felt something warm and wet and realized that a trickle of blood was running down his jaw.

Absently he dabbed at it with the silk scarf as he crossed the living room to where Mason lay, moaning.

Zoe followed.

Mason clenched his thigh with both

hands, gritting his teeth. A pool of blood had formed on

the tiles.

"You can't prove anything." Mason looked up, his face twisted with pain and rage. "You can't

prove a damned thing."

"Don't bet on it." Ethan brushed a couple of slivers of glass off his shirt, reached into his

pocket, and took out his phone. "I found the bed."

Chapter Eight

"Okay," Zoe said, "How did you find that bed?"

Ethan took a swallow of the champagne Arcadia had insisted on ordering for the table and put

down the glass. Champagne was not his beverage of choice, but Zoe seemed to like it and he

was trying to go along with the client. He consoled himself with the thought that he could

always pour himself a stiff shot of

whiskey later when he got back to Nightwinds.

It was late, and the trendy little Fountain Square restaurant was starting to empty out. A few

couples lingered, and there was one large group on the far side of the room. He recognized a

familiar face and figured it for a business dinner.

It had been Zoe's idea that they go out to eat after the long session with the police. They

were both exhausted, and she said she

was concerned about their stress levels. They needed to unwind.

"Dinner is on me," she said. "It's the least I can do after what happened today."

The offer had sounded too good to be true, and, as was often the case with such offers, it

proved to be exactly that. Zoe invited Arcadia Ames to join them. The result was that instead

of an intimate dinner for two during which he could have told her in great

detail why she'd had

no business taking off alone that afternoon, he was stuck with this not-so-cozy threesome.

He was acutely aware that he had no real grounds for complaint. If it had not been for

Arcadia, he might still be looking for Zoe.

Every time he thought about Zoe locking herself inside the high-tech, steel-doored wine cellar

to escape a crazy wife killer, he felt the inchoate anger and got the freezing

sensation in his

gut all over again. It had been so damned close.

So here the three of them sat, squeezed into a snug corner booth, sipping champagne. Maybe

it was better this way, he thought. His relationship with Zoe was supposed to be all business,

and the truth was he probably would have tried something really stupid if he'd found himself

alone with her tonight.

The problem was that even though he was well and truly pissed, he also wanted very badly to

take her to bed. The resulting tension had made him a little surly, and it was hard work trying

to conceal his bad temper.

"The bed," he said, focusing on the neutral topic. "Right, in the end that proved to be Mason's

biggest problem. It was easy enough to wrap his dead wife in the shower curtains and bury

her in the back garden. But he couldn't

quite see digging a hole big enough to bury a

king-sized box spring and mattress."

"That might have gotten the attention of some of his neighbors," Zoe said dryly.

"But he couldn't just haul them off to a landfill, either. People prowl through landfills looking for

things to salvage and the bed was in pretty good shape."

"Except for the stains, of course."
Arcadia turned her champagne flute slowly between her

fingertips. "He knew that if the blood-soaked mattress ever turned up it could be used as

evidence of foul play."

Ethan nodded. On the surface he could not see what Zoe and Arcadia had in common, but the

emotional tie that bound them together was unmistakable and it worried him. He wondered if

the connection between the two women was sexual. His instincts told him that it was not, but

he did not trust his gut reaction when it

came to that kind of thing. Women were a mystery.

His instincts might be in denial tonight because all he could think about was having hot,

sweaty sex with Zoe.

Get your mind out of the gutter, Truax. You 're supposed to be a professional.

Zoe smiled at him. She looked better than she had a few hours ago when she had emerged

from the wine cellar, but there was an unnatural brightness in her eyes. He knew what was

causing it. She was feeling the aftereffects of the adrenaline, just as he was.

"Davis was sure that you would never be able to find the bed," she said. "He claimed that

even if you guessed that it was in storage somewhere, there was no way you could find the

right rental facility. He said there were hundreds, maybe thousands of them in the state."

"Probably are." Ethan removed the lid of the clay warmer in the center of the table and

removed another plump corn tortilla. He dipped it into one of the three salsas that the waiter

had brought to the table. They'd finished the salads, but the main courses had not arrived yet

and he was ravenous.

"So?" Zoe prompted.

"The thing is, I didn't need to search every storage locker facility in the state." He took a bite

of the tortilla. "I only had to check out the ones that could be reached within about a

thirty-minute drive from Desert View. I also assumed that in order to remain as anonymous as

possible, Mason would have gone with a large operation that had lots of lockers, not a small

outfit where someone was more likely to remember him. That cut the number of possibilities

down to a manageable number. I got on the phone and started calling."

"Wait a second." Zoe held up a hand. "How did you know that the storage facility had to be

located within a thirty-minute driving radius of Desert View?"

"I got the pickup and drop-off times of the rented truck that Mason used. I knew almost

exactly when he left Desert View with the bed. It wasn't hard to calculate how far he could

have gone, allowing for the time to unload the bed at the locker facility."

He paused to take another bite of the salsa-laced tortilla and noticed that the business dinner

on the other side of the room was

breaking up. At the head of the table, the big,

sandy-haired man in the expensive linen blend jacket picked up the tab for the other five

people with an easy flourish.

It was nice to have a large budget for entertaining clients, Ethan thought. He turned his

attention back to his own client and her companion.

Zoe gave him an admiring look. "I'm impressed. You make it sound so simple and logical. The

mind of a detective is an amazing thing."

"Thanks," Ethan said. "I've always wanted to be loved for my mind."

Damn. That was not quite what he had wanted to say, he thought. Maybe he had better lay

off the champagne. It did not seem to be mixing well with the aftermath of the adrenaline

cocktail that still flowed through his system.

Arcadia looked faintly amused, but she did not say anything. If Zoe found the crack about

being loved for his brain inappropriate, she gave no indication.

"I'm still a little confused though," she said, serious again. "How did you figure out which truck

rental company Mason used and how did you find out precisely when he left Desert View?"

Ethan started to answer, but he broke off when the big man in the stylish jacket suddenly

loomed over the table.

"Truax." Nelson Radnor gave him an easy grin. "Good to see you. I hear you

closed a big one

today. Congratulations."

"Word travels fast," Ethan said.

"I've got my sources." Nelson examined the bandage that covered a portion of Ethan's jaw and

raised his brows. "Looks like you got knocked around a little."

"Just some flying glass." Ethan glanced across the table. "Zoe Luce, Arcadia Ames. This is

Nelson Radnor."

Zoe made the connection immediately.
"Radnor Security Systems?"

Nelson gave her an approving smile.
"Right. A pleasure. I understand there
was a woman at

the scene this afternoon when Truax took
Mason down. Can I assume it was one of
you two

lovely ladies?"

"I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't make
any assumptions," Ethan said evenly.

"My client would

like to keep a low profile in this matter."

"No problem." Nelson switched his attention to Arcadia. "Truax is a lucky man to be enjoying

such charming companionship tonight. Got a hunch he's having a lot more fun than I did."

The best that could be said for Arcadia's smile, Ethan thought, was that it was polite. There

certainly wasn't much warmth in it. Not that Radnor seemed to notice.

Ethan angled his head toward the small group of people making their way toward the front

door. "Client dinner?"

"Yeah. Routine." Nelson cast a quick, satisfied glance at the departing members of his dinner

party. "The manager and some of his people from Las Estrellas."

"The new resort outside of town?" Zoe asked.

Nelson nodded. "Looks like Radnor will be handling security for them."

"Congratulations," Ethan said. "Nice contract."

"Thanks. You know, I may give you a

call one of these days, Truax. We're running at full

steam over at Radnor. Might be able to throw a little of the small stuff your way. You

interested in some subcontracting work?"

"Depends," Ethan said carefully.

"I'll be in touch." Nelson appeared to realize that he had overstayed his welcome. He nodded

at Zoe and Arcadia, his gaze lingering an extra second or so on Arcadia, and then he moved

back a pace. "I'll let you folks get on with your dinner. See you around, Truax."

He walked off toward the door of the restaurant.

"I call him my competition," Ethan said. "But the truth is, we're not even playing in the same league."

"Maybe not." Zoe sounded amused. "But if I had to guess, I'd say he's jealous."

"Of the fact that I get to have dinner with you two instead of those folks from Las Estrellas?"

Ethan nodded. "As well he should be."

Zoe shook her head. "He's not jealous because you're eating dinner with us. It's because of

what you did today."

"She's right." Arcadia said with quiet certainty. "Radnor might be the big-time operator here in

town when it comes to the security business, but his position as the CEO of a large

corporation means he'll probably never have an opportunity to play the heroic private

investigator who comes to the rescue in the nick of time the way you did today."

Zoe chuckled. "Probably not much opportunity for swashbuckling when you're in the business

of doing routine employee background checks and supplying guards for places like Desert View

and Las Estrellas."

"Got news for you," Ethan said. "My swash nearly buckled permanently today when I realized

you were in that house alone with Mason. Talk about stressing out on the

job. Thank God you

had the presence of mind to get into that fancy cooler."

"It's not a cooler. It's a state-of-the-art wine cellar complete with its own refrigeration and

humidity control systems." She spoke very evenly. "The room was designed to be physically

secure because the Taylors collect extremely valuable old vintages."

"And another thing," he continued, getting into it now. "You should have stayed inside that

state-of-the-art cooler until the coast was clear."

She said nothing.

Arcadia stiffened. "I hadn't," she said slowly, "thought about the size of the wine cellar." She

broke off and gave Zoe a sharp, searching look. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"Yes," Zoe said firmly. "It was just a room, Arcadia. I can only thank heaven it was available

when I needed it."

Arcadia's mouth tightened. "Have some more champagne."

She did not wait for a response. Hauling the bottle out of the ice bucket, she refilled Zoe's

glass.

Ethan watched the two women in silence. *I'm definitely missing something here.* It wouldn't

be the first time, of course, but he had a feeling this was something important, something he

needed to know.

Zoe looked at Ethan. "I believe you were about to tell us how you came to learn so many of

the details about the timing of Mason's movements the day he rented the truck."

"Yes." Arcadia watched him with a speculative expression. "Finish your story. How did you

come by all those facts and figures?"

"Radnor's a cheap employer," Ethan said. "He charges the Desert View Community Association

a lot of money to supply security guards, but he doesn't pay his men very well."

Zoe's eyes widened. "You bribed one of the Desert View guards to let you look at the gate

logs?"

"Yeah."

"The straightforward approach. I like that," Arcadia stated.

"So elegantly simple. Why didn't I think of that?" Zoe marveled.

"Probably because you are not a trained detective," Ethan said.

"That must be it," she agreed. "How much does it cost to bribe a Radnor

security guard?"

"You'll find out when you get my bill. That bribe, as well as the one I used to get the

attendant at the storage facility to look the other way while I opened Mason's locker, will be

listed under miscellaneous expenses."

* * *

Outside the restaurant, the desert night felt good but it did nothing to dispel Zoe's strange

mood. She wondered if she had drunk

too much champagne. Arcadia had refilled her glass

several times. She knew why her friend was deliberately trying to get her a little drunk.

Arcadia was worried about the time in the wine cellar. *A small room with a locked door.*

As Arcadia suspected, the experience had brought back a lot of unpleasant memories that

tonight might well trigger a few bad dreams about her time in Xanadu. But it was not as if

there had been a lot of options this afternoon. The wine cellar had kept her safe until Ethan

had arrived. That was the important thing.

Too bad there had been no Ethan Truax to come to the rescue at Xanadu. She and Arcadia

had been forced to find their own way out of that nightmare.

She watched Ethan from the corner of her eye as he walked beside her toward the car. His

hair gleamed darkly in the light of the

street lamps. His face was in shadow.
He moved through

the night with an easy confidence,
relaxed but aware of his surroundings.
She had the feeling

that the trick was a habit that came
naturally to him.

The three of them got into Ethan's SUV.
Arcadia gave directions to her condo.
When they

arrived, Zoe and Ethan walked her to her
door.

She paused in the white carpeted hall to
look searchingly at Zoe one last time.

"Are you sure you'll be okay alone tonight?" she asked. "You're welcome to stay here. You know that."

"Thanks, I'll be okay." That was a lie. It was going to be a bad night. But there was nothing

anyone could do about the nightmares. She had to deal with them on her own. "Don't worry

about me. If I can't get to sleep, I'll spend the time thinking up ways to explain to the Taylors

why their antique Spanish chest has

bullet holes in it."

"All right. I'll see you tomorrow."

Arcadia looked at Ethan. "You probably need rest, too."

"Probably," he said, not sounding overly concerned.

Arcadia closed the door. Zoe heard her slide the heavy bolt into place. It was followed by the

muffled clink of a chain.

Ethan glanced back at the door as he and Zoe turned to go down the stairs.

"Sounds like your

friend takes security seriously."

"We both do. A woman can't be too careful."

"Yeah, you did sort of prove that today, didn't you?"

The too-neutral, give-nothing-away tone was back in his voice, she noticed. He was in an

edgy, unpredictable mood, just as she was, but she did not have a clue to what he was

thinking. She reminded herself that he had been through a very traumatic experience that

afternoon.

Outside on the street, they got back into his vehicle. The interior seemed a good deal smaller

and the atmosphere far more intimate than it had a few minutes ago when there had been

three of them.

She was very conscious of Ethan sitting so close. He was not one of those beefy men like

Nelson Radnor who looked as if he'd played football in college and who always seemed to

crowd a woman. Nevertheless, Ethan somehow managed to take up more than his share of

the available space. His nearness did things to her nerve endings, unfamiliar things, things she

could not remember experiencing before around a man, not even in her other life.

She wondered if she was suffering some form of delayed shock.

He drove the short distance to the two-story building that housed her apartment and parked

in the lot.

Without a word, he got out of the car and opened the door on the passenger side.

She knew

what he was probably thinking. Ace detective that he was, he could not help but notice that

the Casa de Oro Apartments did not exactly live up to its grand-sounding name. But while the

place was no house of gold and although it was considerably more down-market than

Arcadia's luxury condo, it was everything it had claimed to be in the newspaper ad she had

answered: clean, quiet, and, most important of all, *affordable*.

Clutching her tote, she extricated herself from the close confines of the interior and walked

with him to the green wrought-iron gate.

It was late, she realized, reaching into her tote for the heavy key ring, almost midnight. It

was strange to think that, after all she and Ethan had been through together today, she

hardly knew him. Yet here he was, taking her home. She wondered what he

would say if she

informed him that he was the first man to get this close to her front door since she had

moved to Whispering Springs.

Then again maybe he would not be interested in that small factoid. Probably just hand her his

itemized bill and ask her when it would be convenient for her to take a look at the room he

wanted her to design.

"Here, I'll do that for you." Ethan took

the key chain from her hand and muttered something

beneath his breath when he felt the heft of it. Holding it up to the light, he examined the large

metal ball attached to the ring. "Why don't you just get yourself a nice rock if you want to

add a little extra weight to your purse?"

"It's an antique doorknob. I found it in an old residence I redid a few months ago. I took it to

a local craftsman who works in metal and had him attach the key ring to it."

"I can see that it's a big old doorknob."
He twisted the key in the gate lock.
"What I don't

understand is why you're using it for a
key ring. Some kind of design
statement?"

She gave him a cool smile. "It's big
enough that I can find it easily in my
tote."

"Uh-huh." He did not look impressed
with her explanation. "You sure as hell
don't want to drop

it accidentally on your big toe. You'll
limp for a week."

"I'm careful." She slipped quickly through the gate and led the way along the walk to the door

that opened onto the small lobby. He followed, carrying the brass doorknob in his hand.

"It's the long, silver key," she said.

He opened the door and stood aside. She moved into the lobby and stopped, locked up with

indecision. Should she say good night here or allow him to see her to the door of her

apartment? Did one offer a cup of coffee

to a man who had arguably saved one's life?

Another chill of awareness went through her at the thought of taking him upstairs to her

apartment. This was a no-brainer. Clearly the smart thing to do was to bid him good night

here in the lobby. So why was she dithering?

Ethan studied her with an assessing expression. "You sure you're okay? You don't look good."

"Thanks. You really know how to flatter

the client, don't you?"

"Think of it as a professional observation."

"I'm still feeling a little jumpy, that's all. I told Arcadia that I'm exhausted, and that's true as

far as it goes. But I'm all revved up inside. I feel like I'll never sleep again."

"You overdosed on adrenaline today," he said. "We both did. Too much of that stuff does a

real number on your nervous system. Takes a while to get past the jag."

"I know," she said automatically, not stopping to think.

"Been through it before, huh?"

That had been dumb, she thought. It occurred to her that, between the events of the day

and the champagne, her defenses were dangerously low. She had better get upstairs to her

apartment before she said anything else equally stupid.

"I've heard about the syndrome," she said smoothly. "Sounds like you've experienced it

personally."

"Once or twice. Goes with the job, occasionally." He looked at the stairwell. "I'm betting you're upstairs."

"Yes." This was the moment when she should thank him once again for coming to her rescue

and say good night. But the words seemed to have gotten stuck in her throat.

He gave her another critical survey and then grasped her elbow in a firm grip. "I'd better see

you to your door. I don't think you should be wandering around loose in your present

condition."

"I'm all right, really." She clung to her tote as if it were a flotation device and she was about

to jump into some very deep water.

"You're the one who got the worst of it today."

But she did not resist when he steered her up the staircase. She could feel the power in the

hand wrapped around her arm. If he

were to tighten his grip fractionally, she knew she would

be unable to escape. But she also sensed the control that seemed to be so much a part of

him. The combination of strength and self-discipline was disconcertingly sensual.

Maybe it was just this strange mood she was in tonight. She reminded herself for what was

probably the two-hundredth time that he was not her type.

At the landing Ethan paused to study the

doors that lined the hall. "Which one?"

"The corner apartment."

He walked her to the door, selected the correct key from the heavy ring, and let her inside

her snug little home.

She moved quickly into the miniature foyer, turned on the overhead light, and looked at him.

"Have I thanked you for what you did today?"

He propped one shoulder against the door frame and folded his arms. "You've

mentioned it a

couple of times. If you do it again, I'll probably start back in on my lecture about how you

shouldn't have gone out alone to the Taylor place this afternoon."

She shuddered. "I'd just as soon not hear that particular speech again. But I do want you to

know I'm very grateful for what you did today."

His mouth curved faintly. "I guess this is the point where I get to say, *all part of the job,*

ma'am. You'll get my bill in the morning." For some reason she found that incredibly funny.

She smiled. The smile turned into a giggle. And then she realized she could not stop.

Something was wrong. She *never* giggled, at least not in this unnatural, high-pitched way.

I'm losing it.

Horrified, she dropped the tote on the floor and slapped her palm over her mouth. Intensely

aware of Ethan watching her, she took a

deep breath. Then she took another.

Mercifully the runaway laughter subsided. Cautiously she took her hand away from her mouth.

She could feel herself turning red with embarrassment.

"Sorry," she mumbled.

"Me, too," he said. "That wasn't my best line."

"Maybe the champagne was not such a good idea tonight," she said.

"I'm sure it seemed like it at the time."

"Yes, it did."

"Mind if I ask you a personal question?"

"I don't know." Something in his expression made her cautious. "What's the question?"

"You and Arcadia. Are you two, uh, a couple?"

It took her at least two beats to process that query. Then she managed to grasp his meaning.

"No," she said. "We're friends. Very close friends. But we're not lovers. I'm not gay and Arcadia

is, well, I'm not sure what she is, to be perfectly honest. Arcadia is Arcadia. We've never

discussed her sexual orientation."

"That was the way I had it figured, but I just wanted to be sure."

She could not seem to look away from him. Time was slowing down and turning viscous. She

felt like a butterfly trying to move through thick honey.

"Why?" she whispered.

Ethan straightened very deliberately,

unfolded his arms, and took one step forward into the

hall.

"Because I didn't want to make a complete fool out of myself when I kissed you," he said.

Time stopped altogether. This was one of those deer-in-the-headlights moments, she

thought. She groped for something intelligent to say, tried to come up with a smart,

sophisticated way to break through the heavy spell that held her in thrall. But

her brain

refused to engage.

All of the restless, chaotic energy that
had been ebbing and flowing through her
for the past

few hours surged abruptly to high tide.
Every nerve in her body was shimmering
with a tension

that was not unlike what she had
experienced when she had heard the
gunshots outside the

wine cellar.

The memory of that moment of horrified

dread jolted her out of the silence.

"I was terrified that he'd shot you," she whispered. Ethan put his hands on her shoulders. He

flexed his fingers, tightening his grip experimentally, as if waiting to see if she would try to

run. He drew her slowly toward him.

"All the more reason why you shouldn't have gone out there alone today," he said. He really

was angry, she thought. Or maybe not. It was impossible to be certain of anything except the

heat in his eyes. It was so intense it could have thawed an iceberg. It was certainly doing a

terrific job of melting something deep inside her, something that had been frozen for a long

time.

She raised her fingers to the small bandage at the edge of his jaw. He had gone home to

shower and change after the session with the police. Evidently he had taken the time to

shave, too.

It was incredibly exhilarating to touch him like this. "Are you really mad at me?" she asked,

intrigued. "I'm not sure," he muttered. "Maybe I'm just pissed off at myself for letting the

situation get out of control. I should never have allowed you to get into that mess." "It wasn't

your fault."

"Yeah, it was my fault." He pulled her hard against him and put his mouth very close to hers.

"And this is going to be my fault, too. No

one to blame here but myself. I really hate when
that happens."

His mouth closed over hers, fierce and demanding. Her response was immediate and electric.

Excitement crashed through her. She was literally shaking with it.

With a tiny, muffled moan, she wrapped her arms around his neck and clung to him. Sensation

poured through her, leaving her dazzled and breathless. She had known desire in the past but

never like this. She could feel herself growing damp, and he was *just kissing her*.

She was aware that what was left of the rational part of her mind was trying to get a

message through, but she ignored the warning. She knew that she had drifted into some

uncharted danger zone, but she no longer cared.

She and Ethan had survived a brush with death at the hands of a cold-blooded killer. As far as

she was concerned, the events of the day had created a bond that would exist between them

for the rest of their lives even if they never saw each other again. Then again, maybe that

was how you rationalized a one-night encounter, she thought.

Works for me.

She was vaguely aware of Ethan closing the door with one hand while he pinned her to him

with the other. She was too busy kissing his throat, his ear, his mouth – too busy

rejoicing in

the elemental thrill of being crushed into his unyielding body.

It seemed to her that, in spite of his shower and fresh clothes, the aura of the day's violence

still clung to him. She wanted to free him from it and replace it with the same euphoria that

was coursing through her.

Ethan reluctantly pulled his mouth away from hers. He was breathing heavily. He shoved his

fingers through her hair and clamped her head very gently between his palms.

"This is probably not a good idea," he said thickly.

"Probably not."

"But I can't seem to think of a better one."

"Neither can I."

The urgency welling up from some deep place spilled through her, leaving showers of sparks in

its wake. She could feel the same electricity crackling through Ethan. It

was a wonder they

didn't short out the apartment's wiring, she thought.

He lifted her into his arms, angled her out of the hallway, and carried her into the close

shadows of the small front room. There he settled her down onto the nearest piece of

furniture, a dainty, elegantly curved little sofa. For a moment, she feared the graceful little

piece would crumple beneath their combined weight.

The sofa shuddered, but it stayed upright. It was not large enough to hold the two of them,

however. When he came down on top of her, Ethan rolled with her in his arms onto the

carpet.

He did not seem to notice the sudden change in elevation.

She could hardly catch her breath, but breathing was the last thing on her mind now. She

clawed at the buttons of his shirt. The knowledge that he was as caught up in

this moment as

she was acted like a potent aphrodisiac.

She was aware of him fumbling with her blouse. He got it off and it disappeared. Cool air

flowed over her hot skin. Her bra vanished. His palm rasped lightly over her nipple. She

shivered and dug her nails into his back.

He put a hand under the lower edge of her skirt and slid one warm palm up the inside of her

bare leg until he touched her already

dampened panties. He pressed his hand against her

briefly. When she arched in response, he whispered in her ear – raw, earthy, incredibly sexy

things. No man had ever talked like that to her. She was shocked.

"Yes," she said. "Oh, yes, please."

He tugged her panties off and pushed her skirt upward until it bunched at her thighs.

"Tell me if I'm going too fast here," he said into her mouth. "I feel like I'm in free fall."

"You are not going too fast."

She curved one leg around his thigh and felt the heat of him through his trousers. When she

moved her foot along his calf, he sucked in his breath and groaned.

Buttons popped, flew, and skittered across the little coffee table. She had done some damage

to the shirt, she thought, but at least she had gotten it undone. That was the really important thing right now.

She flattened her hand on his bare chest

and felt the smooth glide of muscle beneath skin.

Oh, yes, getting his shirt off had certainly been the right thing to do.

She went to work on his belt buckle.

"Hang on," he said against her throat.

"I'm trying to."

He started to smile and then he gave a husky groan and put a hand down between their

bodies. He covered her fumbling fingers.

"I'll get it," he said.

He wrenched himself away from her again and got to his feet. She watched him strip off his

low-cut boots, trousers, briefs, and shirt. The curtains were closed on the windows

overlooking the swimming pool and garden, but enough light seeped through to reveal the

contours of his hard body. He looked larger than life here in the confines of her small living

room.

She looked at his heavy arousal and

caught her breath. A *lot* larger than life.

A moment later he came back down on top of her. Excitement flared. She turned her head and

bit him lightly on the arm. *Bit him*. She never did things like that in bed. He laughed softly in

the shadows.

His hand tightened around the curve of her hip. She felt his mouth on her breasts, her belly

and lower. When he found the hidden, exquisitely sensitive little button, she nearly screamed.

She had not expected this. It was too much for her overwrought senses, especially given the

fact that it had been so long since she had shared any kind of sexual intimacy. She sank her

fingers into his hair. Her entire lower body was clenched as tight as a fist.

"*Ethan.*" Her fingers tightened fiercely in his hair.

He moved up to cover her, sinking into her. *Larger than life.*

The too-tight feeling was right at the knife edge that separated pleasure and

pain. She could

not stand it, she thought. She could not take this.

Without warning her climax rocked through her. This was not the sweet, pleasurable release

she remembered from the past. This was a powerful, sweeping cascade of sensation that

stole her breath. She could not even cry out with the astonishment and wonder of it all.

The furious release rode her, wringing her out and throwing her to the winds.

Ethan retreated an inch or two and then plunged back into her. She felt every muscle in his

back go taut just before his own climax slammed through him.

At the last possible instant, he covered her mouth with his own. She swallowed most of his

hoarse, triumphant shout of satisfaction.

* * *

A long time later, Ethan managed to rouse himself from the seductive lethargy that had stolen

over him in the aftermath of passion. He glanced at his watch. It was after one in the

morning. Beside him Zoe was wedged into the angle of his body, spoon fashion. He could feel

the soft, silken skin of her sweetly rounded rear tucked warmly against his thighs.

He could not recall the last time sex had been this good. True, it had been quite a while since

the last time, and he was old enough to know that bouts of abstinence, spiked with adrenaline

overload, tended to make the heart grow fonder. Still, it had been pretty damn memorable. At

least it had been memorable for him.

He thought about how good it had felt to be inside her, how she had wrapped herself around

him and shivered in his arms. His satiated body began to stir.

She opened smoky eyes and looked up at him.

"You're leaving," she said calmly.

It was a casual, straightforward

observation, not a question or a plea or even a protest. It

shook him more than he would have believed. He tried to read her expression in the shadows

and realized that she *expected* him to go, maybe even *wanted* him to leave.

He sure as hell did not consider himself to be the romantic or sentimental type, but it bothered

him that she had no problem with the concept of showing him the door. Hadn't what had just

happened between them meant anything

to her? Maybe he was the only one here who was

not accustomed to sex that good.

"Depends," he said. He decided to force the issue out into the open. Better to know the truth

than to leave wondering what it was he had done to screw up. Because he had a feeling that

as soon as he walked out the door he would be trying to think of a way to get back inside.

"Do you want me to go?"

For an instant he was certain that she was about to say yes, and he went a little cold inside.

But she hesitated. In the shadows, her expression was very serious, as if she was attempting

to make a profound decision, one that scared her.

"No," she said on a soft sigh. "I don't want you to go."

"Good." His insides reheated. "I don't want to leave yet, either. But I would like to request a

move into the bedroom." He sat up

cautiously. "I'm assuming that your bed is at least

somewhat larger than that itty-bitty sofa over there."

She blinked a couple of times. He got the impression that she was already having second

thoughts about inviting him to stay. His stomach tightened.

Then she smiled. "I think my bed is big enough for both of us."

Chapter Nine

... The white-jacketed orderly seized her arm and pulled her around the corner into the long

hallway. Fear crested within her. She hated this passage more than any other place in the

hospital. Desperately, she dug in her heels and tried to struggle free.

The attendant shook her angrily. "Get with the program, bitch. You've got an appointment

with Dr. McAlistair this afternoon. I

don't have time for this crap."

His name was Ron but she had privately given him and the rest of the orderlies the generic

label of *Hulk*. She hated them all, but she hated Ron and Ernie the most. The pair always

pretended to treat the patients with concern on the rare occasions when there were family

members or visitors present but when they were alone with a *resident* – the director's

diplomatic term for an inmate – they

were rough, rude, and occasionally cruel.

She had managed to fake swallowing her morning meds as usual, but she suspected that

McAlistair had ordered something new to be slipped into her hot cereal. There was something

wrong with her again. Her head was spinning and her balance was off.

Another one of McAlistair's little experiments, no doubt.

Ron was in a hurry today. He jerked her swiftly along the hall. She saw the red

metal

emergency fire extinguisher box on the wall and knew that the entrance of the screaming

room loomed ahead on the right.

Sometimes the door was closed, and that was better because then the screams were muffled.

But today the door stood open. Dread seized her. Some of the sobs trapped in the wall were

fresh. Something bad had happened in that room again last night.

Ron hauled her past the entrance to the terrible little chamber. She braced herself but nothing

could soften the blow. The white walls of the room shrieked silently, just as they always did.

Pain, rage, and fear mingled together, assaulting her senses. Lately she had begun to wonder

if some of the meds McAlistair was using on her were making her more sensitive.

She did not want to look through the doorway, but she could not bring herself to look away.

There was no one inside the room. It looked quite normal with its white cabinets, blood

pressure gauge, sink, small desk, and chair.

The examination table stood in the center, a fresh sheet of pristine white sanitary paper

pulled neatly down the padded top. The cold metal stirrups were extended.

It was a common, ordinary medical examination room in every way except for the fact that

the walls screamed....

He came awake instantly when he felt Zoe's body stiffen. He had fallen asleep with her

nestled against him. He had one hand resting comfortably on her bare thigh when he first

became aware of the tension that had invaded her sleep. Her skin went cool beneath his palm.

Tiny goose bumps roughened her flesh.

"No." Her arm jerked but she did not awaken. "*No.*"

She started to writhe as if in torment or terror.

"Zoe." He jackknifed upright and hauled her up into his arms. "Zoe, take it easy, honey. You're dreaming."

She shuddered, and then her eyes snapped open. She stared at him with a shocked, dazed expression. He could see that she was still trapped in the nightmare. She did not recognize him.

"Zoe, pay attention." He did not speak gently this time. He made the words a command, and

he delivered it the way he would have in any other type of emergency, coldly, firmly,

demanding a response. "Wake up. Now."

She shivered again, and then she seemed to come back to herself. He wondered where she

had been.

Her muscles loosened and went limp. She gave her head a little shake.

"Sorry," she mumbled. "I get bad dreams sometimes. Didn't mean to scare you."

"Don't worry about it. Are you okay?"

"Yes, thanks."

But she was not okay, he thought. The nightmare had taken a toll.

"Come on." He rolled to the edge of the bed, got to his feet, and found his trousers. "Let's go

into the kitchen. I'll fix you some warm milk."

"Please, don't worry about it. I can cope with the dream."

"You'll cope better after you've had some warm milk." He reached down and pried her out of

the rumpled bedding.

When she was on her feet, he took the dark blue satin robe down from the brass hook on the

wall and draped it around her shoulders.

At that point she evidently decided to concede the field to him. Without another word of

protest, she tied the sash of the robe and allowed herself to be steered to the kitchen.

He sat her down on one of the tall chairs at the high, round table near the window and went

to work in the miniature kitchen. He found a half-full quart of nonfat milk in the refrigerator

and a small saucepan in a cupboard. He could feel her eyes on him, pensive and uneasy, but

she did not speak.

When the milk was ready, he set a mug full of it in front of her and sat down in the one other

chair. He folded his elbows on the table.

"Drink," he ordered.

"It was very kind of you to do this, but I

really don't like warm milk."

"Drink," he said again. "It may not do anything for you, but it will make me feel better."

"Okay, okay." She raised the mug with both hands and took a tentative taste. She swallowed

and made a face. "You're inclined to be rather dictatorial, but I suppose you already know

that."

"Others have mentioned the trait on occasion over the years, but I feel that I have been

sadly misunderstood."

She nodded. "Of course."

She drank some more of the milk.

"Want to tell me about the dream?" he asked after a while.

"No," she said quickly. "I'd rather not talk about it. Makes it too real, if you know what I mean."

"Suit yourself."

"Did I, uh, say anything?" she asked cautiously.

"While you were caught up in the nightmare?" He shook his head, wondering why that

possibility concerned her. "Not much. Just the word *no* a couple of times."

She looked relieved. "That's all?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"I just wondered. It's a little embarrassing, to tell you the truth."

"Do you remember saying something in the dream?"

"Not really." She looked down at the milk. "It was one of those bad dreams in

which you find

yourself running away from some unseen threat. A common, garden-variety nightmare."

She was lying, he thought. It made him curious, but he let it go. This was not the time to

push her.

"Given the events of the day, it's not surprising that your dream would follow that script," he

said.

"I guess not."

He watched the remnants of her tension dissipate as she drank the milk.

After a while, he rinsed out the empty mug and led her back to the bedroom.

They got into bed, and he cradled her close. She relaxed against him.

He had just decided that she was safely asleep when she spoke.

"Thanks for the milk," she mumbled.

"Any time."

Chapter Ten

The door of Ian Harper's office opened. Venetia McAlister, clutching a set of files, walked into

the room. Her round face was crimped in disapproval.

With her halo of gray curls, her little glasses, and her frumpy suits, Venetia made Ian think of

his grandmother. There had always been cookies in the oven and a heavy leather belt hanging

close at hand in Granny's house. Granny

had not hesitated to use the heavy leather strap on

her *little man* if he failed to follow all of the rules. *Can't have you turning out like your father,*

now can we?

"I brought my notes regarding Sara Cleland," Venetia said. "But I can't understand why you

want to go over them, and I'm rather busy this afternoon."

"Please sit down," Ian said. "I have some news."

He had not been looking forward to this conversation. He did not like Venetia, but there was

no getting around the fact that she knew more about the Cleland woman than anyone else at

the Manor. Furthermore, she had a strong personal interest in seeing Sara Cleland returned to

the hospital.

"What news?" Venetia demanded.

"Leon Grady found the Cleland woman."

"I don't understand." Venetia sat down

hard in one of the two chairs on the other side of the

desk. The jacket of her skirted suit bunched up around her thick waist. She held the files she

had brought with her in both hands on her lap. "You told me that she and the other patient

who escaped that night died in a hotel fire somewhere in Mexico."

"Apparently they faked their deaths, or at least the Cleland woman faked hers."

"I see." Venetia removed her glasses and absently polished the lenses with the

hem of her

white blouse. "This is really quite astonishing. I had no idea."

"Several days ago, Grady was contacted online by someone calling himself GopherBoy. This

individual claimed to have hacked into the files of someone who sells false identities over the

net. He managed to steal some of the files before that person realized there was an intruder."

"Incredible. I've heard of such things, of course, but I never – "

"The hacker claimed that he had information regarding our patient and that he would give it to

us for a price," Ian said, impatient with the interruption.

"I see." Venetia positioned her glasses back on her nose. "What did you do?"

"I authorized payment of a large sum of money to him. Grady handled the transaction. He told

me that in exchange for the money, he had been given a name, some personal data, and the

information that the Cleland woman was

in L.A. We both agreed that he should try to find the

woman and verify her identity before we arranged to have her picked up and returned to us."

"Of course. It certainly wouldn't do to snatch the wrong person off the street, would it? There

are laws against that sort of thing."

Ian gritted his teeth. Once in a while he got the uneasy feeling that Venetia McAlister did not

have a great deal of professional respect for him.

"Grady left for Los Angeles a few days ago," he said. "And then he disappeared."

"Disappeared?"

"He has evidently betrayed this institution and my confidence. I do not know for certain what

he plans to do with the information he has regarding the Cleland woman, but I think we can be

sure that he does not intend to see her safely returned to the Manor."

"But where is he?"

"Fortunately, Ms. Leeds became suspicious of his behavior almost immediately and took action.

She instructed Al Drummer in accounting to keep tabs on Grady by tracking his charge card

expenses. Grady did indeed use his Candle Lake Manor card to get to L.A. There he rented a

car and that is when he vanished."

Venetia looked baffled. "Where did he go?"

"Ms. Leeds believes that he has gone to wherever the Cleland woman really is,

of course. She

is currently trying to come up with that information."

"But what on earth does Grady intend to do?"

"I'm not sure, but I suspect he has figured out a way to make a profit on the information he

got from the hacker. Some form of blackmail, I imagine."

Outrage glittered in Venetia's birdlike eyes. "I must tell you, Dr. Harper, that I have long had

serious doubts about Leon Grady's professional attitude and dedication. I've never been

convinced that he put the best interests of this hospital or the patients first."

No shit, Ian thought. But he managed to maintain his carefully honed facade of the dedicated

professional. "Unfortunately, your impression was correct. Hindsight is always twenty-twenty,

is it not?"

"She has gone without her therapy and medication for an entire year. There is

no telling how

much ground has been lost."

"I agree. The situation is quite critical."

Venetia sat up very straight, gripping her files. "We must bring her back at once.

For her own

sake."

You mean because you 've got plans for her, Ian thought. But he did not say that out loud.

Whatever McAlistair wanted to do with the Cleland woman once she had been retrieved did

not interest him. His only goal was to get his extremely profitable patient back.

The door opened again. Fenella Leeds entered.

"I've got an address for the Cleland woman," she said coldly. "Found it in some email

correspondence that Grady conducted with that hacker. Grady deleted the email, but I was

able to recover it. He was always very sloppy about records of all kinds."

Fenella's beautiful face was as composed and impassive as ever. Ian

still could not believe

that he had had her in his bed for a while. At the start of their brief affair, he had considered

himself a very lucky man. By the time she had lost interest in him and ended the relationship,

he was profoundly relieved.

Fenella was the only woman he had ever met besides his grandmother who had the power to

terrify him.

"Where is Sara?" Venetia demanded.

Fenella glanced at her notes. "A town called Whispering Springs. It's in Arizona. She's living

under the name Zoe Luce."

"What about Grady?" Ian asked. "Did you find him?"

"No. Evidently he's smart enough not to charge his lodging and meals to his corporate credit

card. He probably realizes that we could track him that way."

"Well, he's the least of our problems," Ian said. "We'll deal with him later. The chief priority is

to get Sara back. I'll send two of the orderlies who know her and who have been trained to

handle difficult patients. Get Drummer from accounting in here. I'll tell him to authorize the

travel expenses. I also want to make sure he keeps quiet about this."

"Absolutely," Fenella said. "The last thing we want is for word of this situation to get out to

any of our clients. Publicity like this is precisely what they pay us to avoid."

Five minutes later, Al Drummer walked

into the office. If Venetia reminded him of his

grandmother, Ian thought, Drummer put him in mind of the stern, fire-and-brimstone preacher

whose sermons Granny had forced him to endure every Sunday – the one who had shocked

the congregation when he was arrested while trolling for prostitutes one weekend in Florida.

Ian gave him the outline of the situation.

Drummer's eyes blazed with what could only be described as righteous wrath.

"I told you that Leon Grady could not be entrusted with a corporate credit card,"

Drummer

said.

Chapter Eleven

She awoke feeling a little groggy but not nearly as wrung out as she usually did after one of

the bad dreams. For a few seconds, she kept her eyes closed and tried to make sense of the

incessant warbling sound that had awakened her.

Something about the bed felt wrong. It finally occurred to her that she was alone in it. It was

unsettling to realize how quickly the feel

of Ethan's weight beside her had become familiar and

comfortable. One night. Probably not a good thing.

She opened her eyes and sat up against the pillows.

Ethan was gone.

A glance at the bedside clock provided one possible explanation for his departure. It was

almost ten o'clock. She stared, disbelieving, at the hands of the timepiece. She *never* slept

this late.

The irritating warble interrupted her thoughts. She pushed aside the covers, swung her feet

over the side of the bed, and reached for the phone.

"Hello?"

"Did he spend the night?" *Arcadia* asked without preamble.

"Sort of."

"Sort of? Did he or didn't he?"

"He was here."

"I had a feeling that might happen."
Arcadia sounded pleased. "Something
about the way he

was watching you all through dinner last
night. Can I assume matters turned
appropriately

passionate when you got back to your
apartment?"

"He said it was the aftereffects of the
adrenaline jag we had both been on all
afternoon and

evening."

"Adrenaline jag." Arcadia sounded
thoughtful. "I suppose that's as good an

excuse as any for

hot, steamy sex with a virtual stranger."

"That's certainly what I'm telling myself this morning." She got to her feet and reached for her

robe. "Heaven knows, I need some kind of rationalization for what happened. I can't believe I

did it, Arcadia. I haven't even been interested in a man since – " She broke off. "You know."

"I know."

"And then, last night it was as if the

floodgates had been opened. It was a completely surreal

experience, if you want to know the truth."

Arcadia chuckled. "It probably just felt a little weird because you've been celibate for so long.

Don't worry about it. You had a right to a night of wild abandon. Is he still there?"

"No. He's gone. One is tempted to make the usual snide remarks about men who sneak out

without saying goodbye but I suppose

I've got to allow for mitigating circumstances in this case."

"Circumstances such as the fact that it's ten o'clock on a weekday morning and he does have a business to operate?"

"Yeah. And so do I. I just remembered that I've got an appointment with a client at eleven, and I've got to arrange for repairs at the Taylor residence. I don't even want to think about

what they'll say when they find out what happened to that gorgeous Spanish chest."

"Relax. It will give them a good story to tell at their next cocktail party."

"I certainly hope they take that attitude." Clutching the phone, she slid her feet into a pair of

slippers and padded down the hall toward the kitchen. "I can't believe I slept in like this. And

so solidly. I never even heard him leave."

"He probably didn't want to wake you."

"More likely he didn't want to have to make any of the customary polite promises about calling

me." She picked up the teakettle and turned on the faucet. "Based on what he told me of his

track record, I'm afraid Ethan Truax has a problem with the commitment thing."

"What track record?"

"He admitted that he's been married and divorced three times."

"You're right, it doesn't sound like he goes in for permanency. But, then, you're not exactly

looking for a long-term committed relationship, yourself, at the moment, are you?"

It was a depressing observation but entirely valid. A committed relationship implied truth,

trust, and a degree of intimacy that she dared not risk.

"Point taken." She plugged in the kettle and opened the ceramic jar that contained her

favorite tea. "Still, three marriages and three divorces are a little scary."

"Not even close," Arcadia said quietly.

"You and I both know some real scary types. Ethan

Truax is not in that category."

"I won't argue with you."

"Not to change the subject, but have you seen the paper this morning?" Arcadia asked.

Zoe started to say no. Then she noticed the morning edition of the *Whispering Springs Herald*

lying on the kitchen table. Ethan must have found it at her door and brought it inside before

he left. She wondered if she should be touched by the thoughtful gesture. Maybe he had

merely brought it in for his own convenience to read before he left for work. That was the

problem with a guy who was commitment-phobic. You did not know what kind of spin to put

on his actions.

"It's here," she said into the phone. "But I haven't read it."

"You might want to take a look at the story below the fold of the second

section."

"Uh-oh. Should I get a bad feeling about this?"

"Depends."

Zoe took a step closer to the high table and saw that the paper had been left folded open to

the second section. It was impossible to miss the headline.

DESERT VIEW MAN CONFESSES TO MURDER OF WIFE

A jolt of unease went through her.

"How bad is it?" she asked. "That nice Detective Ramirez who took our statements yesterday

promised that he would do his best to keep me out of it."

"You're out of it, all right. Neither you nor Enhanced Interiors is mentioned by name. The story

doesn't name the Taylors, either. It just refers to shots fired at a private residence."

"That's a relief. What about Ethan? This was his first case here in Whispering Springs. Did he

get any credit for being the hero of the hour?"

"That's the amusing part," Arcadia stated. "Read the last couple of paragraphs."

Zoe looked closer and saw that Ethan had marked them for her with a heavily inked arrow.

... A police spokesperson acknowledged that the murder might never have come to light had it

not been for the actions of the private investigator who tracked Mason to the residence

yesterday. "His inquiries into the disappearance of Jennifer Mason broke the case," the

spokesperson said. A representative of Radnor Security Systems, a local firm that handles

security for Desert View as well as several large businesses in the area, was contacted for

comment. He referred all questions to the CEO of the firm, Nelson Radnor, who, in turn

declined, citing a longstanding policy of client confidentiality.

"*Radnor*." Zoe snatched up the paper. "The stupid reporter got the wrong agency."

"He probably just went on the assumption that the investigator was a Radnor employee

because everyone knows that company is the big banana in security around here."

"Reporters aren't supposed to go on assumptions." Fuming, she slapped the paper against the

edge of the table. "They're supposed to report facts."

"Really? Since when? I hadn't heard

that."

Zoe sighed. "Poor Ethan. He risks his neck, does all the work, and doesn't get the credit."

"Look on the bright side. He got you into bed last night. That's more than any other man has

accomplished in a very long time."

Chapter Twelve

A bell tinkled somewhere in the veils of darkness that hung from the ceiling of Single-Minded

Books. Ethan closed the door and waited for his eyes to adjust to the gloom. He had known

the proprietor, Singleton Cobb, for only three weeks. He had not yet figured out if Cobb was

passionately devoted to the cause of saving a couple of bucks on his electricity bill or if he

thought the dingy decor added atmosphere. This was an antiquarian bookstore, after all.

The place was so crammed that he could hardly move. If Zoe ever saw the interior, she'd

probably advise Singleton to get rid of all the bookcases. They no doubt messed up the

energy flow.

The collection was impressive, especially given the relatively small size of the shop.

Out-of-print and rare volumes of all

shapes and descriptions filled row after row of shelves

that extended from floor to ceiling. The pleasant, slightly musty smell of old books and aged

leather permeated the space.

There was a shifting of the shadows at the back of the shop. Singleton materialized,

silhouetted against the blue-green glow cast by his computer screen.

If you saw him on the street and did not know what he did for a living, Ethan thought, you

would never guess that the guy was an antiquarian book dealer. On the surface, there was

nothing of the academic or the scholar about him.

Singleton was built like a rock. Not just any rock, a large chunk of granite. He was the size of

a small mountain. He appeared to be in his fifties. Like stone that has been exposed to the

elements for a few eons, he had weathered some but he sure as hell had not softened.

His skull was completely shaved. It gleamed, as if it had been oiled. The tendrils of elaborate

tattoos peeked out from beneath the rolled-up sleeves of a faded denim shirt. He had the

face of a really bad-news pro wrestler.

Singleton peered at him through the lenses of a pair of round, gold-rimmed spectacles. "Got

my message, I see."

"It was waiting for me when I arrived at the office this morning."

Singleton snorted. "Heard you come in half an hour ago. Running a little late today, aren't you?"

"Didn't know you were paying such close attention to my schedule."

"Hard to avoid it, seeing as how we're the only two tenants in the building at the moment and

your office is right overhead. I hear everyone who goes up or down those stairs."

"I was a little busy yesterday. Out late with a client last night."

Singleton leaned his elbows on the counter and looked interested. "About you being busy yesterday."

"Yeah?"

"I read about Mason and the blood-stained bed and the Shootout in the papers. Pretty

exciting stuff. By any chance was that you ducking bullets?"

"How did you guess?"

"Not a lot to do around here," Singleton said. "So I sit around and speculate. I

remembered

your little lady client going up and down
the stairs and the paper mentioned an
unnamed

woman at the scene. Also, I recall you
going out early yesterday morning and
not coming back

all day. And then you've got the fact that
Radnor is more into corporate security
and such.

Can't see any of his people turning up a
blood-stained bed. I sort of put two and
two

together."

"You should have been a detective."

"Don't think so. Guy could get himself killed with the kind of detecting work you did yesterday."

"It was the client's fault." Ethan crossed to the glass counter. "Personally, I prefer to avoid

that kind of exercise whenever possible."

"Blame it on the client, huh?"

"Sure."

Singleton looked knowing. "So you were out late explaining your point of view on the subject

of reckless endangerment to your client?"

"Something along those lines." Ethan shrugged. "The good news is that my client's name didn't

appear in print. She'll be happy about that."

"I don't blame her. Probably not good for her business to have it going around that she was

involved in a situation that got her

client's newly decorated house shot up."

"Probably not."

"On the other hand, it would have been a nice bit of advertising for your business if your name

had made it into the article."

"Win some, lose some." Ethan braced both hands on the wooden edge of the counter.

"Where's my journal?"

"Got it right here." Singleton turned partway around and plucked a large envelope off the desk

behind him. He handed the package to Ethan. "Located it through an online dealer I know who

specializes in private journals and diaries of the twentieth century. I paid extra and had it

shipped overnight."

"I'm impressed." Ethan opened the envelope and removed the slender, leather-bound volume.

"I did a search online myself before I came to you. Found some leads to the newspaper

coverage of the murder but no trace of

the journal."

"The Internet has done a lot for the antiquarian trade," Singleton said. "But like any other

business, you've still got to have connections to find the good stuff."

Ethan examined the book. The leather was cracked but the pages were in excellent condition.

He examined the first words in the journal. They had been written down in a strong, flowing script.

The Journal of Abner Bennett Foote

Anticipation whispered through him. He turned to an entry at random and read the first few

lines.

"... Nightwinds is finished at last. My beloved Camelia now has a setting that befits her

extraordinary beauty...."

Ethan closed the journal. "I'm in luck. Foote's handwriting is clear and legible."

Singleton's brow wrinkled. "Mind if I

ask why you wanted his journal? Is it because you're living

in that old house he built?"

"Indirectly." Ethan slipped the book into the envelope. "It's the death of Camelia Foote that

really interests me."

"Why's that?"

"I research old murder cases." Ethan pulled his wallet out of his pocket. "It's a hobby."

"Huh. Didn't know she was murdered. The story is that she got real drunk at a

big party out at

Nightwinds years ago and died in a fall in the canyon."

"That was the official verdict. But the old newspaper accounts imply that there were plenty of

rumors of murder at the time. A lot of people, including the local chief of police, apparently

suspected that her husband killed her in a jealous rage."

"Unusual hobby," Singleton said. "But when you get right down to it, I guess it's not that much

different from playing chess online."

"You do that?" Ethan handed over his credit card.

"Among other things." Singleton swiped the credit card through a machine. "Once upon a time,

I used to work for a think tank.

Specialized in cryptography. I'm out of the business now, but

the chess games are a way of keeping my hand in, so to speak."

"Cryptography? As in computer security and encryption?"

"Yeah."

"You must be good."

"Used to be. I pretty much burned out."

"But you can still find your way around on the Net?"

"Sure."

Ethan took the credit slip and signed it.
He picked up the book and paused.

"You ever do any freelance consulting?"
he asked.

"Not for a long time. What did you have in mind?"

"I sometimes need the kind of deep background information that it takes a real expert to pull

off the Net. I can get the standard info from the usual sources, but I'm not what you'd call a

computer whiz. There are times when I need someone who can dig deeper and faster. I can't

afford the guy I used to use in L.A. You interested?"

Singleton pondered that. "You can't afford the other guy? That doesn't sound so good."

"Truax Investigations is a small business. Still in the start-up phase. You know how it is."

"Hell, why not?" Singleton grinned.
"Might make for a break now and again.
The book trade is

interesting and I've got my chess games,
but I don't mind telling you that it gets a
little dull

around here from time to time. My social
life has been sort of nonexistent since my
wife left."

"I know the feeling. Why'd she split?"

"She said I did not show a sufficient

interest in upward mobility. Something to do with my

refusing to join the Desert View golf club, I think."

Ethan nodded. "My third wife said something along those lines, too."

"Yeah? What did the other two say?"

"First one said she'd married me by mistake. The second one said I was not good at

communicating. I think maybe she was trying to be polite."

"What'd she really mean?"

"That I was boring."

* * *

The phone rang just before noon. Zoe grabbed it.

"Enhanced Interiors."

"I see you finally made it into to work,"
Ethan said.

The tiny knot of tension, which had settled in the pit of her stomach and which she had been

determined to ignore, eased.

"You should have awakened me before

you left," she said crisply.

"Figured you needed your sleep. The nightmare you had seemed to take a lot out of you."

"Mmm."

"How do you feel?" he asked.

"Fine, thanks." Time to change the topic.

"By the way, I saw the newspaper.

Nelson Radnor is

a sneaky bastard, isn't he? Imagine him letting that reporter think his company was involved in

solving the murder of Jennifer Mason.

Talk about nerve."

"I'd rather talk about your bill."

She glared at the photo of Nightwinds on the wall. "You're supposed to be a little more

diplomatic and suave when you bring up the subject of money. You sound a trifle mercenary."

"Only a trifle? I'll have to work on that. Look, you operate a small business. You know how

important it is to keep up with accounts receivable. You want to come to my office this

afternoon after you close for the day?
We can go over the details together."

Be still my beating heart. "Why don't
you just put the bill in the mail?"

"It's sort of complicated, what with our
little agreement to take it out in trade."
Ethan paused

a beat. "You do remember that part,
don't you?"

"I remember."

"Good. I've been thinking it over and
I've decided which room I want you to
redecorate."

"How big is it?" she asked cautiously.

"Big enough. It's my bedroom. I'll take you out there so you can have a look at it."

His bedroom. Oh, gee.

"I don't know if I've got time this evening," she said uneasily.

"Afterward I'm going to take my nephews and their mother for *pizza*. You're welcome to come along."

So very casual, she thought. Just a throwaway invitation. But it left her

temporarily

speechless. Going out for pizza with the family. It sounded so *normal*, the sort of thing that

real people, living real lives did.

"I'd like that," she finally said. "I'd like that very much."

* * *

At five-o'clock that afternoon, she sat in the jaws of Ethan's outsized client chair, the copy of

her bill from Truax Investigations on her lap, and fumed.

"Five hundred dollars in miscellaneous expenses?" She raised the neatly itemized bill and waved

it in the air. "That's ridiculous."

Ethan lounged back in his chair, elbows resting on the arms, fingers together. His feet, shod in

running shoes, were stacked on the corner of his desk. He made a what-can-you-do sound

with his tongue.

"Cost of bribes, like everything else, has gone up," he said.

"You should have cleared the amounts with me before you handed five hundred dollars over to

that guard and the man at the storage facility."

"Wasn't time to call you. In both instances, I had to make executive decisions on the spot."

"Executive decisions, my big toe. I'll bet you would have been a lot more economical about it if

it was your own money you were throwing around."

He tapped his fingertips together and

looked authoritative. "The information and access I

obtained with the bribes were vital to the successful closure of the case."

"Something tells me you could have obtained that information for a lot less money." She

spotted another item on the bill and was immediately consumed with fresh outrage. "What's

this about travel expenses? You told me you would cover your own travel expenses."

"Only within the local area. I had to

drive outside the city limits of
Whispering Springs to

investigate the storage locker facility."

"Meals?" She stabbed a finger at another
item on the bill. "You're billing me for
the sandwich

and coffee you had while you were out
of town?"

"A man's got to keep his strength up."

Before she could move on to the next
ridiculous charge, she heard the sound of
footsteps

pounding up the stairs. The voices of

two young males echoed in the outer office.

"Uncle Ethan, is she still here? You didn't take her to your house yet, did you?"

"Mom made us stop at the stupid mall. That's why we're late."

The door of Ethan's office slammed open. Two boys garbed in jeans, tee shirts, and running

shoes charged into the room. Zoe recognized them as the youngsters she had nearly collided

with on the stairs on the occasion of her

first visit to Truax Investigations.

They halted and stared at her with ill-concealed fascination.

"Oh, wow," the older one said. "She's still here."

Ethan surveyed the two invaders.

"Allow me to introduce my nephews. Jeff and Theo, meet

Ms. Luce."

"Hi." Theo said.

"Hello, Ms. Luce," Jeff said.

"Nice to meet you," Zoe said politely.

She wondered what she had done to warrant so much

interest on the part of two small boys.

Jeff turned to Ethan. "Can we go to your place now?"

"Yep." Ethan glanced at his watch.

"Where's your mom?"

"I'm right here," said a warm voice from the doorway.

Zoe turned her head and saw an attractive woman with short, curly, light brown hair. She was

dressed in a pale yellow blouse and

chocolate brown trousers.

"I'm Bonnie Truax." Bonnie smiled.

"The mother of these two ghouls. You must be Zoe."

"Yes." *I'm going to like her*, Zoe thought. "How do you do?"

She was about to ask Bonnie why she had referred to her sons as ghouls, but before she

could frame the question, Ethan got to his feet.

"Come on, folks, let's get going," he said. "We'll run over to my place, show Zoe the room

she's going to redecorate, and then we'll do the pizza thing."

"Can I ride with you, Uncle Ethan?" Jeff asked.

"Me, too," Theo said. "I want to be sure to see what happens when Ms. Luce checks out the

inside of your house."

Ethan looked at Zoe and Bonnie. "Why don't we all go in my car and from there to pizza?"

"Cool." Jeff dashed through the door.

"See you downstairs." Theo raced after

his brother.

"Wait for us in the hall," Bonnie called after them.

"Okay," Jeff yelled back over his shoulder.

Both boys pelted down the stairs and disappeared.

Zoe looked at Ethan. "Is there something I need to know about your house?"

"Needs some work." Ethan stood aside to allow Zoe and Bonnie to go through the door.

"Work is right." Bonnie made a face.

"Didn't Ethan tell you? He bought Nightwinds, that pink

blob just outside of town."

Zoe stopped at the top of the stairs, startled. "That big Spanish Colonial out on the cliffs?

Good grief, it's huge. And it was built back in the late 1940s, wasn't it? I'm sure it's got a lot

of atmosphere, but I'll bet it is one heck of a money pit."

"Got a deal on it from my uncle," Ethan said.

"Victor knew he'd never be able to sell it to anyone else," Bonnie said. "So he practically gave it to Ethan."

"What can I say?" Ethan shrugged. "Uncle Vic saw me coming."

Zoe started down the stairs, following Bonnie.

"Be careful of really good deals when it comes to very old houses," Zoe said. "The upkeep is

usually enormous. But I must admit I'll be interested to view the inside. Why are Jeff and Theo

so eager to see my reaction to the place?"

Bonnie glanced back over her shoulder. "Ethan more or less promised them that you would

collapse and start twitching at the sight of the interior of Nightwinds."

Zoe shot Ethan a disgusted glare. "Thanks a lot."

"He implied that your delicate designer sensibilities would not be able to withstand the shock,"

Bonnie added.

"Really?" Zoe smiled coolly at Ethan.
"Obviously you know nothing about the
fortitude required
of a successful interior designer."

"I didn't a few days ago when I first
made that prediction," Ethan agreed.
"But I've got to

admit that yesterday was a real eye-
opener for me." He lowered his voice
and leaned in close,

speaking directly into Zoe's ear.
"Learned some interesting things last
night, too. Do all you
decorator types go in for matching

underwear?"

It wasn't his words that made her blush, she thought. It was the low, sexy, cheerfully wicked

tone. Mercifully, Bonnie, who had reached the bottom of the stairs and stepped outside, had

not overheard.

There was no sign of Jeff and Theo at the foot of the staircase.

"I told them to wait in the lobby."

Bonnie came back into the hall, looking worried.

Her sudden anxiety was a bit over the top under the circumstances, Zoe thought. The boys

could not have gone far and, while Cobalt Street was a little on the shabby side, it was not

dangerous.

"Take it easy, Bonnie," Ethan said quietly. "Jeff and Theo are fine. I have a hunch they're in

the bookshop."

Zoe heard the calm, steady note in his voice. He was accustomed to reassuring her, she

thought.

At that moment Jeff's voice drifted out of a partially opened door. *"Who wants to buy old*

books like this?"

There was a dark rumble by way of a response.

"Do you have any games on this computer?" Theo asked.

The bear in the bookshop rumbled again.

Bonnie relaxed visibly. "Sounds like they've found someone else to pester." She went toward

the door. "I'd better rescue the poor man."

"Got a hunch Singleton can take care of himself," Ethan said.

But Bonnie had already vanished through the opening.

Zoe followed and reached the door just in time to hear Jeff make introductions in an excited voice.

"Mom, this is Singleton Cobb. He owns all these old books."

"He said Uncle Ethan bought one," Theo

offered. "And he's got some neat games on his computer."

Zoe peered through the gloom. Her first thought was that Singleton Cobb looked like an aging

biker. But there was a quiet good humor in his eyes that did not fit that image.

"I'm Bonnie Truax and these two belong to me. I'm sorry for the intrusion," Bonnie apologized.

"Not a problem," Singleton said.

"Always glad to have a little foot traffic through the place."

He looked at Zoe. "You're the client, aren't you? The one whose name didn't get into the papers."

"This is Zoe Luce," Ethan said. "Zoe, Singleton Cobb."

Singleton grinned. "You're the client."

"I'm the client, all right." Zoe made a face. "And I've got the bill for services rendered by Truax

Investigations to prove it. Do you have any idea how much it costs to bribe people these

days?"

"Clients." Ethan shook his head. "They always complain when it comes time to settle the

account." He signaled to Jeff and Theo. "Let's go, boys. We've got things to do, and I'm

getting hungry."

"We gotta leave now," Jeff said to Singleton. "But we can come back some other time."

"Sounds good to me," Singleton said easily.

"Would you show me some of your computer games next time?" Theo asked. "I could bring you some of Mom's cookies."

Singleton glanced at Bonnie. "It's a deal."

Outside on the street, they all piled into Ethan's SUV. There was still enough late afternoon

light left for Zoe to see that Bonnie's cheeks were slightly flushed.

Jeff and Theo chattered about their new acquaintance and speculated on whether or not he

owned a motorcycle. Bonnie was quiet for a long time.

"An interesting man," she said eventually. "Not quite what you'd expect."

Chapter Thirteen

Nightwinds stood silhouetted in all its flamboyant pink glory against a scorching sunset. Ethan

had a few second thoughts as he halted the SUV in the drive. Maybe this wasn't going to

prove to be one of his more brilliant schemes, after all.

The original concept had been simple and straightforward. Encouraging Zoe to pay her bill by

redecorating a room in his house had

struck him as a particularly crafty maneuver that would

allow him to continue some kind of relationship. But what if she concluded that he had

incredibly bad taste?

"Let us go inside first," Jeff said with an improbably innocent air. "We can turn on the lights for you."

"Yeah," Theo said. "We know where the light switches are."

"Go for it." Ethan tossed the keys to

Theo.

Zoe watched the boys race forward to open the grand door.

"I'm being set up, aren't I?" she said.

"They're going to be awfully disappointed if you don't fall down and twitch," Bonnie said.

"I suppose I could twitch a little bit," Zoe said.

Jeff and Theo got the front door open. Both boys disappeared into the foyer. Lights came on

inside.

Ethan watched Zoe approach the threshold. It seemed to him that she hesitated for a split

second as though bracing herself. Maybe she had decided to put on an act for Jeff and Theo.

Or maybe he was imagining things.

Then he remembered how she had paused briefly before walking into his office the first time.

Maybe it was just the way she was about entering a room. Probably a decorator thing.

She disappeared into the glowing pink

interior.

He walked into the hall behind her and saw her turn in a slow circle, surveying every ornate,

gilded, *pink* detail.

"This is amazing." She sounded awed.

Bonnie laughed. "Pretty incredible, isn't it?"

"Incredible is right." Zoe moved slowly toward the living room. "I can just imagine an elegant

late-1940s party here. All those fabulous clothes and the old cars parked in the

drive. What a

scene it must have been."

Jeff watched her closely. "Are you going to collapse, Ms. Luce?"

"I don't think so," Zoe said apologetically.

Theo looked disappointed. "You're sure?"

"Pretty sure," she said.

Ethan chuckled. "So much for this evening's entertainment."

"Maybe she'll start to twitch when she

sees some of the other rooms," Theo said, still hopeful.

Bonnie looked at Zoe. "Ignore them."

"Come on into the living room," Jeff said eagerly. "There's a picture of Mrs. Foote over the fireplace."

Obediently they trooped into the living room. Bonnie fell into step beside Zoe.

"The story is that the tycoon who built this place, Abner Bennett Foote, was absolutely

devoted to Camelia. She was about

thirty-five years younger than he was. He showered her

with jewelry and furs. After her death he never remarried."

They all came to a halt in front of the portrait. Zoe studied the glamorous woman in the

beaded, pink satin evening gown for a long time.

"She was very beautiful," she said finally.

"Yes, she was," Bonnie agreed.

Personally, Ethan thought Camelia

looked like trouble. He had a hunch she was the kind of

woman who had used her beauty to manipulate others, especially men. But what did he know?

A guy who had been married and divorced as often as he had was probably not a good judge.

"Of course," Zoe said, "It doesn't hurt that she's literally dripping in diamonds."

"True," Bonnie agreed. "Good jewelry always adds a certain something."

"Who cares about her jewels," Theo

said. "Let's go see the movie theater."

"Yeah, that's the best place in the whole house," Jeff said. "It's got a big-screen TV and a

popcorn machine."

The boys dashed off down an arcaded hall. Zoe and Bonnie dutifully followed. Ethan hung

back, trying to gauge Zoe's reaction.

So far, so good, he thought. At least she did not seem disdainful. If anything, she looked

intrigued. Perhaps she viewed his new

home as a decorating challenge.

When they reached the theater, Jeff and Theo tugged on the heavy, curving brass handles of

the twin doors.

Zoe examined the elaborate entrance with its orchid-pink panels and gilt trim. "Breathtaking. I

don't even want to think about what it would cost to reproduce that workmanship today."

"I told Ethan he couldn't possibly afford to restore this place," Bonnie said. "Just keeping it

from further deterioration will be difficult enough."

"Look, there's a curtain to keep out the light if the door is opened while the movie is playing."

Jeff hurried into the theater. "And it connects to this curtain over here. If you go through that

opening, you're inside the little snack bar."

"Foote probably had it installed to serve the guests drinks and hors d'oeuvres while they

watched the film," Ethan explained. He

halted beside Zoe, who had made no move to enter

the interior of the theater. "There's a carved pink marble counter. The bartender could come

and go through his section of the curtain without letting any light into the seating area." "I

see," Zoe said. "Fascinating."

Her enthusiasm had definitely dimmed, Ethan noticed. Her smile was polite but no longer warm.

There was a marked tension in her shoulders. She was no longer having fun.

Jeff held aside one of the velvet curtains to reveal the rows of gilded seats.

"There's another curtain over the old movie screen," he explained to Zoe.

"Uncle Victor put

the big TV in front of it, see?"

"Yes, I see it." She looked into the theater, but she did not enter it. "Pretty cool."

"Specially when we make popcorn," Theo told her. "I'm impressed," Zoe said.

Ethan checked his watch. "Let's go take a look at the bedroom you're going to redo

for me,

Zoe."

Jeff barreled back out of the theater.

"This way, Ms. Luce."

Zoe turned away from the theater doorway with what looked suspiciously like relief. *Not*

exactly twitching, Ethan concluded, *but almost*. At the door of his pink-and-gilt bedroom, Zoe

halted a second time. But then she walked casually into the space and surveyed with

unmistakable amusement the huge gilded-swan bed, the lush rose-pink walls, and the

orchid-print carpeting.

When she turned, Ethan was relieved to see the genuine laughter in her eyes.

"Oh, my," she chuckled. "It takes a very secure man to sleep in a room like this."

Ethan lounged in the doorway. "It's got the best view of the canyon."

"Between you and me, Zoe, I think it looks like the boudoir of a very high-priced courtesan,"

Bonnie remarked.

"What's a courtesan, Mom?" Jeff asked.

"Time for pizza," Ethan announced.

* * *

Could have been worse, Zoe thought.
She had been dreading the bedroom, but
it was the

theater that had taken her by surprise.
Fortunately, whatever had happened in
that space

had occurred a long time ago. The
violence and passion locked into the
walls was subdued

and muted now. She could have handled it if necessary, but she was glad that it was not the

room Ethan wanted her to redesign.

The dinner of pizza and salad was no doubt a routine outing for Jeff, Theo, Ethan, and Bonnie,

but it had been a special treat for her. She had actually felt normal for a time, as if she was

living a real life again.

When the meal was finished, they all walked outside into the balmy night. Fountain Square

was festively lit. People strolled among the colorful fountains, coming and going from the other

restaurants.

Jeff and Theo wanted to check out a video arcade. Ethan good-naturedly agreed.

Bonnie and Zoe sat on a bench and watched the three males weave a path among the

splashing fountains.

Jeff and Theo bounced around Ethan, circling and darting here and there but always returning

to his side. They reminded Zoe of a couple of small, eager wolf pups hanging out with the

indulgent leader of the pack.

"This may not be any of my business," Bonnie said after a while, "but I have to tell you that

I'm delighted that Ethan asked you to join us tonight."

"Are you kidding? I can't remember when I've had such a good time," Zoe said with absolute

honesty. "This evening was a real break for me."

Bonnie laughed. "I'll take that with a grain of salt. I can't imagine that eating pizza in a noisy

restaurant with a couple of chatty little boys qualifies as a good time for anyone with any

serious alternatives."

"Jeff and Theo are terrific."

"Thanks. Sorry about the accident with the pizza sauce. Are you sure you won't let me pay

the dry cleaning bill?"

"Don't be ridiculous. That pizza was

delicious. Well worth the cost of sending the skirt to the dry cleaners."

Zoe watched the two boys drag Ethan into the video arcade. A wistful feeling slipped through

her. In her other life she had known what it was to be part of a family, at least until her

freshman year in college when she had lost her parents in a car crash.

After the tragedy, the knowledge that she was utterly alone in the world had been

devastating. She had fought the twin demons of depression and anxiety and sought refuge in

her studies.

She had emerged from college with a master's degree in fine arts and something else, a kind of

sixth sense that she would just as soon have done without.

She had always known that she frequently felt strong emotions in certain houses and rooms.

But for the most part, the sensations were very weak and not particularly

disturbing. She had

accepted them as normal, and perhaps at a low level they were. After all, a lot of people

talked about experiencing a sense of déjà vu or some other unsettling feeling when they first

entered a certain house or room.

But during those lonely years in college when she had gone inside herself for long periods of

time, her reactions to various interiors grew noticeably more acute. Her single trip to Europe,

a gift to herself to celebrate her first full year of gainful employment at a museum, had turned

into a nightmare. After touring three ancient castles with blood-drenched histories in two

days, she had felt so grim and chilled that she thought she had come down with an exotic

disease. The following morning she had booked a flight home, borrowing heavily on her credit

card to pay the full fare in coach.

She had finally been forced to conclude

that, whatever it was she experienced when she

walked into a room where violence or some other dark, intense emotion had soaked into the

walls, the sensation could no longer be classified as normal.

By the time she met Preston, she had become very adept at concealing her special sense.

She had also taught herself a few simple precautions. She always paused before entering a

room to make certain she would not be

overwhelmed with unwelcome sensations. And, until

she met Arcadia, she never, ever told anyone the full truth about her sensitivity, not even

Preston.

Preston Cleland had been a kind, caring man who would have tried hard to understand and

accept her for what she was: a freak. But his nature had been gentle and scholarly, and she

had known, deep down, that it would not have been right to burden him with the

knowledge

that he had married a woman who sensed things in the walls. She realized that while he would

have continued to love her with all his heart, he never would have been able to look at her in

the same way again. She had not been able to deal with the thought of seeing pity and

concern and anxiety in his eyes.

Preston had had enough problems dealing with his ruthless cousin and the other members of

his greedy, avaricious family.

"You know," Bonnie said, lowering her voice to a confidential tone, "this is the first time Ethan

has invited a woman out for an evening with the boys and me since his last wife left him."

"Mmm." Zoe kept her response as noncommittal as humanly possible.

Bonnie frowned. "Ethan did tell you that he was divorced, didn't he?"

Zoe cleared her throat. "I believe he mentioned that he'd been married and divorced several

times." "Several is a gross overstatement." "I think he specified that there had been three

marriages and three divorces," Zoe said carefully. "*Three* doesn't qualify as several." Zoe

noded politely and said nothing. Bonnie threw up her hands. "Okay, okay, I know what you're

thinking. In your shoes, I would come to the same conclusion. On the surface of it, three trips

to the altar and the divorce courts does seem to indicate a certain inability to commit. But

Ethan is different."

"Bonnie, it's all right. Please don't feel you have to defend him. Ethan and I don't have what

you'd call a serious relationship. We hardly know each other. I'm just another client."

"Whatever else you are," Bonnie said, "you are not just another client. If you were, he would

not have invited you to have pizza with us tonight. Ethan is very big on keeping his

professional life separate from his

private life." "I see." Zoe couldn't think of anything else to

say. "The thing is, Ethan has simply been very unlucky in love." Bonnie held up three fingers.

"He married Stacy when he was twenty-two. She was only nineteen. They were both too

young. Stacy was coming out of a very chaotic, very dysfunctional home life. She was

searching for something solid, and Ethan fell into the trap of playing the knight in shining

armor." "What happened?"

"After about a year, Stacy announced that she was leaving Ethan to follow a, uh, religious

vocation." "Good grief, she became a nun?" "Not exactly," Bonnie said dryly. "She joined a

small, very strict, very fringe religious group." "A cult."

Bonnie nodded. "I'm afraid so. They got a divorce and got on with their lives. Then, just after

Ethan opened his own security agency, he met Devon. It was another serious

mistake."

"Why?"

"Devon fell for Ethan because she had a thing for men who have macho jobs. When she found

out that most of his work was done behind a desk, on the phone, or with a computer, she left

him to marry a professional race car driver."

"Bonnie, I really don't – "

"Kelly, wife number three, came along after he had established his business and

was making a

lot of money. They did fine as long as he was financially successful. But she couldn't handle

the bankruptcy."

"I didn't know about the bankruptcy," Zoe said.

"It was the direct result of a high-profile murder investigation," Bonnie clasped her hands

together in her lap and kept her attention on the waters of a nearby fountain.

"Certain

powerful people in L.A. did not like what happened when he identified the killer and exposed

the financial maneuvers that had led to the murder. When it was all over, they made certain

that Ethan paid a price for making them take some heavy losses."

"Who got killed?"

"My husband, Drew," Bonnie whispered.

It clicked. Zoe went still. "His brother?"

Bonnie nodded. "Yes."

"So, that's why the children's father isn't here. I wondered. Oh, Bonnie, I am so very sorry."

"Drew was murdered three years ago come November. It took Ethan months to find the killer

and the man who had hired him. Just before the trial started, the contract killer, who was out

on bail, was shot dead by person or persons unknown."

"The logical assumption being that his employer decided to get rid of him so that he could not

testify?"

"Yes. But there was no proof. The trial went on for weeks but in the end Simon Wendover, the

man responsible for Drew's death, walked out of the courtroom a free man. The only

consolation was that his illegal business activities had been so thoroughly exposed by the

media that a large portion of his financial empire fell apart."

Zoe tightened her hands around the edge of the bench on either side of her knees.

"Sometimes a financial blow is the only justice you can get."

"Yes. It's not enough."

"No," Zoe agreed softly. "Not nearly enough."

"In any event, the wealthy men who suffered some of the collateral damage due to the

destruction of Wen-dover's empire felt that Ethan should be taught a lesson. Together they

had the power to force Truax Security into bankruptcy. It took a little over a year to destroy

everything Ethan had built in ten years. He went down with his ship."

"I can see him doing that."

"In the end, between the loss of his business and the divorce settlement, he was left with

almost nothing. He was able to get consulting work with some of his old rivals for a while and

a couple made offers. But Ethan is the kind of man who likes to be his own boss."

"That doesn't surprise me."

"We talked it over and decided to make the move to Whispering Springs. We both agreed that

it would be good to raise the boys outside of L.A."

Zoe glanced at her. "And where Jeff and Theo go, Ethan goes?"

"Ethan has taken Drew's place in their lives," Bonnie said quietly. "I shall be forever grateful to

him. Someday Jeff and Theo will be equally grateful. At the moment, however, they just take

him for granted. And I think that's for the

best. His presence gives them a great sense of

security and stability. He also provides some emotional balance. I still get anxious too easily

and I'm inclined to be overprotective. Left to my own devices, I'm sure I would have turned

them into little neurotics by now."

"I don't blame you for the overprotective instincts. If I were in your shoes, I'd be the same

way."

"What I'm trying to tell you about Ethan is that he is fully capable of making a commitment,"

Bonnie said. "In fact, I don't think he knows any other way to be. His problem is that no

woman has ever really made a commitment to him."

"Mmm." Zoe doubted that was the full story. Three divorces took a little more explaining. But

it was not her place to argue the point. What did she know? She had only met Ethan a few

days ago. But she had to admit that Bonnie's determined loyalty to him was touching.

"It was knowing that we could all lean on Ethan that helped us get through the worst of the

nightmare," Bonnie concluded.

"I'm glad he was there for you," Zoe said. "But what about Wendover? It is so unjust, so

wrong that the bastard who murdered your husband is walking around free."

Bonnie looked at her with clear, calm eyes. "But Wendover is not walking

around free. I forgot

to tell you the rest of it. Simon Wendover drowned a few weeks after the trial ended. He fell

from his yacht, which was anchored off Catalina. He was alone at the time. Apparently he had

been drinking heavily."

A chill of understanding flashed through Zoe. She studied Ethan, who was walking back

toward them with his nephews in tow. She had only known him a few days, she thought, but

she knew enough about him to realize that if he had set out to find his brother's killer, he

would not have let anything, including the vagaries of a less-than-perfect judicial system,

stand in his way.

Whatever had happened to Simon Wendover that night on his yacht had probably not been an

accident.

She envied Bonnie and Ethan and the boys, she thought. At least there had been some justice

for them. She had not been so fortunate. Preston's murder had gone unavenged. She had

plans to balance the scales somewhat, but even if they worked, the result would only be a

weak, pale whisper of vengeance.

She wrapped her arms around herself. "I'm glad Wendover drowned," she said fiercely.

"Nobody wept any tears for him, that's for certain."

"What a dreadful time you must have had."

"It was awful." Bonnie rose to her feet.
"But looking back, I think the psychic
was the worst
part."

An unpleasant sense of impending
disaster gripped Zoe. She got carefully
to her feet. *I don't*

want to hear this, she thought. But she
had no option. "What psychic?"

"It was my own fault." Bonnie shook her
head ruefully. "I should have known
better. You see,

for a long time after Drew disappeared,
I refused to believe that he was dead."

"I understand."

"A so-called psychic got in touch with me and said she could help me find him. She fed me a

lot of nonsense about being able to see him in a small room somewhere, bound hand and foot.

She told me she thought he was alive and being held captive. And I was so desperate that I

willingly bought into her scam. It cost me a great deal of money, and in the end the false

hope only made it harder to deal with the

truth."

Ethan, Jeff, and Theo were almost upon them.

"I don't blame you," Zoe said. "I would have wanted to cling to hope, too."

"If you ask me," Bonnie said wryly, "the most remarkable aspect of the whole thing wasn't that

Wendover got a dose of really bad karma. It was that the psychic survived Ethan's wrath."

"Oh."

"Ethan detests people who prey on

others. After that incident, he absolutely despises people

who claim to be psychics. As far as he's concerned, they are all frauds and charlatans. I

swear, when he found out how that woman had strung me along, I thought he would strangle

her."

* * *

Half an hour later Zoe said good night to everyone from the doorway of her apartment.

She looked at Jeff and Theo. "Thanks for a great evening, guys."

"You can come with us again sometime, if you want," Jeff said magnanimously.

"Thank you," Zoe said. "That would be nice. Next time I promise to have some ice cream on hand."

The discovery that she did not keep a supply of ice cream in the small freezer compartment of

her refrigerator had produced baffled astonishment. Jeff and Theo had taken the bad news

manfully, but she made a mental note not to be caught off guard next time. She was surprised

to realize just how much she hoped that there would be a next time.

"I like chocolate chip," Theo said helpfully.

"I'll keep that in mind," she promised.

"I enjoyed talking to you." Bonnie gave her a warm smile.

The temptation to tell Bonnie how much they had in common because of the manner in which

they had lost their husbands had been almost overwhelming. But sharing confidences was as

risky in this new life as intimate romantic entanglements.

"It was a wonderful evening," Zoe said.

"We really will have to do this again." Bonnie turned to Jeff and Theo and made shooing

motions with her hands. "Come on, you two, let Uncle Ethan say good night to Zoe in peace."

Jeff and Theo reluctantly left the doorway and went down the hall.

Bonnie followed in their
wake.

Theo's voice drifted back along the
corridor.

"Is Uncle Ethan gonna kiss Zoe?" he
asked.

"That's none of your business," Bonnie
told him. "Move, gentlemen."

Ethan waited until the little group had
started down the stairs. Then he smiled
slowly.

"Yeah," he said, "Uncle Ethan is gonna
kiss Zoe."

He put his hands on her shoulders and drew her deliberately toward him. Zoe felt a little fizzy

sensation in the pit of her stomach.

Don't get addicted to this, she warned herself. It'll never work. Not for long, at any rate.

But intense curiosity swamped the warning. All day long she had wondered exactly how much

of last night's heat had been generated by the aftermath of the adrenaline rush they had both

experienced.

He covered her mouth with his own, and she got her answer in no uncertain terms. If it was

adrenaline that had sparked last night's passion, the same drug was flowing just as strongly

through her veins tonight. How long did it take for that stuff to wear off, anyway?

He sensed her response and deliberately deepened the kiss. His hands moved along her

shoulders and then she felt his fingers on the nape of her neck. His thumbs braced her chin,

holding her lips right where he wanted them. She was pressed so tightly against him that she

could feel the contours of his aroused body.

"Uncle Ethan?" Jeff's voice echoed up the stairs. "Aren't you coming?"

"Hush," Bonnie said. "Let's wait for him outside in the garden."

Ethan slowly raised his head. "I think I just heard my wake-up call. I'd better get moving.

Gonna be a little hard to get to sleep tonight, though."

He did the smoldering-eye thing every bit as well as he did the narrow-eyed thing, she

thought. She had to swallow a couple of times to find her voice.

"Good night." Reluctant to let him go, she fiddled with the collar of his shirt, pretending to

smooth it. "Thanks again for inviting me to join you."

"Any time."

She made herself let go of his shirt. He stepped back into the hall and stood waiting.

Very slowly she closed the door and methodically set all three locks. When she finally fastened

the chain, she heard him walk away toward the stairs.

Turning, she slumped back against the door, drew a couple of slow, deep breaths, and tried to

catalog her reactions objectively. She was definitely feeling a little lightheaded. Giddy, almost.

There was a pleasant tingling in certain regions of her anatomy. The fizzy sensation was still

strong.

She had to fight the urge to unlock the door, dash out into the hallway, and drag Ethan back

into her apartment. The only thing that stopped her from doing just that was the fact that

Bonnie and his nephews were waiting for him.

All in all, it was pretty exciting.

Just like real life.

Chapter Fourteen

"I like her very much." Bonnie spoke quietly, not wanting Jeff and Theo, seated in the

backseat discussing Singleton Cobb and his computer, to overhear. "She's different from your

usual type."

"You think?" Ethan did not take his attention off the road. "I haven't had a date in so long, I

can't remember what my usual type is."

"Don't get me started. If you want to compare dry spells, I'll beat you hands down."

Ethan gave her a quick, searching glance. He did not comment, but the dashboard light

revealed the slight curve of his mouth. She knew why her crack about a long dry spell had

startled him. It had surprised her, too. She had chided him often enough for not doing more to

jump-start his social life, but this was the first time since losing Drew that she had even

mentioned her own lack of same.

All of her attention during the past few years had been focused on maintaining a safe, secure

world for Jeff and Theo. The possibility of meeting someone and perhaps even dating again

had been the last thing on her mind. She wondered what had put the thought into her head

today. Maybe it was seeing Ethan and Zoe together. You could feel the crackle of energy in

the air when those two were in close

proximity.

"When I said that Zoe was different," she continued deliberately, "I meant that she was not

like any of your exes."

"So what? All of my exes were different from each other."

"No, they weren't. Not really. You do tend toward a certain type of woman."

"And that type would be?"

"All three of your ex-wives were pretty and smart and nice enough in their own ways, but

they all had two things in common. The first is that they were attracted to you because you

look like a pretty cool guy at first glance. Exciting. Mysterious. Maybe even dangerous."

"But underneath I'm boring, right? You don't have to spell it out. Devon did a pretty good job

of making that clear."

"No, underneath you are definitely not boring." She paused. "But you are complicated."

"Complicated." He tasted that word.

"That doesn't sound much better than boring."

"Complicated is hard work for a woman. The other thing your exes had in common was that

none of them wanted to spend much time dealing with your complexities. They wanted *you* to

spend all your time catering to *their* complexities. And let's face it, they were all very high

maintenance."

"Huh."

"You are also very controlled. Maybe even a little obsessive about some things. Those factors

make you good at your job, but they are not easy to handle in a relationship."

"Obsessive?"

"Forget obsessive," Bonnie said quickly.

"That was a poor choice of words.

Determined is what

I meant. Focused. You keep going until you get your answers. Once you've made a decision,

you don't allow anything to deflect you. Look at what the investigation into

Drew's murder

cost you. Your company and your marriage."

"It was worth it."

She looked at him. "You're always willing to pay the price, aren't you?"

He shrugged. "No such thing as a free lunch in this world."

"That attitude makes you a terrific investigator. But it also makes you a little scary."

"Complicated, obsessive, and now scary. Great. My prospects for renewing

my social life are

not looking up here."

"What I'm trying to tell you is that those traits have a certain appeal, but they aren't easy for

a woman to handle in a serious, long-term, committed relationship."

"You think maybe I'm doomed to a lifetime of serial monogamy?"

"What I think," she said very deliberately, "is that you need someone who can deal with the

part of you that makes you who you are."

He was silent for a time.

"You think Zoe could handle that part?"
he asked after a while.

"I don't know," she said, coming down
hard on the side of honesty. "But I'll tell
you one thing,

I think she's every bit as complicated as
you are."

* * *

Zoe sat on the edge of the bed, tucked the
phone between her shoulder and ear, and

reached down to tug off her shoes. "The
long and the short of it is that because of

what

happened after his brother's murder, Ethan despises psychics." "You're not a psychic," Arcadia

said. "You're just exquisitely sensitive to the ambience of some interior spaces."

"Let's face it, by any definition, I'm a little weird." "You don't plan to tell him about your

weirdness, though, do you? There's no point. He wouldn't believe you, anyway."

"I know." Zoe flopped back across the duvet and looked up at the ceiling. "He

would think I

was crazy. Or a fraud. Or both."

"Yes."

"The story Bonnie told me tonight was chilling. The guy who paid to have her husband

murdered actually walked free from the courtroom. That's exactly what would have happened

even if I had been able to get anyone to believe me about – "

"Don't say it."

"Sorry."

In Arcadia's opinion, events from their other lives should not be mentioned in any way, shape

or form, especially not on the phone. But Zoe found it hard not to talk about them sometimes.

Probably because so much remained unresolved, she thought. *No closure*, as her so-called

therapist at Xanadu, Dr. McAlistair, would say. And Arcadia was the only one she knew with

whom she could safely discuss the past.

"At least in the case of Ethan's brother, there seems to have been some justice of the bad

luck variety," Arcadia said.

"Bad luck, my sweet patootie. If Wendover died because he got drunk and fell off his yacht,

I'll eat a saguaro."

Arcadia gave one of her throaty chuckles. "So, are you going to see Ethan again?"

Zoe thought about the heat in Ethan's good-night kiss. "I got that impression, yes."

"Good. You need to get out more."

"Getting out is one thing. Playing with fire is something else."

"Just keep it light and have some fun. You deserve some R & R, Zoe. You've had a rough two years."

Zoe levered herself up on her elbows.
"Right. Light and fun."

Arcadia made it sound so simple. The truth was, she thought, from where she sat, there was

nothing simple about Ethan Truax.

She got to her feet beside the bed and grasped the top of the duvet. "Well, I'd better get

some sleep. I've got an early morning appointment to look at plumbing fixtures."

"Sounds exciting."

"Oh, yeah."

She tossed the duvet to the foot of the bed.

And froze when she saw the letter-sized sheet of business stationery lying just below the

bottom edge of the pillows.

"Oh, my God."

"Zoe?" Arcadia's voice sharpened instantly. "Are you okay? What's wrong?"

Zoe stared at the sheet of stationery, unable to speak. She recognized the logo imprinted

discreetly at the top of the paper. It was a small, stylized, black-and-white drawing of an

austere brick mansion crouched on the edge of a dark lake.

Beneath the image the name of the establishment was written in elegant type, CANDLE LAKE

MANOR. There was no address or phone number.

Individual letters had been snipped from a newspaper and glued to the page to spell out a

message.

Wish you were here. Below that line were more words.

The opportunity to stay out of Room 232 can be yours for a price. You will receive

instructions in the near future.

"Zoe?" Arcadia's voice was laced with tension. "Talk to me. Is something wrong?" "Yes," Zoe said.

Chapter Fifteen

Ethan wrapped both hands around the curved bronze handles and opened the gilded double

doors. He stepped into the postage-stamp-sized lobby and pulled aside the velvet curtains.

For a time, he stood looking into the inky darkness of the unlit theater.

Zoe had not simply paused here on the threshold; she had made an excuse not to enter what

had to be one of the more interesting

rooms in the house.

He found the bank of switches and snapped a couple upward. The bronze and etched glass

fixtures glowed to life. They cast a low, glamorous light that lit the aisle between the two

rows of seats.

He studied the gilded, dark pink velvet chairs and wondered what it was about the theater

that had caused Zoe to shiver.

Because he was very sure that was what

he had seen pass through her when she
had looked

into this room. A shiver.

After a while, he turned off the lights and
went back along the hall to his study.

Abner

Bennett Foote's journal was where he
had left it on the desk.

He sat down and opened it to the entry
he had been reading earlier and picked
up where he

had left off.

... *My beautiful Camelia has invited*

several of her acquaintances to join us here for a long

weekend. The ladies will be beautiful and the gentlemen will no doubt tell excellent stories.

There will be a good deal of champagne and gin and everyone will be drunk by midnight. My

darling is so young and naive that she does not see how shallow they all are.

I am not looking forward to the affair but I can hardly object. Camelia's friends are very

important to her. When I persuaded my

*Flower to marry me she made it clear
that she*

*would agree only if I would allow her
to entertain as often and as lavishly as
she wished. This*

*long weekend will no doubt cost me a
good deal of money but if it makes my
Flower happy,*

that is all that matters.

*There is one bright spot on the horizon
this weekend. I reviewed the guest list
this morning*

and Hill is not on it....

* * *

"It's a blackmail note," Arcadia said.

"Yes." Zoe wrapped her hands around the mug of hot tea that sat on the table in front of her.

But it was no use. Nothing could warm her. She could not seem to stop shaking. These chills

were as bad as those she got after she'd had one of her little episodes. "Believe it or not, I did

manage to figure that much out."

Conversation and soft jazz swirled

around them, masking their tense discussion. The Last Exit

was a café that morphed into a nightclub after nine o'clock in the evenings. Zoe and Arcadia

occupied a small booth tucked into the shadows at the back. They had a good view of the

stage, but neither of them paid any attention to the musicians.

"So much for that special firewall that was supposed to keep me invisible," Zoe commented.

"I'd like to get my hands on that broker

who sold it to me."

"The Merchant has a sterling business reputation," Arcadia said. "I can't believe he

double-crossed you."

Another chill shot through Zoe. She clenched the mug more tightly. "You do realize that if he

sold me out, he may have done the same to you?"

"I don't think he sold either of us out. He's been in business for a long time, and there's never

been any hint that he might be unreliable."

"Well, *someone* found out where I am, and we have to consider the possibility that whoever it

is knows where you are, too."

"Believe me," Arcadia said, "that thought has been on my mind for the past half hour."

Zoe tried to sort through the few facts they had. "If you don't think the Merchant

double-crossed us, how do you explain that blackmail note?"

"I don't know what went wrong, but I can think of at least one possibility."

"What?"

Arcadia drew her fingertip around the rim of her tiny espresso cup. "The Merchant operates

online. His security is good, but no computer security system is perfect. Maybe he got

hacked. Whoever got into his files may have been looking for you in particular or maybe the

hacker just grabbed a bunch of names at random and got out."

"I suppose either of those reasons would explain why I got a note and you didn't."

Zoe

propped her elbows on the table.

"Which means that the blackmailer may be the hacker."

"Not necessarily. It's possible the hacker is just another online business person who sold your

file to someone who knew enough about you to make use of the information."

Zoe rubbed her temples. "It could be anyone."

"No, not *anyone*," Arcadia said slowly.

"I think we can exclude your in-laws. They have no

interest in blackmailing you. If they knew where you were, they would be moving heaven and

earth to put you back in Xanadu."

"True." Zoe forced herself to think. "And the same goes for Dr. Harper. If he had discovered

my whereabouts, he would have sent his minions to pick me up."

"As quietly as possible," Arcadia agreed. "The last thing he'd want is for Forrest Cleland to

discover that you've been running around loose for the past few months."

"Okay, so the blackmailer is probably not Harper or any of my dear relatives."

"No, but whoever sent that note obviously knows a lot about your history with Xanadu."

"The reference to Room 232."

"Yes."

"You're right." Zoe tried to blot out the scenes from her recurring nightmare and stay focused

on the logic. "The room number is a very

specific detail. Only someone directly connected to

Xanadu would know it."

"I think that's a fairly safe assumption."

"One of the orderlies? Ron or Ernie?"

"Maybe," Arcadia said slowly.

"Although I would have bet that neither of them is bright enough

or sufficiently well connected to have the resources it would take to find you."

"Good point. They're both sociopaths but they are definitely not the sharpest knives in the

drawer."

"Doubt if they could afford to buy that kind of information, even if someone offered it for sale

to them. Whoever supplied your file to the blackmailer probably charged big bucks for it."

Zoe ran through a few more possibilities. "What about Fenella Leeds?"

"Harper's administrative assistant?" Arcadia gave that some consideration and nodded.

"Maybe. Leeds is about as cold as they

come and she's smart. I'm sure she knows everything

Harper knows. She was sleeping with him for a while, until she got bored and found another

victim, remember?"

"Only too well. All right, we'll put her on the list. And don't forget the security chief, Leon

Grady."

"I don't know," Arcadia said. "He's not overly smart and besides, I always had the impression

that he was Harper's creature. He makes a nice living doing what he's told there at the Manor.

Remember the Porsche? And that flashy ring?"

"Maybe he got tired of covering up for his boss," Zoe suggested.

"Maybe."

"We can't overlook Dr. McAlistair, either. Harper was content to lock me away and keep me

doped up, but McAlistair was always scheduling therapy sessions. She kept pushing me to tell

her exactly what I experienced when I walked into certain rooms. Always trying to conduct

one of her little surprise tests."

"She did seem to be particularly interested in your case," Arcadia allowed.

"She had to know about Harper's side business."

"I agree, but, like Harper, I would think her main goal would be to get you back into Xanadu,

not to blackmail you."

"You're right." Zoe dropped her head in her hands. "This is hopeless. We'll never be able to

identify the blackmailer this way. The most we can do is speculate."

"I think," Arcadia said, "that what we need here is some professional expertise."

Zoe raised her head swiftly, stunned. "Go to the cops? You know that's not possible. The

minute they discover that I'm an escapee from a loony bin, they'll fall all over themselves to

ship me back there."

"I wasn't talking about going to the police," Arcadia said.

Understanding struck.

Zoe sat back very slowly against the cushions of the booth. "No."

"Got a better idea?"

"No," she said again. "But this is definitely not a good idea either."

"Why not? This is the kind of thing he's trained to do. He guarantees confidentiality to his

clients, and I think you can trust him."

Zoe felt ill. "I don't want him to know about... about Xanadu and me and the damned walls."

"You don't have to tell him all the details. He doesn't need to know about your issues with certain rooms."

"But he'll have to be told about Xanadu."

"Yes. I don't see any way around that. You've only got two options as far as I can tell. You

either go home, pack, and make a run for

it, or you call Ethan Truax."

"When you put it like that..."

Chapter Sixteen

Friday...

He is here. Hill had the gall to come even though his name was not on the guest list. I

confronted Camelia and demanded that she tell him he must leave. But she became very

angry and refused to send him away. She says that would be ungracious and that there is

plenty of room for one more.

Midnight...

I saw them together this evening when the cocktails were served before dinner. I knew from

the way he was looking at her that he intended to try to seduce her. Shortly after ten

o'clock, they went out into the gardens together. I watched them from my study window.

The bastard took my Camelia into his arms and kissed her. She made no effort to resist.

I know now that they must have plotted

all along to be together this weekend.

I have been a fool....

The phone buzzed, jarring Ethan out of the journal entry. He glanced at his watch and was

surprised to see that it was nearly midnight. He had intended to be in bed by now.

He reached for the phone, aware of a small tightening in his gut. There were very few people

who might call him at this hour. Bonnie was at the top of the list.

"Truax," he said.

"Ethan? It's me, Zoe."

A whisper of pleasure replaced the unease. He leaned back in his chair.

"What's up? Can't

sleep?"

"I need to hire you again."

* * *

He walked into The Last Exit twenty minutes later and stood in the shadows near the

entrance until he spotted Zoe and

Arcadia in a remote booth. He watched them for a while.

Every few seconds Zoe turned her head, glancing anxiously toward the door, but he could tell

that she was unable to see him.

He started toward the booth, deliberately weaving his way through the maze of tables in a

convoluted path that kept him out of what little light there was. Neither Zoe nor Arcadia

noticed him until he was almost upon them.

Zoe started visibly when she realized he was looming over the table. Relief came and went in

her face. It was replaced by wariness.

"Ethan." She spoke very softly. He got the feeling she was exerting immense control. "I didn't

see you."

Arcadia frowned slightly but gave no other indication of surprise. He wondered what it would

take to rattle her. A lot, he thought.

"Thanks for coming," Zoe said in the

same tone of voice she might have used to express her

appreciation for his having turned up at a funeral.

"Not like I had anything better to do."

She flushed.

He sat down next to her, purposefully crowding her a little to see what she would do. She

responded by edging back into the corner of the booth. Putting some distance between them.

Not a good sign.

"You made excellent time," Arcadia said.

"I like to encourage repeat business, but I've got to admit I wasn't expecting to get rehired

quite so fast." He looked at Zoe. "What's going on? Got another suspicious client?"

"No," Zoe said. "This is a personal problem."

He angled himself loosely in the booth and rested one arm on the back of the bench. "Tell me

about it."

She tightened the fingers of one hand into a fist on her lap. "I'm being blackmailed."

Well, shit. He'd better start thinking like a professional here.

"Give it to me from the beginning," he said.

She glanced at Arcadia, as if looking for support. She got a small nod from her companion.

"Two years ago my husband was murdered. Shot dead on the back porch of our vacation cabin."

"I'm listening."

"Preston drove up to the cabin a day before our anniversary. Alone. He didn't tell me. He

wanted to prepare a surprise."

"What kind of surprise?"

"Flowers." Zoe smiled wistfully. "Lots and lots of flowers. Dahlias, orchids, huge

chrysanthemums. He filled the cabin with them. They were everywhere. The kitchen, the

bathroom, the living room. My husband

taught art history at a small college in Northern

California. At heart he was a true romantic."

"Right. A romantic."

It would never in a million years occur to him to fill a mountain cabin with flowers as a surprise

for a woman, Ethan thought. Maybe that was one of his problems.

"There was also a gift for me." Zoe flexed the fingers of her hand and then knotted them back

into a tense little fist. "A camera."

Something in her face triggered a hunch. "You found him, didn't you?"

She swallowed. "I was away at a three-day conference in San Francisco, but we had

arranged to rendezvous at the cabin. I tried to call him that night but there was no answer. I

was a little worried but I told myself that there was a perfectly good explanation for why he

wasn't answering his phone. Still, the next morning I left the conference early

and drove to

the cabin."

"Go on," Ethan said when she came to a sudden halt.

She took a deep breath, steadying herself. "When I opened the door I realized at once that

something terrible had happened."

"What did you see?"

"Shattered vases and broken flowers everywhere. The camera had been crushed beneath

someone's foot. To me it looked like there had been a fierce struggle. But the police pointed

out that Preston had been shot on the back porch. He had apparently gone out to get some

firewood. There was no indication that he had even seen his assailant, let alone tried to fight

back."

"How did the cops explain things?"

"There had been a prowler in the area hitting empty cabins," Zoe said. "They think he shot

Preston from ambush and then went into the cabin to steal whatever he could."

"What did they say about the broken vases and the camera?"

"They concluded that they had been smashed by the killer in a fit of rage and frustration when

he failed to find anything significant in the way of cash or valuables."

"What about your husband's wallet?"

She hesitated. "They found it nearby. It was empty. The assumption was that the prowler had

discarded it after he took the cards and cash."

"The empty wallet does sort of support the cops' theory," he said gently.

"I realize that," she shot back with sudden heat. "But I refuse to believe that Preston was

murdered by a passing prowler."

"What do you think happened?"

"I'm convinced that my husband was killed by his cousin, Forrest Cleland."

"Motive?" Ethan asked.

"Control of a closely held company, Cleland Cage, Inc. It was founded by Preston's

grandfather and his great-uncle. Preston himself was not active in management. His passion

was teaching. But he held a controlling block of shares, and he took his responsibilities to the

firm and the Cleland family seriously."

"What about Forrest?"

"Forrest Cleland is the current CEO. He and Preston did not get along well. Shortly before the

murder, Preston and Forrest were engaged in a fight over a major acquisition that Forrest

wanted the board to approve. Preston was convinced that Forrest was putting the future of

the company at risk. He intended to use his controlling interest to halt the project. Forrest

was enraged."

Definitely time to think professionally. Ethan took the notepad and pen out of the pocket of

his shirt. He put them on the table.

"You think Forrest Cleland murdered your husband because Preston was standing in his way

with those shares, is that it?"

"Yes," Zoe said evenly. "Yes, that is exactly what I believe. Forrest's plan would have worked

perfectly except for one thing. Shortly before he died, Preston made some significant changes

in his estate plan. He left me his entire block of shares."

Ethan tapped the edge of the notebook against the table. "You control that block

now?"

"Not exactly," she said. "It's a long story. But here is how it works. I think Preston had begun

to suspect that Forrest might be dangerous. He left his shares to me in a trust with a proviso

that if I died, regardless of the circumstances of my death, the shares would go into another

trust to be administered by a bank."

"Who benefits from that trust?" Ethan asked.

"Any and all members of the Cleland family who happen to be under the age of ten at the time

of my demise." She looked coldly amused. "The Clelands are a fairly large clan. There are a

number of kids under the age of ten at the moment. Fifteen or twenty at least. Neither they

nor their parents can access the trust until the offspring reach the age of thirty."

Ethan took a minute to filter that through a fine sieve. Then he nodded, impressed. "It's not

that hard to break a will but it's damn near impossible to tear apart a well-constructed trust."

"Yes. Preston knew what he was doing. He was trying to protect me."

"Let me get this straight. The bottom line here is that if something happens to you, Forrest

can't get his hands on the shares and neither can anyone else in the family. Very clever."

Arcadia stirred slightly in the corner of the booth. "Not quite clever enough, as it turns out."

Ethan glanced at her and then turned back to Zoe.

"You want to spell that out for me?" he said.

"There was one loophole in Preston's estate plan," Zoe said softly. "It's true that if I die, the

shares slip out of Forrest's control. But the lawyers convinced my husband to set up a

mechanism to handle routine business affairs in the event of a temporary emergency."

"Such as?"

She moved a hand slightly. "Say I was incapacitated for a time by a serious accident or

surgery. It is conceivable that a situation might arise that would leave me temporarily unable

to manage my personal affairs. If that happened, Preston did not want my shares going into

the irrevocable trust designed for the children because I'd never be able to get them back."

"As fate would have it," Arcadia said dryly, "a temporary emergency occurred about six

months after Preston Cleland was murdered."

Ethan was tempted to follow that tangent, but experience kept him focused. "How does this

short-term emergency mechanism work?"

"In the event I am incapacitated for any length of time," Zoe said, "a revocable trust kicks in

allowing my shares to be voted by the Cleland board of directors. The revocable trust remains

in effect until I revoke it in writing. As

things stand now, Forrest controls the board and

therefore, the votes."

"Because you are incapacitated?"

"So they tell me."

"You look okay to me. How, exactly, are you incapacitated?"

She looked at him with fathomless eyes.

"They say I'm crazy."

There was a beat of silence. The jazz swirled heavily in the darkness.

"You want to run that by me again?"

Ethan said softly.

Zoe clenched and unclenched the hand resting in her lap. "My husband's dear cousin managed

to get me committed."

"Committed." He repeated the word very precisely and very evenly.

"Yes."

"I'll admit I'm not up on the laws concerning this kind of thing," he said carefully, "but I was

under the impression that it was pretty tricky to get someone committed against

her will

these days."

Zoe's jaw tightened. He could see that she had clenched her teeth. Probably wondering if he

was buying any of this. It was a legitimate concern. He was wondering the same thing.

"Forrest had some help with the paperwork and the legalities," she said.

"From?"

"Dr. Ian Harper, the director of a private psychiatric hospital in California called

Candle Lake

Manor. I have no idea how much Forrest paid him to keep me doped up, locked up, and

incapacitated. But I'm sure it was a substantial sum."

Okay, he'd had a feeling this was going to get weird, he reminded himself.

"I can't help but notice that you are not in this Candle Lake Manor hospital at the moment,"

he said. "You are sitting in a jazz club in Whispering Springs instead."

"Under another name," Zoe said. She fixed him with a determined expression that did not quite

hide a hint of desperation. "You are looking at a genuine escapee from an old-fashioned

lunatic asylum."

"That's funny, you don't look crazy."

She flattened one hand on the table. "Let me explain how it happened."

"An explanation would be nice."

"The day I found Preston's body at the cabin, I was a basket case. I knew he

had been

murdered, and I told the cops that I suspected Forrest. They thought I was hysterical. And I

can't argue that point."

"Lot of people would get hysterical in that situation," Ethan said.

"True. But I was also sure that I was right. I gave the authorities my statement and then I

went home, expecting the wheels of justice to grind. Unfortunately there was no evidence

linking Forrest to the crime. No one was arrested. The cabin prowler was eventually picked up,

but he refused to confess to murder. After three months I realized that Preston's killer would go unpunished."

"What did you do?"

"I didn't know what to do. I started to wonder if maybe I was wrong and the cops were right,

after all. Meanwhile, I was struggling with grief and all of the emotional trauma involved. Then

there was the business side of things to worry about. What with one thing and another, it

was another three months before I felt I could think clearly again."

"What was your next step?"

"I went back to the cabin," she said.

"To pack up your husband's things?"

"Yes." Her gaze slid away. She looked at the musicians. "To pack up his things. It was the first

time I had been there since the day I found him. I sat on the sofa for a long

time,

remembering how the vases had been shattered and the flowers strewn around the room. And

I thought about the broken camera. The more I thought about it, the more I was sure that

the pattern of destruction just did not feel like the work of a frustrated murderer who couldn't

find enough cash on his victim."

"What do you think that kind of destruction would have looked like?" he asked. He realized

that he was genuinely curious about her reasoning.

"I don't know." She shook her head. "It just seemed to me that an angry killer who was furious

because he hadn't found enough money would have been more likely to break windows or tear

up the furniture."

She was choosing her words very carefully now. Not lying exactly but not telling him the full

truth, either. He'd been here before. Clients did this a lot.

He looked down at his notes.

"This is like the thing with the fancy sheets at Davis Mason's house, isn't it?" he asked.

"Something doesn't quite fit so you leap to a conclusion that supports your theory."

"I guess you could say that." She looked at him with fierce eyes. "But I do believe that Preston

knew his killer. I think he opened the door to him. There must have been a fight. Maybe they

argued and came to blows. That would

explain all the smashed vases and the camera getting

crushed underfoot. I suspect that after the fight, Forrest left and came back later to shoot

Preston from ambush."

He contemplated that for a while. It was possible. He had learned long ago that when it came

to murder, almost anything was possible.

"I take it you confronted Forrest with your accusations after that last visit to the cabin?" he

asked.

"Yes. But I'm afraid that I didn't handle it very adroitly. I made... scenes. A number of them.

The two most memorable ones occurred when I went to Forrest's home and shouted my

accusations at him in front of his wife. The second big one took place when I stormed into a

meeting of the Cleland board."

"You accused Forrest of murder in front of his board of directors?"

She sighed. "As I said, I did not handle things in what you'd call a diplomatic fashion."

"No, I can see that. What happened?"

"I don't know what I hoped to accomplish. Maybe I thought I'd get some support from a few

of the board members. Instead everyone just looked at me like I'd gone..."

"Crazy."

"In a word, yes." She shrugged. "There were a few more incidents in a similar vein. The police

were not interested. Forrest convinced everyone that he had an iron-clad alibi for the day of

Preston's murder. Everyone else in the Cleland family was content with the cops' theory that

the prowler had been the killer. They wanted me to sit down and shut up. I had never been a

popular addition to the clan."

"Why not?"

"No money. No background. No social connections."

"Presumably you got increasingly frustrated," he said.

"Oh, yes. Yes, I got very frustrated. So I got louder. A few weeks later Forrest called in Dr.

Harper. I don't know how he found out about him and his hospital. But he told Harper that I

had become irrational and was making wild threats. He said that he did not want to turn me

over to the cops because, after all, I *was family*. Harper promised him that he would take very

good care of me. And he did."

"What did Harper do?"

"He declared me to be a threat to myself and others." Zoe's mouth twisted. "And then he

proceeded to medicate me."

"He used drugs on you?"

"Oh, yes, he used drugs."

She closed her eyes. *Fighting back tears or memories or both?* he wondered.

When her lashes lifted, he could see the

cold anger that blazed within her. But her voice was

unnaturally steady. "The first time I was literally overpowered by orderlies who held me down

while I was given a shot of something very strong. I woke up in a little white room in Xanadu."

"Xanadu?"

Zoe exchanged a glance with Arcadia. "Our nickname for the Manor."

Ethan raised his brows at Arcadia. "You were a patient there, too?"

"For a while." Arcadia did not elaborate.

"Another escapee?"

"Mmm."

"Living under a fake ID?"

Arcadia said nothing.

Zoe cleared her throat. "For the record, my ID is not exactly fake. More like concealed."

"You want to explain that?" he said politely.

It was Arcadia who responded.

"I have a connection," she said quietly.
"Before I went to Candle Lake Manor, I made some

arrangements. Someone I trusted and who is now dead gave me an introduction to an online

identity broker called the Merchant. He's very secretive. You have to have a special code just

to contact him and he only accepts certain clients. If you make his A-list, however, he offers

a variety of services. He'll sell you a complete new life if you want to go that route. But Zoe

only needed to stay hidden for a while."

"In fact," Zoe put in, "I have to keep my old identity in order to be certain that I retain control

of the Cleland shares. I'm not sure what would happen, legally speaking, to my status as

owner of the shares if I assume a whole new ID."

"Zoe Luce is your real name?" Ethan asked.

"Sort of. Zoe is actually my middle name. Luce was my last name before I was married.

There's no law that says you can't go back to using it."

"Names don't matter a whole heck of a lot when you're tracing someone," Ethan said said.

"There are hundreds, even thousands of people with the same first and last names. Numbers

are the only things that count. I'm assuming that you're not using your old credit cards or

bank accounts. But what did you do about your social security and driver's license numbers?"

"The Merchant offered to provide what he called a spiderweb veil online," she said. "I don't

understand all the technical details, but what it means is that he arranged for any inquiries

concerning my Basic ID numbers to be routed through him. He promised that he would make

certain that anyone who searched for me would get the appropriate answers."

"Legitimate inquiries from government or law enforcement agencies get the truth, I take it."

"Yes, but there haven't been any from those sources." She moved one hand in a crisp arc. "I

certainly never gave the government or the law any reason to do a background check on me.

As for other online searchers, the Merchant claimed that he would muddy the waters. It

seemed to work. Shortly after we escaped, he notified us that an investigator hired by

someone at Candle Lake Manor had attempted to find Arcadia and me. He assured us that he

had planted a phony story from a Mexican newspaper to the effect that we had evidently died

in a hotel fire."

"The Merchant hasn't notified us of any more inquiries," Arcadia concluded.

"But someone has obviously found Zoe."

So much for moving to a smaller town where the cases would be simpler and he could have a

normal social life, Ethan thought. Business was getting complicated fast here in Whispering

Springs, and he was sleeping with a woman who had escaped from a mental hospital.

"I spent six months in Candle Lake Manor," Zoe said.

"For all intents and purposes, I might as well have been in prison." She smiled humorlessly.

"Except, of course, that I got therapy."

"How did you get out?" Ethan asked.

Zoe put a fingertip in the center of the cocktail napkin and used a second finger to spin the

small paper square. She appeared to be giving the question extremely close consideration.

"It's another long story," she said. She stopped spinning the napkin. "Do you really want to

hear it right now?"

"It can wait," he said. But not for long, he thought. "All right, let's get to the part that

involves me."

"The blackmail threat," Zoe said.

"I assume that whoever has located you

is threatening to tell someone else."

"That's the implication." She reached into her large black tote and withdrew a sheet of

business stationery. Without a word she handed it to him. "I found this in my bed tonight."

"He got inside your apartment?" He tried to keep the question businesslike, not wanting to

alarm her.

"Yes. He knows exactly where I live, and he knew how to get past all my locks."

That was not good news, Ethan thought.

He studied the little etching of the mansion on the lake. "Candle Lake Manor. That's all. No

address or phone number."

"Of course not." Arcadia picked up her espresso cup and sipped languidly. "Dr. Harper relies on

referrals. He does not believe in advertising. Discretion and privacy are the twin pillars of his

business."

"Candle Lake Manor is the kind of place

where you can stick your crazy uncle and rest assured

that your friends down at the yacht club will never find out you've got some embarrassing

genes in the family," Zoe said.

"It is a very, very private institution," Arcadia added.

"A tranquil setting designed to soothe and reassure," Zoe murmured. "A positive environment

in which sensitive individuals who cannot cope with the rigors of normal daily life may flourish

and thrive in a serene, orderly setting."

"You're quoting, I assume?" Ethan did not look up from the blackmail note.

"I overheard Dr. Harper showing new clients around a couple of times," Zoe said.

Ethan held up the blackmail note. "Mind if I keep this?"

To his surprise, Zoe hesitated. "I don't know. That's the only piece of evidence I've got."

It annoyed him that she did not fully trust him with the note. Then it occurred to him that a

woman who was accustomed to having her sanity questioned had a right to be cautious about

anything that verified her story.

"I understand this is your evidence," he said patiently. "That's why I need it."

She bit her lip, exchanged a glance with Arcadia, and then nodded. "Okay."

He folded the sheet of stationery and tucked it into the pocket of his shirt. "It looks like you'll

be hearing from whoever left this fairly soon. Any idea who might have found you and how?"

Zoe and Arcadia did some more nonverbal communication. Then Zoe put her hand back into

her tote and drew out another sheet of paper.

"We think it almost has to be someone from Candle Lake Manor," she said.

"We made a list."

"That's a start."

"Something else you should know," she said carefully. "I only need to stay hidden for six more

weeks."

"What happens in six weeks?"

"I take my revenge for my husband's murder." Her eyes were fierce. "It isn't nearly enough,

but it is something."

He chilled. "What are you going to do?"

"Destroy the only thing in this world that Forrest Cleland really cares about. Cleland Cage,

Inc."

Chapter Seventeen

Ethan walked through the door of the bookshop shortly after eight the next morning.

Singleton loomed in the gloom.

"You're here bright and early," Singleton said.

"Got a new case and I need some consulting work."

"Business is picking up, huh?"

"A repeat customer."

"That would be the interior decorator?" Singleton leaned on his counter. "She got another

suspicious client? You know, I see a pattern developing here. Play your cards right and this

could turn out to be a fulltime gig for Truax Investigations."

"She's being blackmailed."

Singleton sat down on a stool. "Not good."

"No." Ethan put the extortion note on the glass top of the counter. "I'm trying to get

whatever I can on this private psychiatric hospital. The director's name is Dr. Ian Harper. I did

some preliminary searching online last night and this morning, and I came up with zip. I don't

have time to go at it again. Can you do some fishing for me?"

"Sure." Singleton leaned over to study the note. "Not real original. Clipped the letters out of a

newspaper."

"The bastard left it in Zoe's bed."

One of Singleton's brows rose. "Which means he's right here in town. Or, at least he was last night."

"It also means he knows his way around locks," Ethan said. "Zoe's got some good ones on her front door."

Singleton looked up. "Could have bribed the manager."

Ethan shook his head. "Zoe told me that she had them changed quietly after she moved in.

She did not give the manager the key."

"Okay, so you're looking for someone who can pick a lock and who is probably staying in the vicinity."

"Best guess is that he is associated with this Candle Lake Manor place. Zoe gave me a list of

names of some of the people who work there. I'm going to start calling their offices this

morning, see if any of them are out of town on business. If he was here in Whispering Springs

late last night, there's no way he could be back in his office in Candle Lake yet. I checked the flight schedules."

"Got it. If anyone isn't where he or she is supposed to be, you can start looking for him or her here in Whispering Springs."

"That's the plan."

Singleton got up from the stool. "I'll see what I can find out about this Candle Lake Manor. A private psychiatric hospital, you said?"

Mind if I ask what Zoe's connection is to it?"

"My client prefers to keep that information confidential."

"Got it." Singleton nodded. "She was a patient there. Don't worry, as your part-time

consultant, I consider myself bound by the client confidentiality policies of Truax

Investigations, whatever they are."

"Figured you'd see things that way."

"Just out of curiosity, did Zoe get

discharged from this Candle Lake Manor
because she got

better?"

"No, she busted out."

"An escapee from the funny farm. Gotta
hand it to you, Truax, when it comes to
clients and

girlfriends, you sure can pick 'em."

"When you're starting up a new business
and a new social life, you can't be real
choosy. Oh,

yeah, there's another thing." He took out
his notepad. "Zoe bought some identity

camouflage

from an online ID broker who calls himself the Merchant. The guy is supposed to have great

security. But someone got the information about Zoe. I'd like to know exactly how that was accomplished."

Singleton was clearly intrigued. "No such thing as perfect security online. You know how to contact this guy?"

"Arcadia gave me a special code." Ethan

removed his notebook from his pocket, flipped it

open, and read the information to Singleton.

"I'll see what I can do." Singleton studied the code. "Should be interesting."

Ethan went out into the hall and took the stairs two at a time. He let himself into his office,

sat down at the desk, and got a notepad out of the drawer.

He picked up the phone and went to work.

"... I've been referred to Dr. Harper..."

"Dr. Harper is with a client at the moment and his appointment calendar is full this afternoon."

"May I ask who referred you? "

"This is a very private matter. I'll call back some other time."

Ethan hung up and tried again.

"... This is Bob at the garage. Is Ron there? I need to talk to him about his lube job."

"Ron's not scheduled to work today. Did he give you this number? He's not

supposed to take

calls at work...."

"... I need to talk to Ernie about his last rent check. It bounced sky high..."

"Ernie has the day off. He can't take private calls on this phone, anyhow. You'll have to get

him at home..."

He got lucky on the fourth call.

* * *

Ethan walked into her office shortly after nine, took one of the client chairs,

extended his

legs, leaned back, and laced his fingers behind his head. Making himself at home, she thought

grimly. Well, she had known from the start that he would probably be irritating at times.

"What can you tell me about Leon Grady?" he said.

A cold wave washed through her. "So he's the one?"

"Could be. The orderlies you mentioned, Ron and Ernie, are not scheduled to work today so

they weren't around. I suppose they are possibilities, but Grady is the one who interests me

the most. He's definitely not in his office at Candle Lake this morning and the official word is

that he is out of town on business."

"He's head of security at Candle Lake."

"You gave me that much last night. Explains how he might have had the resources to locate

you and why he might know something about locks. Can you describe him?"

"Short. Heavyset. Thinning hair. Not a spiffy dresser." She broke off, summoning up every

detail she could recall. "I'd say he's in his late fifties. He reports directly to Dr. Harper. He

probably took a lot of heat from Harper when they discovered that Arcadia and I were gone."

"Is Grady good with a computer? Savvy enough to track you down online?"

She wrinkled her nose. "From what I saw of him, I wouldn't have thought that he was

particularly clever at anything, but he might know his way around a computer. I just don't

know."

"You mentioned his clothes. How does he dress?"

"Whenever I saw him in the halls at Candle Lake during the week, he was usually wearing a

bad suit. But once or twice he came in on a weekend because of an emergency. I seem to

remember cheap polo shirts and polyester pants on those occasions. And

he had a very gaudy

diamond ring. Arcadia is pretty sure the stone is not real."

"Car?"

"A red Porsche. It's his pride and joy. I used to see it in the parking lot, and I overheard some

of the orderlies talking about it."

Ethan thought about that and then let it go. "Probably isn't driving it. Too eye-catching.

Glasses? Scars? Quirks?"

"Sunglasses. I think they go with the Porsche. I don't remember any scars."

"Right." Ethan unlaced his fingers and got to his feet. "I'm off. If you think of anything else,

call me."

"Wait." She leaped out of her chair.

"Where are you going?"

"To find out if Leon Grady is in Whispering Springs."

"How do you plan to do that?"

"The traditional way. I'm going to look for him."

He was already at the door, turning the knob. She sensed the controlled energy running

through him. On the hunt, she thought. Doing what came naturally.

"Ethan?"

He stopped in the doorway and looked back at her. "Yeah?"

"Be careful."

He looked surprised. Then he smiled slightly.

"Always," he said.

Before she could respond he was gone.

* * *

He went back to his office, opened the phone book, and started punching numbers. There

were a lot of resorts, hotels, and motels in Whispering Springs and the surrounding area. This

was Arizona, after all, a golfer's and sunseeker's paradise. But he cut the list down

considerably when he excluded the high-end establishments. He had a feeling that Grady was

the kind of guy who would feel more comfortable in inconspicuous surroundings. Blackmail, by

its very nature, demanded a low profile.

He thought it was also safe to assume that Grady would not have set up shop too far from his

target. He would want to keep tabs on Zoe.

It was amazing how free with information people were when you asked the right questions.

"... I'm trying to find my uncle. He's got Alzheimer's and he's wandered off

again. Big flashy

*ring. Thinning hair. You'd never know
he was ill. Keeps changing his name
because he can't*

*remember his own. We're really
worried about him...."*

At eleven-thirty that morning, he drove
into the graveled parking lot of the
Sunrise Suites

motel. Half a dozen cars were parked in
the lot. A fast-food chain restaurant
occupied the

property on the left. There was an old,
boarded-up house on the right and,

beyond it, a row

of dilapidated warehouses that appeared to have been abandoned a long time ago.

Ethan sat behind the wheel for a few minutes, studying the two-story motel. In most of the

windows the drapes were open or only partially closed. But one window was completely veiled

with dingy curtains that sagged from the rod.

He climbed out of the SUV, collected his tool kit, and went up the outside steps at the far end

of the building. He walked along the second-floor balcony, stopped in front of the door that

went with the closed drapes, and knocked.

There was a short pause.

"Who's there?"

A man's voice. So far, so good.

"Sorry to bother you, sir," Ethan said, making it sound like he wasn't sorry, just bored. "My

company got a call from the manager. There's a leak in the room below. I took

a look down

there and I'm pretty sure the water's coming from this room. I need to check your shower."

"Come back later."

"Sorry, sir, this is sort of an emergency. The manager is freaking out about the damage

downstairs. I gotta get this leak stopped."

"Hell with it. Okay, okay, give me a minute."

A short time later the door opened. A

heavyset man with thinning hair peered out through the

crack. He was wearing a faded tan polo shirt and polyester slacks. There was a really big,

really fake-looking diamond ring on one finger. He surveyed Ethan's gray work shirt and tool

kit. Apparently satisfied, he stepped back.

"Make it fast, will you? I'm in the middle of some business here."

Ethan caught the scent of antacid tablets on his breath. He walked into the room

and closed

the door.

"This won't take long, Grady," he said.

"It better not, I'm trying to work – "
Grady broke off abruptly. His mouth
opened, closed, and

opened again. "What the hell? How do
you know my name? Who are you?"

"I represent the lady you're trying to
blackmail. She hired me to find you and
make sure that

you cease and desist." Ethan paused a
beat. "That means stop, by the way."

"That's impossible."

"Well, no, it's not. I mean, look at the progress I've made, already. I've located you. That was

the hard part. Making sure you stop the extortion will be a piece of cake."

"You're crazy."

"Seems to be a lot of that going around lately."

"Listen to me, you stupid SOB – "

"The name's Truax."

"I don't give a shit what your name is."

But here's some free advice. If you're working for the

Cleland woman, you're in trouble. She escaped from a psychiatric hospital."

"Yeah, yeah, I know. And you were the guy in charge of keeping her locked up."

"Know *why* she was locked up?"

"I heard about the scam Harper is running," Ethan said. "How, for a price, he arranges to take

care of unwanted relatives. A good example of niche marketing."

"Scam? Is that what she told you?"

Grady grimaced, his disdain obvious.
"And you bought her

story. Shit. She's either paying you a lot of money or else she's sleeping with you. Which is

it?"

"That's not your problem."

"Let me tell you why her relatives wanted her stashed away out of sight and out of mind,"

Grady said. "She hears *voices*, man." He aimed a forefinger at his ear and turned it in a circular

motion. "In the *walls*."

"Thought you were in charge of security back at Candle Lake. Didn't know you were working

the shrink side of the business, too. You're a real versatile guy, Grady."

"I'm not one of the quacks, but I made a copy of the Cleland woman's file before I left. I've

had a lot of time on my hands since I hit this burg, so I read her records. She wound up in

Candle Lake because she accused a big-time CEO of a major company of

murdering her

husband. Said something about hearing the screams in the room where it happened."

Ethan grinned. "Hey, you really believe those records Harper makes up for his clients?"

"I do in this case," Grady said, talking fast now. "The shrink who was treating her at Candle

Lake, Dr. McAlistair, confirmed the delusion in some early notes. In fact, McAlistair took a

personal interest in the case. Called it an

extremely rare example of auditory hallucination."

"Wow."

"Listen up, pal, Cleland isn't just crazy – she's dangerous. When she and another patient

escaped from Candle Lake, they damn near killed two orderlies."

"Let me guess, you didn't report the incident to the cops, did you?"

Grady scowled. "Harper wouldn't hear of it. He's real big on keeping a low profile. His clients

don't want any publicity."

"What about the orderlies? Didn't they have some interest in calling in the cops?"

"Nah. Harper made it worth their while to keep quiet. But I'm giving you the facts. The lady's a

certified nutcase, my friend. If I were you, I'd cut my losses."

"Strangely enough, I was just about to give you the same advice," Ethan said quietly. "Cut

your losses and do it fast because if you don't disappear I'm going to the cops."

"Bullshit." Grady was triumphant. "You can't prove a goddamned thing. What's more, the

Cleland woman won't let you call in the police. She knows that once they find out she's a

recent resident of a psych ward they'll contact her family and her doctors. She'll be back in

Candle Lake before she knows what hit her. Trust me, she doesn't stand a chance. Harper

knows how to manage that kind of situation. Man, he's a pro."

Ethan shook his head. "She won't be going back under any circumstances. I've got a plan to

take out some insurance for her."

For the first time Grady appeared wary. "How the hell are you gonna keep 'em from hauling her

off to the Manor when the good doctors and her dear family all want her put back in a padded

room?"

Ethan told him exactly how he intended to keep Zoe out of Candle Lake Manor.

The guy was downright scary. Truax's scheme was breathtaking and damned brilliant. *If he*

could pull it off.

But after seeing the stone-cold assurance in his eyes, Leon was pretty sure the son of a bitch

would manage it.

Leon stood alone in the middle of the motel room and tried to think his way out of the box in

which he found himself. You had to hand

it to Truax. He'd come up with a hell of an angle.

The Cleland woman might be desperate enough and crazy enough to go along with it. Probably

wouldn't even see the trap Truax had set for her.

He knew a slicker operator when he met one, Leon thought. Glumly he dug the large bottle out

of his pocket, pried off the lid, and poured a fistful of antacid tablets into his palm. When this

was over, he'd better see a doctor about

his stomach problems. They were getting worse.

He stuffed a fistful of tablets into his mouth and chewed grimly. It was time to change course.

Once Truax made his move, everything would start to come apart. Leon wanted to be in the

wind before that happened.

He started to pace the threadbare carpet. He needed to come up with plan B and he had to

do it fast. He possessed valuable information. If he could not use it to

blackmail the Cleland

woman, he ought to be able to find another buyer.

There was at least one other person he could think of who might be persuaded to pay big

bucks to find out where the crazy lady was hiding. He hesitated to make that call, though. It

was one thing to deal with an escaped patient on the run, but the idea of negotiating with

the other potential client worried him.

He stopped pacing and looked at the large envelope that sat on top of the small table. It

contained the contents of the Cleland woman's file. He had copied every scrap of paper in the

original before leaving Candle Lake Manor. The phone number he needed was there.

He walked across the room, scooped up the envelope, and emptied the contents onto the

table.

He picked up the sheet of paper that

contained the name and address he wanted, studied it

for a while, and then opened the file and reread Harper's original intake notes.

... Subject is obsessed with the delusion that her husband was murdered by Forrest Cleland.

She suffers from severe auditory hallucinations, claiming to sense so-called "screams " in the

walls of the cabin where the body was found.

Subject made serious verbal threats to Forrest Cleland and has vowed to

destroy both him

*and the firm of Cleland Cage, Inc.
Subject is clearly a danger to others
and, in her obsessed,*

*hallucinatory state, very probably to
herself, as well....*

Leon put down the notes and popped a few more tablets. The reason he was reluctant to

make the pitch to his one other potential target was simple. He knew enough about Ian

Harper's business style to suspect that there was a good chance the patient had

told the

truth. It was very possible that the Cleland woman was right about her husband having been

murdered by the CEO of Cleland Cage.

Leon would have preferred not to do business with a guy who was capable of putting a bullet

in the brain of someone who got in his way. But he no longer had any choice. Truax had seen

to that.

Time was not the only thing that was

running out fast, Leon thought. His supply of cash was

dangerously low. He'd cleaned out his bank account before he left, but that had only netted

him a few hundred bucks.

He had lived on the corporate credit card and his own personal plastic until he'd arrived in

Whispering Springs. After that he'd used his hard-earned cash to pay for the crappy motel

room and the fast food that was killing his stomach. No telling when Harper

might get

suspicious and take a notion to trace him
via the credit card records. A motel
charge popping

up from Whispering Springs, Arizona,
would be the same as sending Harper a
telegram

informing him that he was not in L.A.
looking for the Cleland woman.

He could try pawning the ring, but he
knew enough about pawn shops to
realize that he

wouldn't get anywhere near its real
value.

It had all looked so easy back at the start. He would get in and get out with the payoff from

the Cleland woman before anyone back at Candle Lake knew what had happened. He had

pictured himself living on a beach in Florida or some island in the Caribbean before Harper even

realized he'd been hosed.

But Truax had just screwed things up royally.

The story of his life, Leon thought. There was always someone around who

couldn't wait to

screw him.

If he was to salvage anything out of this, he had to take some risks. He'd have to put the

squeeze on Forrest Cleland before the guy discovered that Truax was about to outmaneuver

him.

The burning sensation in his chest was worse than it had ever been. The pills weren't doing a

damn bit of good. He reached for the

bottle of liquid antacid that sat on the dresser, opened

it, tilted it, and drank deeply.

When the fire in his chest eased a little, he pondered his priorities. One thing was crystal

clear. He could not hang around this fleabag motel now that Truax had made him.

He needed some more cash to blow town, and he needed it fast. Luckily he had planned for

this contingency.

Chapter Eighteen

*"What is it? What's happened?"
Klumberley Cleland asked.*

She sat tensely on the sofa and watched Forrest put down the phone. Something was very

wrong. She could see that in his face. He rarely displayed strong emotion of any kind, but

whoever he had just finished talking to had managed to anger him. She could tell because he

looked even more cold and controlled

than usual and that was saying something.

Forrest was fifty-one and very much in his prime. He had the kind of good bones that would

draw the eyes of men and women alike until his dying day. At six-foot-four, he possessed a

physical presence that did great things for hand-tailored suits. Together with his natural

charisma and authority, that presence also helped him keep his board of directors and the

members of a constantly feuding, bickering family in line. Most of the time.

She was his second wife. Three years ago when she had married him, she had made the

mistake of thinking that his seemingly bottomless well of cold control was a reflection of his

strength. Somewhere along the line she had discovered the enormity of her mistake. Forrest

was not strong. He was cold-blooded.

She had been wrong about him. He did

not really love her. He had married her because she

came from the right social world and because she had the right social connections and

because she was attractive and because she was eighteen years younger than he was.

When she hit forty, he would probably trade her in on a newer model. Maybe she wouldn't

even last that long. Lately she'd sensed that he was getting restless. She wouldn't be

surprised if he was having an affair. He'd had one with her before he'd divorced his first wife.

"That was a man claiming to know the present whereabouts of Sara Cleland," Forrest said evenly.

She stared at him, jolted out of her thoughts. "What on earth?"

"He offered to sell me the information for a considerable sum."

"I don't understand. Sara's at Candle Lake Manor."

"According to the man on the phone, she hasn't been there for the past year."

"But that doesn't make any sense. We've been paying the bills. She has to be at Candle Lake."

"There's one way to find out if she's there or not." Forrest reached into the slim briefcase at

his feet and retrieved a small handheld computer. He punched a button and studied the

screen for a few seconds. Then he reached for the phone again.

He spoke briefly to whoever answered

at Candle Lake.

"I don't care if she's in a therapy session," he snapped. "Get her on the phone."

There was another tense silence.

"Let me speak to Harper," Forrest said in his executive office voice. "Now."

Kimberley got up with a jerky movement and went to the liquor cabinet. She poured herself a

shot from the first bottle that came to hand without even looking at the label and listened to

the rest of the one-sided conversation in growing panic.

"Don't give me that bullshit about her fragile mental condition," Forrest said softly. "You've lost

her, haven't you? How long has she been gone?"

Kimberley took a long swallow and stared unseeingly at the sweeping view of San Francisco

Bay. What she really needed was one of the little pink pills she kept in her medicine cabinet,

but she did not dare take them in front of

Forrest. He would see it as a sign of weakness even

though he was the reason she had been forced to ask her doctor for the prescription.

Forrest hung up and looked at her across the width of the room his first wife had decorated.

"She's gone," Forrest said flatly.

"Harper admitted as much. His story is that she managed to

slip away a few days ago and that she has been located. He claims that he sent some people

to pick her up and that there's nothing to worry about."

"Then it will be okay. Everything will be fine once they have her back at Candle Lake."

"I'm not so sure of that." Forrest got to his feet. "I'll give Harper twenty-four hours. If he

doesn't have Sara back by tomorrow, I'll take matters into my own hands."

"You're going to deal with that person who just called? The one who offered to sell you the

information about Sara?"

"If necessary. One way or another, Sara has to be found and returned to Candle Lake as soon

as possible. I can't risk having her show up at the annual board meeting."

Kimberley noticed that her hand was shaking. She lowered her half-finished drink with great

caution and set the glass down on top of the lacquered cabinet. "Do you really think she'd

have the nerve to turn up at the meeting?"

"She's crazy, remember? She thinks I murdered Preston. Her goal is to destroy

me and the

company. Yes, I think she'll show up unless we get her back into Candle Lake." Forrest picked

up the briefcase and started toward the door. "I'll be in my study."

Kimberley watched him walk away from her. It reminded her of the way her father had always

walked away when she needed him, the way everyone walked away from her. She tried

another swallow of whiskey. The expensive liquor tasted like acid.

Chapter Nineteen

"You told Leon Grady you were going to do what?" Zoe was so stunned that she could barely

get the words out of her mouth. It was as if her tongue had just short-circuited. Her brain,

too. She stared blankly at Ethan, who sprawled in her client chair, glancing occasionally at his

watch. He was making no secret of his impatience to leave. A busy man who had things to do

and people to see.

"You heard me," he said. "I told Grady that we're going to get married."

She pulled herself together with a tremendous effort. "*Why?*"

"I thought it was obvious."

"No," Zoe said through her teeth. "It is not obvious. Try explaining it to me in short,

single-syllable words."

"Don't worry, most of the words I know are short and single syllable. Okay, here's my thinking

on this. You told me that the shares you inherited from Preston are now in a trust that you

can revoke at will."

"Yes."

"Your goal is to materialize unannounced at the annual board meeting, paperwork revoking the

trust in your hand, and proceed to vote your shares in such a manner as to force the hostile

merger of Cleland Cage, right?"

"Yes"

"But if you get picked up by the jolly munchkins from Candle Lake before the annual meeting,

your big plans go down the toilet."

"I hired you to keep that from happening, remember?"

"I'm doing my best, ma'am. But in my professional opinion, marriage would buy you a hell of a

lot of insurance. It would, in fact, render the entire concept of returning you there null and

void."

The logic finally started to sink into her bemused brain. "Because as my husband, you would

be able to vote my shares," she said slowly. "You could vote them according to my wishes and

achieve the same results."

"True, but practically speaking, it's a whole lot simpler than that. As your husband, I become

your new next of kin. I could override any medical decision that Forrest Cleland or anyone else

might try to make for you, including

commitment to a psychiatric hospital."

"Of course," she whispered. "I never thought of that. Even if they managed to haul me back,

you could spring me."

"Right. But I don't think it will come to that. I'm betting that once the word gets out that

you're married, everyone involved in this thing will give up on their plans to keep you locked up

and slink away into the night."

"You're serious, aren't you?" she said

finally.

"When I'm working, I'm always serious. The quickest, cleanest way to do this is to catch a

flight to Vegas late this afternoon." He shot another glance at his watch. "We'll get married

there tonight and return to Whispering Springs tomorrow."

"You'd really do this for me? Marry me just to keep me safe for the next six weeks?"

"You got a better idea?"

"Well, no, but this seems a little extreme."

"Hey, it's no big deal. Trust me, I've been married lots of times."

No big deal.

"I suppose you do qualify as an expert in the field," she said neutrally.

"Right. I'm an expert. After the annual board meeting, we'll get a quickie divorce and life will

go back to normal." She cleared her throat. "You make it sound so easy." "It is easy."

She rubbed her temples. "I'm touched, really I am, but I can't allow you to do this." "Why not?"

She frowned. "Because it's too dangerous, of course." "I'd like to say that danger is my middle name, but it's not. Relax, this'll work. You'll see."

She shook her head. "I can't let you do it. In essence you'd be putting yourself into the same

situation that Preston was in. Don't you see? Forrest killed Preston. Who's to say

he wouldn't

try to murder you, too, if he thought that you were standing in his way?"

His mouth curved. "You really mean that, don't you? You're worried about me."

"As the saying goes, you don't have a dog in this fight, Ethan. I don't want the responsibility

of putting you in mortal danger."

"You hired me to take care of a blackmail problem," he said gently. "Let me do my job." "I

won't let you take the risk."

"As your husband, I won't be at risk in the same way that Preston was." "What do you mean?"

"One dead husband who was apparently the victim of an armed burglar can be explained," he

said. "A second dead husband at this point would arouse suspicion and invite a lot of

questions. Trust me, that is the last thing Forrest will want if he is trying to fend off a

takeover. He needs the full support of

his board and all of the major shareholders he can get

on his side."

He had a point, but she was reluctant to admit it. "The most likely scenario is that Forrest will

try to buy me off when he finds out I'm married to you," Ethan said.

"Hmm."

"It's the only approach that would make sense."

"And if he does try to buy you off?" she asked. "What will you tell him?"

Ethan got up, walked to the desk, and flattened his hands on the surface. He leaned in close.

"I will tell him to go screw himself."

"Ethan – "

"Come on, let's get moving. It's going on one o'clock, I'll drop you off at your apartment. You

can pack a bag while I take care of some loose ends at the office. I'll pick you up at

three-thirty and we'll head for the airport. There are dozens of flights all day long to Vegas,

and they take only about an hour. The time change is in our favor."

"What loose ends?" she demanded, struggling to hold on to at least one rational thread.

He shrugged. "There are a few things I want to do before we leave town."

She hauled her ultramarine blue tote out from under the desk and got slowly to her feet.

"Such as?"

"I'm going to line up someone to keep an eye on Arcadia while we're out of town."

A new rush of anxiety stopped her in her tracks. "Do you think she's in danger?"

"Probably not. Leon Grady never mentioned her." Ethan was at the door, holding it open. "And

I'm inclined to agree with her that the hacker who sold your file to Grady would have offered

to sell hers as well if he had it. But I'd rather be safe than sorry."

"I understand your concern, but I think you'd better check with Arcadia before you hire a

bodyguard for her."

"Arcadia strikes me as a smart lady. I don't think she'll go stubborn on me."

"Unlike me, you mean?"

"You are a smart lady, too," he said a little too smoothly.

"But stubborn?"

"Very." He looked at her. "You going to walk out of here on your own two feet or do you want

to be carried out?"

She raised her chin, clutched her tote very tightly, and marched toward the door with as

much dignity as she could summon.
"There is one very important little fact
that you seem to

be forgetting more and more often
lately."

"What's that?"

"I'm the client." She poked a ringer at his
chest as she went past. "You work for
me, Truax.

That means I give the orders."

"Oh, yeah." He closed and locked her
door. "I knew that."

* * *

"Getting married again , huh?" Singleton leaned on his counter and regarded Ethan with a

meditative expression. "If you'd given me a little notice, I could have organized a bachelor party."

"I appreciate the thought," Ethan said. "Tell you what, you can buy me a beer when I get back from Vegas."

"Sure. Look, I can follow your reasoning here, but I gotta tell you that marrying the client is a

little over the top, even for an ace private detective like you."

"That's what Zoe said."

"She's not keen on this plan?"

"I had my hands full talking her into it. She was afraid that she would be putting me in

danger."

"And you told her that danger was your middle name, right?"

"How'd you guess?"

"I saw the movie."

"It's a cool line and I've waited all of my professional life to use it, but unfortunately, she was

not in a mood to buy it. I had to fall back on reason and logic."

"Don't you just hate when that happens?"

"Yeah. I pointed out that the probability that Forrest Cleland would take the risk of murdering

two of her husbands was real low."

Singleton took off his glasses and started to polish them with a cloth. "You think it's all that

low?"

"Sure." Ethan lounged against the counter. "But enough about me. Let's talk about you. What

have you got for me?"

Singleton replaced his glasses. "Not much, I'm afraid. As far as I can tell Candle Lake Manor is

a legitimate private hospital that is wholly owned and operated by Dr. Ian Harper."

"How'd he get enough money to buy his own hospital?"

"He did it the old-fashioned way. He married it."

"Wife?"

"Elizabeth Pangbourne Harper was a spinster most of her life. She inherited a fortune and used

it for good works. She was fifty-four when she married Harper. He was forty-two. That was

eleven years ago. She died three years later. Heart attack."

"Convenient. Harper got her fortune?"

"Not all of it. A good chunk went to

various charities." Singleton consulted some notes. "But

he got some of it, and he also got Candle Lake Manor. By catering to a wealthy clientele who

will pay dearly for privacy and by steering clear of insurance and government funding, he has

evidently found a way to make the place quite profitable."

"A real entrepreneur. Staff?"

"About what you'd expect. Orderlies, aides, housekeepers, kitchen crew, and some security

personnel. Turnover seems to be high."

"What about the medical side?"

"As far as I can tell, there's only one full-fledged psychiatrist on the payroll, Dr. Venetia

McAlistair. She oversees a small number of so-called therapists. Most of them don't have

much in the way of degrees or experience. High turnover in that group, too." Singleton looked

up from his notes. "Given the piss-poor patient to medical staff ratio, I've got a hunch that

Candle Lake Manor relies heavily on Pharmaceuticals to treat the patients."

Ethan nodded. "Drugs are cheaper than doctors, and Harper seems to be a guy who keeps an

eye on the bottom line. Anything else?"

"That's about it except for the fact that, as far as I can tell, none of the patient history or

billing records are online."

"You'd expect that from a place that sells the promise of privacy and a very low profile. What

about Cleland Cage? Anything new there?"

"Just what you already know. Third-generation commercial real estate development and

investment company. Because it is a closely held corporation, there's not much news in the

financial press. But there have been rumors that the company has had some serious financial

problems lately because of some outstanding debt accrued after it acquired a smaller outfit a

couple years ago. Forrest Cleland has been struggling to fight off a hostile takeover from

another large development operation for the past year. Big decisions are expected at the

annual board meeting next month."

"What about the Merchant?"

"A very secretive type, our Merchant. I used the code that Arcadia provided, though, and I

dropped a name. He responded."

"Yeah? What name did you drop?"

Singleton shrugged. "I mentioned the think tank I worked for a while back. He recognized it

and was suitably impressed. Reacted like he considered me a sort of peer or colleague. At any

rate, he refused to believe that he had been hacked. Takes a lot of pride in his security. But

he assures me that he's looking into the matter and that he'll get back to me."

"All right." Ethan pushed himself away from the counter and went toward the door. "If you get

more, you know where to reach me."

"Sure. Congratulations on your forthcoming marriage, by the way. You know what they say."

Ethan paused in the doorway and looked back over his shoulder. "No, what do they say?"

"Fourth time's a charm."

"That's good to hear."

He went out into the hall and climbed the steps to the upper floor. He let himself into his

office, sat down behind his desk, and

reached for the old-fashioned file in which he kept

important phone numbers. He flipped through the cards until he found the one he wanted.

Harry Stagg answered on the first ring. "Stagg Consulting."

"I need a baby-sitter for a woman in Whispering Springs and I need him ASAP. Like tonight.

You available?"

There was a short pause. "If I say yes, it makes it sound like I'm not doing much business."

"You want the job or not?"

"I'll take it," Stagg said. "Business is a little slow."

"How soon can you be here?"

"Let's see, the flight from San Diego to Phoenix takes about an hour in the air but there's the

time change. If I leave now I should be in Whispering Springs by six or six-thirty. That work

for you?"

"It works." He gave Arcadia's name and address to Stagg. "I'll talk to her. She'll

be expecting

you. I'm leaving town with my client as soon as I can get away. We'll be back in Whispering

Springs sometime tomorrow."

"Where are you going?"

"Las Vegas."

"I take it this isn't a gambling junket?"

"I'm getting married."

"Yeah? How many times does this make? Three? Four?"

"Four."

"Well, you know what they say," Stagg said. "Fourth time's a charm."

"I've heard that."

He filled Stagg in on Leon Grady and the situation.

"Grady will probably be gone by the time you get here. It doesn't look like he knows about

Arcadia Ames, but I don't want to take any chances."

"Got it."

Bonnie walked into the office just as Ethan hung up the phone.

"What's going on?" she asked.

"Congratulate me," Ethan said. "I'm getting married."

"Married? "

"You know what they say, fourth time's a charm."

"A bodyguard?" Arcadia contemplated Ethan. "For how long?"

"A couple of days," Ethan said. "Just until we can be sure that you're not on Grady's blackmail

list."

"If he was aware of me, he would have made his move by now."

"It will make Zoe feel more comfortable if she knows that you're in safe hands while we're out

of town."

He was right, she thought. Zoe would worry.

"Okay," she said. "But only until you two return."

"I appreciate the cooperation. His name is Harry Stagg. He'll show up around six

or six-thirty if

all goes well."

She smiled slightly. "Is he just a big hunk of muscle or is there some brain?"

"There's some brain." He looked into the nearest display case and saw several pieces of

unusual looking jewelry. "Got any rings?"

"Yes." She tipped her head to one side. "Don't tell me that you want to buy one for Zoe?"

"When you get married there's supposed

to be a ring."

She studied him for a long moment.

"You ought to know," she said softly.

Chapter Twenty

They flew into Las Vegas that evening. At eleven o'clock they were standing in front of the

altar of an allnight wedding chapel.

The ceremony was everything one could hope for in a Las Vegas wedding, Zoe decided. The

chapel, a glittering little palace decorated with a lot of crystals and candles, was tucked away

on a side street just off the Strip. It featured a blue carpet, a white gazebo,

and several large

vases overflowing with artificial blue flowers.

The minister bore a striking resemblance to Elvis in one of his heavy phases. His assistant,

who doubled as bridal attendant, witness, and secretary, was a retired showgirl. The woman

cried when the vows were spoken. The tears looked genuine. Zoe was not sure that was a

good sign.

The most disconcerting moment occurred when Ethan, at the appropriate moment, produced a gold ring cut with an unusual design.

The best part was that she got to sign her full name on all the legal paperwork, Sara Zoe Luce

Cleland. No more hiding in the shadows.

Fifteen minutes later, Ethan guided her outside into the neon-lit night. They slipped into the

endless stream of people moving from one magnificent casino resort to another. Zoe clutched

the little bouquet of real flowers that the assistant had pressed into her hand just before the

ceremony. The circlet of gold glinted on her finger.

"You thought of everything," she said, trying to sound blase. "How did you come up with a ring

on such short notice?"

"It's not from any of my previous marriages if that's what's bothering you." There was an edge

to his voice.

She felt herself turn red and was grateful for the shadows of night and neon. "I was just

curious, that's all."

"I picked it up at Gallery Euphoria before we left. Arcadia knew your ring size."

"Oh." She spread the fingers of her left hand and studied the gold band. "It's quite beautiful.

Must have been expensive."

"Arcadia gave me a deal."

"I'm sure she'll let you return it for a full

refund," Zoe assured him.

"It's not going on your bill as a miscellaneous expense, so stop worrying about the cost."

She realized that she had insulted him. "It's just that I'm already so deeply in debt to her,"

Zoe said, trying to explain. "After we got out of Xanadu I could not access any of my own

cash or credit cards. We had to use the money that she had stashed away in an offshore

account. I'm making regular monthly

payments to her, but the truth is I won't be able to repay

her for the costs of using the Merchant's services and my business start-up expenses until I

cash out of Cleland Cage. That probably won't happen until a few months after the merger

takes place."

Ethan looked intrigued. "Arcadia is into things like offshore accounts?"

"In her other life she used to be a very successful financial trader. She invested for clients

and for herself. She knows an incredible amount about really arcane business stuff. She's the

one who helped me figure out that Cleland Cage was vulnerable and that a takeover was in

progress. She mapped out the strategy for me."

"Huh. Never would have guessed."

Zoe looked at the ring sparkling in the light of a neon-lit doorway. "It was a nice touch," she

said, still searching for the right note.

"You don't have to wear it if it makes you feel uncomfortable."

"It's okay."

"Not like the ring makes the marriage any more legal."

"I know." She tightened her grip on the flowers. "I said it's okay. I'd appreciate it if you would

not snap at me right now. I'm a little tense."

"Was I snapping at you?"

"Yes."

"Sorry."

"I think we're both tense."

"You certainly seem to be a little high-strung this evening," Ethan allowed.

She resented that. "I'm entitled. It's not like I get married every day."

"Well, maybe *you* don't get married every day," Ethan said gravely. "Some of us, on the other

hand, have had considerable experience in that regard and I can assure you that —
"

"Oh, shut up. I am not in the mood to

joke about your previous experience, so don't start."

"Fine. Not like it's my favorite topic, anyway."

A cloud of guilt settled on her. He had probably been trying to lighten the mood with a little

self-deprecating humor, and she had overreacted.

A long stretch limousine cruised past on her left and turned into the spectacularly illuminated

entrance of one of the mega resort casinos. A woman dressed in a glittering

sequined gown

got out. She was followed by a man in black-and-white formal attire.

On the right, people dressed in jeans and tee shirts drifted past on a long, moving walkway

that bore an unsettling resemblance to a lolling tongue. They disappeared into the mouth of a

giant casino.

Up ahead she could see the brilliant gold and silver sign advertising the hotel where Ethan had

made reservations for the night. They had dropped off their luggage earlier when they had

checked in, but there had been no time to go to the room before Ethan had hustled her off to

take care of the few formalities required to get married in Nevada. She did not know if he had

booked two rooms or one and for some bizarre reason, she had found a lot of excuses not to

inquire into the matter.

"I'm sorry," she said quietly. "I shouldn't

have said that. Especially not after all you've done. I

really don't know how to thank you."

"Forget it."

She examined her rapidly wilting flowers and the ring on her finger.

"That's a little hard to do

under the circumstances."

She expected him to make an acid comment, but he said nothing.

They passed the entrance to a high-end shopping mall built into a hotel. Another doorway

invited them to view a world-class exhibition of old masters. Zoe knew that if she and Ethan

allowed themselves to be lured into either the mall or the art gallery, they would eventually be

fed straight into the resort's casino. That was how Las Vegas survived. The bellies of the

great, glittering beasts were the gaming floors, and the creatures required around-the-clock

feeding.

"Ethan?"

"Yeah?"

"Do you mind if I ask you a personal question?"

"It's a little late to be asking personal questions," he said very seriously. "You ought to ask

those before you marry the guy."

She smiled. "I'll remember that."

"What's the question?"

"How did you get into the private investigation business?"

He said nothing for a few seconds. She

thought that he might not answer her at all.

"I was the family screwup," he said eventually. "Took after my uncle Vic. Dropped out of

college. Joined the army. When I got out, I went to work for a large security firm in L.A. for a

couple of years and then I went out on my own."

"Bonnie told me about what happened to your brother."

"Figured she said something that night we had pizza."

Zoe looked at the crowds up ahead on the sidewalk. "I know how it feels to lose someone like that."

"I realize that."

"I understand what it does to your insides to want justice so badly you can't sleep and to

have people tell you that you should just keep quiet and let the authorities handle it. I

understand how it feels to wake up in the middle of the night knowing that the system isn't

going to work for you."

He reached out and took her ring hand, lacing his fingers through hers.

"I know," he said.

"That's why you're going through all this for me, isn't it?" She clutched the flowers. "Because

you've been in my position. You know how the obsession for revenge eats at you. How it can

make you a little crazy."

"Yeah." He tightened his fingers around hers. "What was he like?"

"Preston?" She summoned up some of the old memories. "He was warm and loving. Caring.

Kind. A truly decent man. Pretty much the exact opposite of his relatives. He was the outsider

in his family. They're all business people. Preston loved his art history."

"And you loved him." It was a statement, not a question.

"Yes, I loved him. By the time I met Preston, I had been alone in the world for a long time. In

his own way, because he was so

different from the others in his family, Preston was also very

much alone. I think that was the reason we were drawn together." She swallowed. "We

promised each other that we would take care of each other."

"And then he got killed."

"Yes. I didn't do a very good job of taking care of him. The only thing I can do now is try to

avenge him. While he was alive, Preston cared about the future of Cleland Cage, but as far as

I'm concerned, it was Forrest and the company that are responsible for his death."

Ethan kept his grip on her hand. "Drew was four years younger than me. He was everything I

was supposed to be. He finished college. He was successful in business and he served on the

board of a charitable foundation. He didn't screw up three marriages. He found a woman who

loved him. He started a family. He was a fine father and a pillar of the community."

A chill of understanding went through her. "You were his older brother?"

"You know what that means?"

She exhaled slowly. "It probably means that somewhere deep inside, you felt that you were

supposed to take care of him."

"Yes. But I didn't do my job. He got killed."

The words echoed all the way through her.

"Do you think," she said very carefully, "that the reason you were obsessed with

getting

justice and the reason I want revenge so badly is because we both feel that we failed in our

responsibilities?"

"Got a hunch that's part of it. What do you think?"

"I think you're right. But it doesn't change anything, does it?"

He squeezed her hand. "No, it doesn't change a damn thing."

Maybe nothing had changed when it came to her need to avenge Preston, she

thought, but

something was certainly different about her relationship with Ethan. She wondered if he felt

the link between them or if it was a product of her imagination.

They walked past a shallow man-made lake that fronted another giant hotel complex. Small

boats, their bows adorned with colored lights, floated across the surface of the water. The

little vessels, together with their cargoes of laughing passengers vanished under a

bridge into

yet another casino.

"You know what?" Ethan abruptly changed direction, dragging her with him. "You were right.

It's been a long day and we're both stressed out. What we need is some distraction. Come

on."

Surprised, she clung to her drooping bouquet and hurried to keep up with him.

"Where are we

going?"

"I'm feeling lucky."

"Join the crowd. Las Vegas is designed to make you feel lucky."

"I'm serious."

He whisked her through the nearest casino entrance, plunging them both into a world of

flashing lights, tinkling slots, and a sea of card tables. The sounds of laughter, conversation,

and lounge music filled the air.

Ethan dragged her to a blackjack table.

"I don't know how to play," she said quickly. "At least not in a real casino."

"Then stand right there and think positive thoughts."

He took a seat. Zoe wrapped both hands around her bouquet and tried to think positive thoughts.

Ethan played with no outward show of emotion, but when he got to his feet fifteen minutes

later, he seemed satisfied. He tipped the dealer and pocketed his winnings.

"Good news," he said. "I won't be billing you for the cost of the hotel room. I just won enough to cover it."

Room. Singular.

"It's all right," she said hastily. "I really don't mind. I understand that out-of-town expenses aren't included in your basic fee."

"Think of it as a wedding present." He handed her some quarters. "Here. Try your luck."

"I never win when I play slots."

"Give it a shot."

"Oh, all right." She snatched a few of the coins out of his hand, dumped them into the nearest

machine, and pulled the handle.

Quarters tinkled pleasantly in the tray.

"Hey, Ethan, look."

More coins cascaded into the bottom of the slot.

"Oh, my gosh," Zoe whispered.

Ethan lounged against the nearest one-armed bandit and grinned. "Guess this is

your lucky

night, too."

The quarters continued to rain down into the tray.

"Here, hold my flowers." She tossed the bouquet at him, opened her tote, and went to work

scooping up her loot.

Ethan waited until she was finished before he took her arm. "Let's get a drink to celebrate."

He led her into the nearest lounge. They sat down in a booth. Ethan put the

bouquet on the
table.

A waitress dressed in a tiny gold costume appeared.

"Champagne," Ethan said.

The waitress glanced knowingly at the flowers. "Is this a celebration?"

Ethan put an arm around Zoe in an unmistakably possessive move.

"Just got married," he said.

"Yeah, that happens a lot around here."
She gave both Ethan and Zoe a genuinely

warm smile.

"Most of the time I figure it'll last about a week. But you two look good together.

Congratulations."

* * *

The champagne took some of the edge off the tension, but it did nothing to allay the

unsettling mix of excitement and apprehension that Zoe was experiencing. By the time they

arrived at the door of the hotel room, the fluttery feeling in her stomach was

Almost

unbearable.

Calm down. It's not like this is a real wedding night. I'm just sort of having an affair with him.

Actually, until now, it's been more of a one-night stand.

But that freshly minted wedding license in Ethan's pocket and the ring on her finger made it all

seem surreal. What did you call it when you slept with the man who had just married you?

She was concentrating so hard on the question that when Ethan opened the door she walked

into the room without her usual pause on the threshold.

The heavy wave of raw lust hit her so hard that she dropped her flowers and nearly fell to her

knees.

"What the hell?" Ethan flipped on the light switch. He caught her arm and steadied her. "Are

you okay?" Concern edged his voice.

"Yes."

That was an outright lie. She was not okay. The suffocating essence of recent sex suffused

the atmosphere. It was not the kind of earthy, natural emotional energy that sometimes clung

to a bedroom for a while. This room reeked of sick and twisted cravings. She breathed

shallowly and looked around with a sense of desperation.

On the surface, everything was pristine. The beige-colored carpet had been

properly

vacuumed. The massive, round bed with its gold-and-black-striped spread and matching,

king-sized pillow shams appeared clean and fresh. The bathroom door stood ajar, affording a

view of acres of white tile.

But the taint of unwholesome sex clung to the furnishings like a terrible stench.

There was no way she could spend the night in this room. She needed an excuse to ask Ethan

to call the front desk and request a move, and she needed it fast.

The answer came when she looked up and saw the large mirror installed in the ceiling over the

bed.

"I can't handle that," she said.

Ethan followed her gaze. He saw the mirror and smiled slowly. "Maybe I shouldn't have asked

the front desk clerk for the address of the nearest wedding chapel. Got a feeling he tried to

do us a favor by upgrading us to a honeymoon suite."

"Would you mind very much if we downgraded ourselves? That mirror is a little over the top for

me."

"See, that's the thing about you interior decorators. Picky, picky, picky."

But he was already reaching for the phone.

His request was granted immediately. They collected their bags and went downstairs to get

new keys.

"Will you need help with the luggage?"
the clerk asked.

"No, thanks," Ethan said. "We can
manage on our own."

They made their way back through the
casino to the elevator lobby in silence.

Five minutes later they opened the door
of another room on the eleventh floor.
This time Zoe

remembered to halt on the threshold.
Nothing intense hit her, just the usual
assortment of

minor sensations that she could easily tune out.

Ethan watched her walk into the room.
"This one okay?"

"Yes, thank you." She was embarrassed but enormously relieved. "Sorry about the fuss."

Ethan hauled her suitcase and his own small flight bag into the room and dropped them on the

floor. "I admit that the mirror over the bed was a little on the tacky side."

"Yes, it was." She went into the bathroom, found a glass, and stuck her

bouquet into it. "I

regret to say that there are a few people
in my profession who don't know when
to stop when

it comes to mirrors."

Ethan came to stand in the bathroom
doorway and watched her run water into
the glass. "I

don't think those flowers will make it
through the night."

"Probably not."

But she could not bring herself to dump
them into the trash.

"Zoe?"

"Look, there are two sinks," she said brightly. "Which one do you want?"

He walked to where she stood and gently cradled her face in his hands.

"It's okay," he said. "I got one room because I was going on the assumption that we needed

only one bed. But if that assumption was wrong, all you have to do is tell me. I can afford two

rooms tonight."

A deep warmth flowed through her. She

spread her fingers across the front of his shirt,

savoring the hard strength in him. The hunger in his eyes was unmistakable, but it was under

full control. If she asked him to get another room or to sleep on the floor he would do it.

"Your assumption was not wrong," she said.

He drew his knuckles lightly along her cheek. "You don't know how happy I am to hear that."

He deserved some kind of rational

explanation, she thought. She was behaving like a nervous

bride on a wedding night.

"I know I'm acting weird," she said.

"The stress."

"That's part of it, but it's more than that. This whole situation just feels so strange. I mean,

we've only had one night together and I was just starting to adjust to the idea that we might

be sleeping together and wondering how things would go between us and now

we're married

but it's not a real marriage. I don't know. I can't seem to grasp the concept."

"Listen to the advice of an expert." He kissed her ear. "Forget the license and the ring.

Concentrate on the sleeping together part."

Before she could respond, he was kissing her, a heavy, intoxicating kiss – a magic spell of a

kiss that set everything inside her gloriously free.

Concentrate on the sleeping together part.

"Ethan." She gripped his shoulders and kissed him back, abandoning herself to the moment

with a kind of desperate, feverish need that was entirely new to her.

"That's it," he said against her throat. His voice was thicker and heavier, rich and dense and

imbued with dark promises. "You're getting the hang of it."

She leaned into him, absorbing his heat into all the cold places inside her, trying

to let him

share some of her own warmth.

He scooped her up, carried her out of the bathroom, and stood her on her feet beside the

bed. Reaching down, he grabbed a fistful of bedspread, blankets, and sheets and tossed them

all out of the way with a single, sweeping motion.

She stumbled out of her shoes, holding on to Ethan to keep her balance. He got out of his

own shoes somehow, and then they were falling together, down, down, down.

The next thing she knew she was on her back and Ethan was on top of her, levering himself

up on one elbow so dial he could strip away her blouse and bra.

She slid her hand downward, got a grip on the zipper of his trousers, and lowered it.

When she found him with her fingers, she discovered that he was fully aroused. She cupped

him gently.

"Oh, yeah." In the shadows, his smile was both very dangerous and very sexy.

"You have

definitely got a good grasp of the concept now."

* * *

A long time later she opened her eyes. The first thing she noticed was the moonlight dancing

on her wedding ring. The pale gleam was as delicate and ephemeral as hope and possibilities

for the future.

Ethan stirred against her and gathered her close. "What are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking that I won't go back to using my other name," she whispered. "I'm going to stick

with Zoe." A new name and, just maybe, a new future.

"Zoe Truax." He leaned over her and kissed her deeply. "Yeah. I like the sound of that. It suits

you."

Chapter Twenty-one

"So," Harry Stagg said. "Come here often?"

Arcadia contemplated the thin man with the deep, world-weary eyes who sat across from her

in the small booth. She had never had a bodyguard before and therefore had not been

altogether sure what to do with one.

She had agreed to put up with him only because it had been clear that Zoe had had enough

to worry about as it was. Flying off to Vegas for a marriage of convenience to Ethan Truax

had caused her a great deal of anxiety. Fretting over her friend's safety while she was out of

town would only make matters worse.

When Harry Stagg showed up in Gallery Euphoria at six-fifteen, Arcadia had suggested that

they have dinner out and spend the evening at The Last Exit. The plan had been to buy as

much time as possible before taking him

home to her silver-and-white apartment.
Unlike Zoe,

she had a spare bedroom, but it was hard
to picture any man, let alone this one,
inhabiting it.

"I like jazz." Arcadia ran her fingertip
around the rim of her martini glass.

"More than that, I

need it. It puts me in another place for a
while."

Harry took a swallow of the fizzy water
that he had ordered. "Know what you
mean."

The trio on stage shifted into a

Thelonious Monk tune, "Brilliant Corners." It was a notoriously

difficult piece, but Arcadia had heard the group do it before. They could handle it. The piano

was leading, the bass and drums moving smoothly into its slipstream.

Harry Stagg blinked a little in muted surprise when the astonishingly clean, compelling music

started to flow through the intimate room. Very slowly he lowered his glass. His face was rapt

with concentration.

Arcadia gave herself up to the otherworldly sounds, and time shifted into another dimension.

When it was over, neither she nor Harry moved for a while. Then her companion turned slowly

back to her.

"Haven't heard anything that good since the last time I was in New Orleans," Harry said. There

was reverent awe in his harsh voice.

"Took me by surprise the first time, too." She smiled slightly. "In response to your question,

yes, I do come here often."

"I can see why."

She removed the little stick from her martini glass and put the olive between her lips. No

sense wasting the moment, she thought. This was a golden opportunity to do some digging.

"Have you known Ethan Truax long?" she asked.

"We met a few years ago," Harry answered.

"In a professional context?"

Harry appeared to ponder that for a moment. Then he nodded. "You could say that. I worked

for some people who wanted me to scare him off a case."

"I assume that plan did not go well?"

"No. Once Truax locks onto a target, he doesn't unlock.

And on that occasion, he was investigating the murder of his brother. I'd have had to kill him

to stop him."

"Zoe told me about what happened to his

brother. I gather that, although the man responsible

walked free, he later met with an unfortunate accident."

"Accidents happen," Harry said.

"You told me that you would have had to kill Ethan to stop him. I can't help but notice that

you didn't go that far. Does that mean that you draw the line at shooting people?"

"Let's just say I don't do it for money," he said.

"Ah. A small, but profound, distinction."

"As it happened, I did not have to explain that distinction to my employers. They were

reluctant to resolve the problem in that way because they were bright enough to figure out

that it would come back to haunt them."

"Were they right?"

"Probably. Getting rid of Truax would have made life very difficult for them. You see, Truax

had already made a lot of waves by that

point. He had a stack of evidence regarding money

laundering a mile high. Some of it contained links to my employers. He also had tapes of me

coming to see him in his office. After I left, he made sure that a memo connecting me to my

employers and them to various shady financial matters went into a safe-deposit box together

with the tapes."

"In other words, if he had turned up dead, there would have been more

questions than your

employers would have wanted to answer."

"Yeah."

"I still don't understand how you and Truax came to be, shall we say, business associates,"

she persisted gently.

"I did not like the way in which my employers dealt with the Truax problem. When it was all

over, I quit. Went into business for myself."

"As a bodyguard for hire?"

"I prefer to think of myself as a consultant." Harry leaned back in the booth and regarded her

with his bottomless eyes. "I've answered your questions. Feel like answering some of mine?"

"Depends." She took a sip of her martini. "What do you want to know?"

"I didn't have time to get the whole story from Truax, but I got the impression that you were

in that Candle Lake Manor place together with his client?"

"Yes."

He squinted a little, deeply curious.

"How'd you end up there? Are you really crazy?"

She smiled. "You could say that. I had myself committed under a false name."

"Huh. Well, you must have had your reasons."

"My husband tried to murder me shortly before he disappeared with most of the assets in my

portfolio. I had learned too much about his connections to some illegal activities. I was a loose

end."

"Looks like he missed."

"Yes. He missed. But I was afraid that he would try again. So, I faked my own death, got a

new identity, established a trust, and used it to have myself committed to Candle Lake Manor.

After I escaped I used another new identity."

"Sounds complicated."

"It was."

"Why go through all that?"

"My husband is a very, very clever and extremely dangerous man. Too clever, perhaps, to buy

my convenient death. I thought that if he was still trying to find me, a private psychiatric

hospital would be the last place that he would look. The plan was to stay at the Manor for a

few months and then disappear a second time. Figured two changes of identity would make it

harder for him to track me."

"What went wrong?"

"Nothing at first. Candle Lake turned out to be pretty much what I had expected, a nice,

remote place where rich folks stashed their embarrassing relatives. It wasn't hard to pretend

to be clinically depressed and uncommunicative. They weren't into serious talk therapy there.

Just meds. I flushed those down the toilet. Then I met Zoe."

"You two became buddies?"

"Yes. Unfortunately for Zoe, the chief shrink, Dr. McAlister, took a personal interest in her.

Wanted to study her. The result was that she was more closely watched than the rest of us.

She had more trouble avoiding the meds than I did."

"But you two found a way out," Harry said.

"Yes."

"What's next?"

"I'm starting over," she replied.

Harry thought about that. "Me, too, I guess. But, then, Truax seems to have that effect on people."

"What do you mean?"

"I dunno. It's hard to explain. Just that if you get into his orbit, things change."

Luminous music flowed into the silence that followed his comment. When the piece was over,

Harry looked at her with a long, considering expression.

"Must have been rough there at Candle

Lake," he said.

"Zoe had to endure it much longer than I did. We escaped a couple of months after I arrived.

She was there, on her own, for four months before that."

"Jesus. Six months."

"Yes."

"Must have left its mark."

"It did," she admitted. "On both of us. We've each dealt with it in our own ways."

"How's that?"

"Zoe signed up for self-defense lessons."

"What did you do?"

"Bought a gun."

Harry nodded. "Works for me."

Chapter Twenty-two

Shortly after midnight, Leon stood on the closed lid of the toilet in the cramped motel

bathroom. Through the small window he had a clear view of the group gathering in the alley

behind the old warehouses. The drug dealing seemed to be a nightly ritual. It didn't look like a

tough crowd. For the most part, the buyers appeared to be teenagers who drifted over from

the fast-food restaurant. They bought booze and pills from a couple of older guys who usually

showed up around one in the morning.

Tonight Leon planned to arrive before the regular salesmen.

He stepped down heavily and hurried out into the main room. Earlier this afternoon, he had

selected several bottles from his emergency stash of stolen Candle Lake meds. His job as

security chief at the hospital had given him a good working knowledge of the

street value of

the pharmaceuticals.

He picked up the sack containing his wares, a small flashlight, and his key. He paused to hang

the tattered privacy sign on the doorknob outside his room and then he made his way down

the steps and around to the rear of the building.

There was enough light from the motel parking lot to enable him to find the rutted, unpaved

road that ran behind the abandoned house and the warehouses. The glow from a nearly full

moon helped. He wanted to avoid using the flashlight if at all possible.

The half dozen or so little dears hanging out around the last decayed loading dock did not

notice him until he was almost upon them. The first one who spotted him, jumped half a foot.

"Shit, it's a cop."

"We're not doin' anything," another one said, voice rising in that annoying whine

that was

unique to the teenager of the species.

"Yeah, we gotta *right* to be here if we want."

Kids, Leon thought. They might be flunking history, English, and math, but they always

seemed to know their rights.

"Relax, I'm not a cop," Leon said. "I've got some candy. Anyone interested?"

* * *

Ten minutes later and seven hundred

fifty dollars richer, Leon started back toward the distant

lights of the motel. *Seven hundred and fifty bucks.* Where the hell did kids these days get so

much discretionary income? He'd sure never had that kind of cash when he was a teenager.

He had been planning to leave in the morning because he'd paid cash through tonight and he

wanted to get his money's worth. But he was wide awake and in no mood to sleep. Might as

well hit the road now. The seven-fifty would see him clear of Whispering Springs, and he had

a feeling it would be good to be gone before Truax came back to check up on him.

Everything had gone sour. Again.

That bastard, Cleland, had not been *available* when he had called him a second time to

negotiate for the woman's address. When Leon hung up the phone, he had faced the fact

that the deal wasn't going to work. The

only other angle, as far as he could see, was to try

blackmailing Ian Harper. Harper was the one person left who had something to lose and who

might be willing to pay for silence.

He would call his ex-boss from somewhere on the road and hope he'd get lucky. At least

Harper was a businessman.

If only his original plan to blackmail the Cleland woman had worked the way it was supposed

to. Shit. It was like he lived under some dark star or something.

Out of the corner of his eye, he caught the movement in the shadows that clung to the

boarded-up house. One of the kids, he thought. Swell. He had some more candy. Maybe he

could clear a neat thousand tonight.

He stopped and started to turn.

"Hey, kid. I got what you want right here."

Too late he realized that the figure on the

sagging front porch was not a young druggie.

The first bullet took him square in the chest and knocked him down. His first thought was that

he could no longer feel the fire of his heartburn. Instead, everything inside him had gone cold.

He was vaguely aware of one of his customers back at the warehouse shouting a warning to

his pals.

"Oh, shit, that was a gun. Come on, we gotta get out of here."

He had come so close to the big score,
he thought. But he was screwed again.
Story of his
life.

He was already losing consciousness
when the killer walked closer and put a
second bullet into
his brain.

Chapter Twenty-three

*Zoe put on the white terry cloth robe
monogrammed with the name of the
hotel and sat in*

the chair near the window. She picked

up the phone and dialed the first number.

"Who is this?" Ian Harper's voice was thick with sleep and irritation.

She could hear the television low in the background. Harper had evidently fallen asleep

watching an old movie. A horror film, probably, one with a plot involving a mad scientist

working in a lab.

"Hello, Dr. Harper," Zoe said. Just talking to him long distance on the telephone made her skin

crawl. "I used to be Sara Cleland, but you can call me Zoe Truax now. You probably remember

me as the patient in Room 232. The one Forrest Cleland paid you so well to keep locked up. I

wanted to be the first to give you the happy news."

"Sara?" He was fully alert now. "What's this all about? Where are you?"

"I just got married. Say hello to my new husband."

Ethan was sitting on the edge of the bed, watching her.

He was naked except for a pair of white briefs. She shoved the phone into his hand. He

touched her fingers lightly as he took the instrument from her. She realized she was trembling.

Rage and old fears, she thought. She had to get control of both.

"This is Truax," Ethan said into the phone. His voice was colder than the outer rings of hell.

"Zoe and I just got married, and we've got a license to prove it. I'm now her next of kin. This

call is a formality. I want to be sure you understand that if you try to snatch her I will come

after her – and you – and rip apart your business operation there at Candle Lake Manor."

He ended the call and handed the phone back to Zoe.

She took a deep breath and dialed Forrest Cleland's unlisted home number.

Kimberley answered on the fourth ring. She sounded groggy and disoriented.

"Hello?"

"Kimberley, this is Sara."

"Sara?"

"Zoe, now. Zoe Truax."

"I don't understand. Where are you?
What's going on?" There was a slight
pause. "Are you all
right?"

"I'm doing great, Kimberley. Thanks for
asking. I just got married, as a matter of
fact.

Naturally I wanted to give Forrest the
wonderful news right away. Is he there?"

"You're married? But that's impossible. You're... you're not well, Sara."

"Call me Zoe. And get Forrest on the phone, please."

There was a brief pause. Zoe heard Kimberley's muffled voice in the background. Then Forrest came on the line.

"Sara? Is that you?"

"I'm no longer Sara Cleland," Zoe said. "Zoe Truax is my name, Forrest. I wanted to let you

know that I will be attending the annual

meeting and that I will be accompanied by my

husband. If anything happens to me before the big day, you'll be delighted to hear that Ethan

will be happy to vote my shares."

"What the hell is going on here? Where are you?"

"In a hotel. This is my wedding night."

"Listen to me," Forrest said in his most authoritative tone, "I need to talk to you."

"We can talk at the board meeting. Right now I'd like you to meet my husband."

Ethan took the phone from her a second time.

"This is Truax," he said. "I just spoke with Ian Harper at Candle Lake Manor and gave him the

same message. It's real simple. Touch a hair on my wife's head, and I will take you apart."

He ended the call and put the phone down on the bedside table.

"That's that," he said. "Your insurance policy is now in effect."

She sat in her chair and looked at him. "I can't believe you did this for me."

He gave her his slow, sexy smile. "You will when you get the bill."

Chapter Twenty-four

She awoke to sunlight and the glint of gold on her finger. She could feel the heavy weight of

Ethan's arm draped snugly around her waist. Mercifully, she had not dreamed last night. She

wondered if that was a good omen.

She looked out through the window at the Las Vegas dawn and thought about another

daybreak she had witnessed a year earlier. The memories of the escape

from Candle Lake

Manor rose to the surface.

"Shit," Ernie muttered. "What the hell's the matter with her? She was supposed to get an

extra dose tonight."

"Maybe she didn't get enough of it." Ron's voice was low but there was no mistaking the sick

lust that reverberated in it. "Don't worry, the restraints will hold her. I brought a needle full of

the stuff with me, just in case."

There was another thud followed by a muffled groan. A fist rapped twice, quick, frantic little

taps against her door, but she recognized the signal.

She sat straight up in bed, her heart pounding, a cold sweat chilling her skin.

"Use the damned needle," Ernie growled outside in the corridor. "She's too strong."

"It's no fun when they're too doped up to know what's happening. Come on, we can handle

her."

She climbed out of bed and grabbed the light cotton robe with the words

CANDLE LAKE

MANOR stitched on the left breast pocket. Every patient got an identical robe and pair of

slippers. There was no belt on the robe and no laces in the footwear.

She went to the door and pressed her ear to the panel. The orderlies had managed to drag

their victim to the end of the hallway.

She waited until she was sure they had turned the corner before she went back

to the bed

and removed the stolen key card from the tiny slit in the bottom of the mattress.

She had obtained the card after weeks of careful observation and plotting. As she had

explained to her friend, the plan hinged on the fact that the new orderly who worked the

weekend nightshift on this ward had developed a drug habit that he fed by stealing patient

meds. The stuff he didn't want to risk taking himself, he presumably sold on

the street.

She had done such a good job of looking sedated whenever he showed up with her midnight

pills that the orderly had been encouraged to steal some of the new pills that Dr. McAlistair

had prescribed. The drugs were intended to induce a cheerful, trusting, euphoric state that

McAlistair had hoped would overcome her patient's stubborn refusal to discuss screaming walls

and crying rooms.

She had faked swallowing the first few doses and had been only too happy to watch through

her lashes when the orderly began to pocket the pills.

She had bided her time. Finally, after five weekends of successful theft, the orderly had grown

careless. One Saturday night, after helping himself to the contents of the little paper cup on

her tray, he had hurried out of the room in response to a ringing call button and had forgotten

to lock her door.

She had given him forty minutes and then she had crept out of the room and made her way

down the hall. She had found the orderly smiling blissfully in front of a small television set

inside the glass-walled nursing station.

She had pulled the fire alarm just outside the rest-room. The orderly, enveloped in a

drug-induced haze, had responded to the clanging bells like a confused bull confronted with a

striped cape. In the ensuing chaos, it had been no trick at all to grab the spare master key

kept in a desk drawer.

The next day she had told her new friend about the acquisition of the key, and they had

begun to make detailed plans.

They had decided to make the break on a Sunday night because the weekend orderlies were

inevitably more lax than the regular weekday staff.

But this was Thursday night. Ron and Ernie were on duty together. And they had her new

friend, the woman with the silvery blue eyes.

She knew where they would take her: the examination room with the medical table fitted with

metal stirrups, the room with the screaming walls.

So much for their plan to leave Sunday night, she thought. It would have to be tonight.

She took one last look around the space

that had been her prison cell for the past few

months. There was nothing worth taking. The personal effects and identification that had

been with her when she had been brought to the Manor were locked up in a small room on the

first floor.

She used the stolen card key to open her door very carefully. She stood listening for a few

seconds. Silence echoed. The hall was empty.

She stepped out into the corridor. The lights were turned down at night but not off. She made

her way quickly toward the corner, turned, and went down another intersecting hallway.

At the next junction, she paused again to listen. This section of the hospital did not house

any patients, just offices and examination rooms that were supposed to be empty at night.

Muffled noises came from the screaming room. Ron and Ernie were already inside with her

friend.

For an instant the fear was so thick that she thought she might succumb to nausea.

Then she moved, hitting the bank of switches at the end of the hall with both hands. The

passage went dark but light still glowed beneath the door of the screaming room.

She hurried forward, moving carefully so as to make no sound. The slippers helped. When she

reached the fire extinguisher locker, she opened it and grasped the canister in both hands.

She went to the door of the screaming room and banged the extinguisher against it.

"What the hell?" Ernie sounded alarmed.

"Must be one of the loonies," Ron said.

"I'll take care of it."

The door of the screaming room opened.
Ron took one step out into the hall.

It was at that moment that it occurred to her that her long run of abysmally lousy luck might

have finally changed course.

Ron looked first to the left, not the right.

He did not see her standing there with the heavy

canister raised on high.

"Shit," Ron muttered. "Some crazy turned off the damned lights."

Ron was much taller than she was. She had to swing the extinguisher at an awkward angle,

not straight down as she would have much preferred to do. Nevertheless, the heavy canister

struck the back of Ron's skull with a satisfying thunk.

He dropped to the floor without a sound.

"What's going on?"

Ernie appeared in the doorway, mouth agape. "What the fuck?"

She pulled the trigger on the fire extinguisher, releasing a gusher of white foam. The stuff

caught Ernie full in the face.

He yelped and staggered backward, clawing at his eyes. The fact that he had already

unfastened his pants in preparation for rape created a real problem for him.

His feet got tangled in his sagging trousers, and he went down hard. He opened his mouth to

yell, and she filled it with foam. Choking, Ernie struggled to breathe.

Sensations stormed through her when she moved into the examination room. She struggled to

ignore the psychic noise and raised the canister a second time, preparing to bring it down on

Ernie's head.

Her friend was struggling frantically with the restraints. She had managed to

rip off her gag.

"Help me."

She rushed to the table and unbuckled the leather ties that bound her feet into the stirrups.

Ernie reached out, trying to grab a chair. She turned back, hoisting the extinguisher.

"Wait."

Her friend grabbed a syringe off the desk and plunged the needle into Ernie's arm. The orderly

moaned, gasped, and sagged.

"I gave him the full dose. He won't wake up for a while. Let's get out of here."

They took the time to drag Ron back into the screaming room and locate his car keys. Then

they closed and locked the door. They fled to the first floor using the key card to access the

emergency stairwells.

The lockers containing the patients' personal effects were located in Leon Grady's office. The

magic card key did not work on that lock but it opened the door labeled

HOUSEKEEPING AND

JANITORIAL SERVICES across the hall. The key to Grady's office was hanging on a hook in the janitorial supply cabinet.

Once inside Security, they found the lockers. The little padlocks that secured them were so

flimsy they could have been broken with one of the tools in the janitorial closet, but in the

end there was no need to go to the trouble. The keys to the lockers were in one of Grady's

desk drawers.

The locker with her name on it opened easily enough. Inside was the handbag she had been

carrying the night she had been brought into Candle Lake Manor. To her enormous relief, her

wallet, containing her driver's license and some other miscellaneous pieces of identification

were still inside. The cash and credit cards had been removed. Those, she knew, had been

turned over to Forrest the day she had

been admitted. It was standard procedure. But

occasionally there was need for a patient's ID, so such documents were retained.

"The credit cards wouldn't do you any good, anyway," her friend reminded her. "You couldn't

use them. Too easy to trace."

Outside in the chill of a moonless night, they had climbed into Ron's car. They had driven it to

a small house on the outskirts of a tiny mountain town.

"Who owns this place?" she asked her friend.

"I do. Under another name. By the way, from now on you can call me Arcadia."

"Nice name."

"Thanks. I found it in a name-the-baby book."

Arcadia pried up a loose board on the porch and removed a key. She used it to open the door

of the house.

Inside the postage-stamp-sized living room, she removed a wall panel to

reveal a safe. After

working the combination, she took out a packet of documents.

"What's that?"

"A new ID," Arcadia said.

"I'm impressed. You had this all planned before you were sent to Xanadu, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"But why?"

"It's a long story." Arcadia started toward the front door. "I'll tell it to you

after we change

cars."

"You've got another car hidden somewhere?"

"In the garage."

The following morning, Arcadia had accessed an offshore account.

"We need a little time to set up a new background for you," she said. "What do you say we

take a little vacation?"

"I've heard that travel is broadening...."

Ethan raised himself up off the pillows and bent his head to kiss her bare shoulder. "You okay?"

"Yes." She turned onto her back and looked up at him.

Her husband.

He smiled. She felt the tingle all the way to her toes. His face was shadowed with his morning

beard, and his hair was ruffled. He was just as compelling in the light of day as he was at

midnight. And he was all hers. For a while.

"What were you thinking about?" he asked.

"The escape from Xanadu."

"Tell me about it," he said.

He already knew most of it. He had a right to the rest.

She told him the whole story.

His eyes went cold. "Did those two orderlies ever drag you into that examination room?"

"No. I think they decided that I was too unpredictable in my craziness. They never knew how

I would react to the meds."

His smile was coldly approving. "You fostered that impression of unpredictability, I take it?"

"Oh, sure, every chance I got." She stroked her fingers through his hair. "I got rather good at

playing the madwoman of Room 232. The orderlies avoided me."

He brushed his mouth across her lips. "I am very happy to hear that. Otherwise, I would have

had to add two more items to my to-do list."

She shivered at the expression that came and went in his eyes.

"I can't take all of the credit for scaring off Ron and Ernie," she said. "They also knew that Dr.

McAlistair was particularly interested in my case. They couldn't be sure what I might tell her in

a therapy session or what she would choose to believe. She could have easily gotten them

both fired."

"McAlistair. That name rings a bell."

"She was the doctor who supervised my so-called treatment plan."

"Right." He looked thoughtful.

"According to Singleton, McAlister is the only real doctor at

Candle Lake. She must have her hands full. Why did she take a special interest in you?"

"Officially, I landed in Xanadu because Forrest told everyone that I heard voices in the walls

at the cabin telling me that he was the person who had murdered Preston."

"Any of that true?" Ethan asked

neutrally.

"Of course not. I don't hear voices." *Just feelings and emotions.* But he wouldn't like that

explanation any better, she figured. "I think Dr. McAlister wanted to believe that I could

somehow walk into a room and sense things, though."

"Why?"

"One day during a session, I noticed some paperwork on her desk. It was from the police chief

of a small town not far from Candle Lake. The letter thanked her for her consulting services on

a recent murder case and said that a check was enclosed."

"What kind of consulting did she do for them?"

"McAlistair saw me looking at the letter and told me that she occasionally did psychological

profiles for small police departments."

"Well, hell. She figured that if you really did hear voices in the walls, you might be useful to

her, is that it?"

"I think she understood that I didn't hear voices," Zoe said, choosing her words carefully. "But

she has a professional interest in the biological basis of human intuition. She's even written

some papers on the subject. I think she wondered very seriously if perhaps I might have some

sort of extremely sensitive intuition that might be useful at crime scenes. It was nonsense,

naturally, but she's really into that kind

of thing."

"You think she figured maybe she could use you as an assistant?"

"Either that, or she was simply curious in the academic sense. All I know for sure is that she

was constantly testing me. She was always asking me to write down my impressions of a

room. She used to experiment with some of my meds, trying to see if certain drugs could

boost my sensitivity."

"Sounds like she should have been a patient at the Manor, not the doctor in charge."

"I pretended to swallow the pills." *Most of the time.*

But there had been those two occasions when the meds had been ground up and slipped into

her food. Old panic sleeted through her veins. She remembered how she had come to her

senses both times in a screaming room with McAlister standing nearby, urging her to report

what she felt.

She pushed the memories aside and saw that Ethan was watching her with a disturbingly

intent expression.

"What's the matter?" she asked, trying to lighten the atmosphere. "Worried that you might

actually be married to a crazy woman?"

"No," he said. "But it does occur to me that Ian Harper and Forrest Cleland might not be the

only ones who had a good reason to

keep you locked up at Candle Lake Manor."

A chill ran down her spine. "You may be right. But it doesn't matter now."

"No." He lowered his mouth to hers. "It doesn't matter now."

Chapter Twenty-five

They arrived back in Whispering Springs shortly after three that afternoon. Ethan drove

straight to the motel where Leon Grady had rented a room. The phone call he had made as

soon as the plane touched down had set off alarm bells. According to Stagg, all was well on

this end, but Grady was still registered under a phony name at the Sunrise Suites.

That didn't make sense. He knew Grady's kind. The blackmailer should have cut his losses and been long gone by now.

Zoe sat tensely in the seat beside him. "I can't believe he had the gall to stick around after

you told him that there was no way I would pay blackmail. Do you think he came up with

another plan? Something to do with Arcadia?"

"He hasn't made any move to contact her according to Stagg, so I think we can

assume he

isn't aware that she's here in Whispering Springs." Ethan pulled into the motel parking lot.

"Maybe he decided to wait and see if we actually went through with the marriage."

"I didn't think I'd left him in any doubt." He switched off the engine. "But if that's the case,

our shiny new license should convince him."

Zoe unclasped her seatbelt. "You know something? I'm glad he stuck around. I'm

looking

forward to confronting that slimy little worm face-to-face. I've got a few things I want to say

to him."

"Might be better if you let me handle this — "

But it was too late. She was already out of the car.

Resigned, he climbed out from behind the wheel and caught up with her just as she started up

the steps to the upper level. They

reached the landing and walked toward 210. The drapes in

208 fluttered a little. Ethan heard the muffled chatter of a television commercial inside the

room.

Zoe glanced back over her shoulder. "Room 210, you said?"

"Yeah." He saw the privacy sign dangling from the doorknob. "Looks like he isn't in the mood to

receive visitors."

"Tough." She came to a halt and rapped

sharply on the door.

Her enthusiasm for taking on Grady would have been amusing if it weren't for the fact that

this whole scene felt very wrong.

There was no response to Zoe's knock. Ethan watched the closed drapes. They did not shift.

"He's probably over at the restaurant, feeding his face," Zoe said.

A bored-looking maid rumbled toward them with her cart.

"Excuse me," Zoe said. "Have you

cleaned this room yet?"

"Nope, he hasn't taken the sign down," the woman grumbled. "Far as I'm concerned, I don't

care if he never opens that door. Been here almost a week and he ain't tipped yet, even

though he paid the manager cash in advance. Doesn't look like the type who'll leave so much

as a buck when he checks out."

"We'd like to take a quick look inside that room," Ethan said.

"Can't let you do that," the woman said.
"Room's rented and the privacy sign's
out. Can't go in

as long as the sign's out, y'know. Only
the manager can open it when they put
that sign on

the doorknob."

Ethan reached for his wallet and pulled
out a few bills. He folded them in half.

"We're a little

concerned about our friend. We just
want to make sure he didn't collapse or
something."

The woman eyed the bills. "I dunno. Not

supposed to go in when the sign's up."

Zoe deftly removed the privacy sign and held it behind her back. "There's no sign now."

The maid examined the doorknob.
"Damn, you're right."

Ethan shoved the money into her hand.
She pocketed the cash with a swift,
efficient

movement and hefted her key ring.

"Just a quick look," she said.

"Of course," Zoe agreed.

The maid knocked once and then opened the door and peered into the room.

"Housekeeping," she called loudly.

Her wariness gave Ethan the impression that she'd had a few bad experiences opening doors

in the course of her career in the lodging business.

For his part, he relaxed a little when he caught a whiff of the air inside the room. There was a

stale, musty odor tinged with the underlying scent of the strong cleaning agent the maid used

in the bathroom, but that was all. He realized he had been braced for something worse. He'd

had some unpleasant experiences opening doors in his career, too.

The maid stepped back and did a quick survey of the balcony, looking left and right. Satisfied

that she was not being observed by the manager, she made a shooing motion.

"Hurry up, take your look. Be quick about it."

Ethan was already inside the room, slipping on a pair of thin plastic gloves.

Behind him, Zoe

hesitated briefly and then followed.

"Don't touch anything," he said over his shoulder.

She glanced at his gloved hands and raised her brows. "I won't."

Not much had changed since the last time he'd been here, he thought. He rifled rapidly

through the contents of Grady's brown duffel bag and found only dirty shirts and socks. The

closet was empty. A couple of plastic

containers bearing the logo of the fast-food restaurant

next door were the only items in the trash.

"My file," Zoe said, sounding outraged.

He looked at her. She stood near the table, examining some papers she had taken out of a

manila folder. He could tell that she was furious.

"Thought I told you not to touch anything," he reprimanded.

She ignored him. "That bastard must

have copied it before he left the Manor."

"Put it in your purse and don't touch anything else." He went down on one knee to check

under the bed. A herd of dust bunnies peeked back at him.

The maid glanced through the doorway. "You gotta leave now," she hissed. "You said you just

wanted to make sure your friend wasn't hurt."

"We're on our way." He did a quick survey of the grimy bathroom. Grady's kit bag contained

nothing more interesting than a razor, a small can of shaving cream, a comb, and some aged

condoms.

He turned away from the bath and followed Zoe out of the room. The maid closed the door

very quickly, grabbed the handle of her cart, and trundled off without a word of farewell.

Ethan and Zoe went the opposite way, back toward the rear stairs.

Zoe watched him strip the gloves off his hands. "Where did you get those?"

"There was a time when a well-dressed gentleman would not have even considered going out

into public without a pair of gloves."

"You're just a throwback to an earlier, more genteel era, is that it?"

"Someone has to try to uphold standards." "A noble endeavor." She looked at the restaurant.

Her mouth tightened. "I'll bet he's over there."

"Maybe." Ethan looked at Grady's car, still parked below the balcony. "Can't see him walking

very far. He didn't strike me as the type who worried about getting enough exercise."

The curtain in the window of 208 fluttered when they went past. Ethan caught a glimpse of a face behind the glass.

"Hang on." He stopped and knocked. The door opened immediately. A cloud of cigarette smoke

gushed from the room. A short, bald little man wearing a stained tee shirt and a pair of

red-and-white spotted boxer shorts

looked out. The front of the shorts gaped wide.

The man had a cigarette in one hand. It was obvious that he had not bothered to shave for

the past couple of days.

"You're looking for the guy in 210, aren't you?" he asked cheerfully. "Heard you talk your way

past the maid. Pretty slick."

"Have you seen him?" Ethan asked. He was conscious of Zoe looking away from the open front

of the boxers.

"How much did you give the maid?" the little man demanded.

Ethan reached for his wallet again and pulled out more cash. He put the money into the

outstretched palm. "About half this much."

"Yeah?" The little man stuck the cigarette into the side of his mouth and counted the money.

He seemed satisfied. "He went out last night around midnight. Never came back."

"Out?" Zoe frowned. "In a car?"

"Nope. No car. Just went downstairs and went around behind the building. Never came back."

"You're sure it was the man in 210?"
Ethan asked.

"Hell, yes, I'm sure. Only the two of us on this floor most of the past week. I rent by the

month and I keep an eye on things. Can't be too careful."

The little man took a step back and closed the door abruptly.

Ethan and Zoe went down the rear stairs.

"Gee, you sure get to meet a lot of interesting people in your business, don't you?" Zoe said.

"You didn't think the boxers were a fashion statement?"

"I will never be able to look at a pair of boxer shorts the same way again."

At the bottom of the steps, Ethan turned and went toward the rear of the motel.

Zoe hurried after him. "Where are you going?"

"According to the local block watch

captain up there in 208, Grady walked off behind the

motel around midnight and never returned. Thought it might be interesting to see if there's

any indication that he met someone back here."

She studied the rutted road that ran behind the motel. "You could meet someone secretly

behind that boarded-up house or at those old warehouses."

"Let's see if we can find anything."

They walked toward the abandoned house. Ethan took a closer look at it. The windows were

covered with sheets of plywood, but the door was partially open. It sagged on rusty hinges.

Should have been closed, he thought. Maybe kids used it as a club house.

He left the road and walked toward the front porch. Zoe followed, wrinkling her nose.

"What on earth is that odor?" she asked.

Ethan was already at the porch, looking at the body that lay just around the

corner.

"That odor is the smell of things getting a lot more complicated," Ethan said. "We can stop

looking for Leon Grady. Someone else found him first."

Chapter Twenty-six

Early that evening they sat together in Ethan's office.

"I don't get it," Harry Stagg said. "You told the cops the guy had tried to blackmail Zoe, and

they still went with the idea that he got shot because he was poaching on another dealer's

turf?"

"That's their working theory at the moment," Ethan said.

Zoe exchanged glances with Arcadia, who was sitting in one of the extra chairs Ethan had

dragged into his office from the outer room. Arcadia looked as cool as ever, but there was

something different about her today. Zoe couldn't put her finger on it, but she knew it had to

do with the thin man with the ancient eyes who sat beside her.

They had gathered in Ethan's office following the long session with the police. Ethan had

offered coffee. It was good coffee, Zoe thought, but she might have made a serious mistake

in drinking some. Her level of tension was already several notches into the red zone.

"I think that, for a while there, Detective Ramirez was looking at me with some serious

interest," she said. "He certainly wasn't quite as friendly as he was the last time. But as soon

as Ethan informed him that we had a perfect alibi, he came up with his dope dealer scenario.

Apparently those old warehouses have recently become a hangout for some of the local kids

who experiment."

"Getting married at the time of the murder is one of the better cover stories I've heard in a

while," Harry said. "You got witnesses and everything."

"And the staff at the hotel will probably remember us well," Ethan said. "We asked for a room

change."

Arcadia glanced at Zoe with a questioning expression.

"The first room had a round bed with a mirror in the ceiling," Zoe said.

Arcadia nodded. "Of course you had to ask for a change."

"Why's that?" Harry asked. "A mirror in the ceiling sounds real nice. You don't see that kind of

thing a lot. Leastwise not in the type of places where I usually stay."

"For a very good reason," Zoe said. "It's tacky. Also, in an earthquake zone, it constitutes a

serious hazard."

"Las Vegas is in an earthquake zone?"
Harry asked with great interest. "Never
heard that."

Ethan propped his feet on the corner of
his desk. "I didn't have a problem with
the decor,

myself, but Zoe didn't care for it so we
got moved. Bottom line is that our alibi
is really rock

solid. Which leaves the cops with the
dope dealer scenario."

"Is it plausible?" Arcadia asked.

"To be fair, it does make some sense," Ethan allowed. "The cops rounded up a couple of the

kids who have a rep for being into the local drug scene, and they admitted that a guy

matching Grady's description had approached them around midnight and offered to sell them

some of what he said were real prescription drugs."

"They turned him down, naturally," Zoe said dryly.

Harry snorted. "Of course. Just said no,

huh?"

Ethan shrugged. "Sure. But under a little questioning, they admitted that they heard sounds

that might have been gunshots right after the stranger left them. Said shots came from the

vicinity of the old house. They didn't report the gunfire because they weren't sure that's what

it was."

"Also, the police found several bottles of various kinds of psychoactive meds in a sack that

was found next to Grady's body and more bottles in the trunk of his car," Zoe concluded. "I'll

bet he stole them from Candle Lake."

"There was a lot of that kind of theft there," Arcadia said thoughtfully. "So the drug dealer

theory is at least somewhat viable."

Ethan looked at Harry. "Not to be indelicate, but just out of curiosity, how good is your

story?"

It took Zoe a second or two to absorb the

implications of that question. When they hit her,

she choked on a swallow of coffee.

"Ethan," she sputtered. "You're not suggesting that Harry... that he..."

"Just asking," Ethan assured her.

"Don't worry." Arcadia reached over and slapped her lightly on the back. "Our alibi is every bit

as solid as yours. The kids heard shots around midnight? Harry and I went to The Last Exit

last night. We didn't leave until two, and

we've got the bar tab to prove it."

"Oh," Zoe said. "Oh, good."

"The jazz was very fine," Harry added.

"Did the police want to know why you were being blackmailed?" Arcadia asked Zoe.

"Sure," Zoe said. "And we gave them a streamlined version of the truth. I told them that I had

spent some time in a private hospital where Grady had worked and that I was anxious not to

have that very personal medical

information made public to potential clients. The detective

was very understanding. We did not mention you, of course."

Ethan examined the tips of his shoes. "There was no reason not to give the cops some of the

facts about Zoe. Hell, the more people that know she's married, the better. There was also no

reason to drag your name into this mess, Areadia. But I think it might be a good idea for you

and Harry to leave town for a few days."

Arcadia frowned. "Why?"

"As far as we know, Leon Grady was not aware of your new identity. With luck that means

that no one else knows you're here in Whispering Springs, either. But at this point we can't be

certain of that conclusion."

"He's right," Harry said to Arcadia. "It makes sense to get out of town for a while, at least

until Truax figures out what's going on here. He needs to find out for sure who killed Grady."

Arcadia raised her brows. "Is that what you're going to do, Truax? Investigate Grady's murder?"

"Yeah," Ethan said. "I think so. I want to be certain that the cops are right about him getting whacked by a dealer."

"But who else would have a motive?" Arcadia asked.

"Hell, the guy was a blackmailer," Harry pointed out. "Blackmailers always have lots of

enemies."

"What about Zoe?" Arcadia asked Ethan.
"Will she be safe?"

"My cover is already blown, as they say," Zoe pointed out. "But it doesn't matter anymore."

Now that I'm a respectably married woman, hauling me off to Xanadu wouldn't do anyone any good."

"Don't worry," Ethan said. "Zoe will be staying with me out at Nightwinds at night until this is

finished."

Zoe lowered her mug. "I will?"

"Yes," Ethan said deliberately. "You will. I'll take you to work and stay with you as much as

possible. I can do some of my research from your office. When I can't be there, I'll make sure

you have company. I don't want you to be alone until I've tied up some of the loose ends."

"But according to your theory, I should be okay now that we're married."

"Something is screwy with this situation and I'm not going to take chances," Ethan said.

Zoe opened her mouth to protest.

"Good," Arcadia said before Zoe could manage a single word. "I like that approach."

"I'm glad somebody does," Ethan said.

"These are just extra precautions. I do think Zoe is

reasonably safe now, but I'd rather she didn't go running around on her own until I get some

answers."

"But I've got a couple of appointments with clients at their residences," Zoe said quickly.

"Can you ask them to meet you in your office?"

"Well, maybe."

"Try. If that's impossible, let me know your schedule. I'll escort you to and from the

appointments."

She made a face. "I'm not sure this is necessary."

"Trust me, it's necessary, if only for my

peace of mind." Ethan turned back to Arcadia. "But it

would simplify things if you and Harry disappeared for a while."

"I suppose my assistant could handle the gallery," Arcadia said reluctantly.

"Where do you

think we should go?"

"Already got a destination in mind."

Harry pushed himself out of the chair.

"How does New

Orleans sound?"

Arcadia looked at him for a long

moment. "It sounds... interesting."

"Guess we'd better pack," Harry said.

Arcadia rose and walked out of the office with him.

Zoe listened to the sound of their footsteps disappearing down the stairs. She looked at

Ethan.

"What is going on with those two?" she asked.

"Don't ask me. The relationship between a bodyguard and his client is confidential."

"Is that a rule from your private detective manual?"

"How'd you guess?"

* * *

At nine-thirty that night, he stood in the doorway of his study and watched Zoe examine the

titles of some of the books on the shelves. "Journals, diaries, and records of old murder

cases." She pulled a plastic envelope off a shelf, opened it, and removed a slender pamphlet.

"A True Account of the Murder of Harriet Plummer Including a Narrative of the Trial of Her

Killer, John Strand." She looked up.
"The date is 1870."

"Harriet was a San Francisco prostitute who was killed by one of her clients. Notice the

elegant bed in the illustration? Complete with ruffled quilt and lots of fancy pillows? That was

the artist's not-so-subtle way of stressing the lady's profession and the sexual undercurrents."

"People bought these pamphlets?"

"Accounts of murders and the trials that followed were very popular throughout the

eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The more lurid, the better, as far as the public was

concerned."

"The ones involving sex sold best?"

"Sure." He folded his arms and leaned against the door frame. "Some things never change."

She put the pamphlet back into the

plastic container and replaced it on the shelf. "Did they

hang John Strand?"

"Yes. Which was, according to my research, a serious miscarriage of justice."

"You don't think he was guilty?"

"Strand was a violent man, prone to fits of rage. He was probably guilty of someone's death,

but not Harriet's."

"Who killed her?"

"I think the most likely suspect was a man named George Edward Kingston. He was one of

Harriet's regulars, a wealthy, self-made man who planned to marry into a socially prominent family."

"Why do you think he murdered her?"

"She became inconvenient, as they say. I got hold of some letters that Harriet wrote to a

friend. She was pregnant and she was sure Kingston was the father. She was furious with him

because he was going to end their affair. She threatened to expose the relationship."

"So he killed her."

"I think so, yes. Kingston was worried that his wealthy fiancée might drop him if she and her

family learned that he had had a long-standing connection with a known prostitute. There's no

way to be absolutely certain at this late date." He paused, searching for the words to explain

the silent click of certainty and the rush

of satisfaction he felt when he saw the pattern and

discovered the answers. "But it feels right."

She watched him closely. "It *feels* right?"

"Kingston as the killer ties up all the loose ends, at least as far as I'm concerned." He came

away from the door frame and walked to the desk. "But it doesn't matter anymore. Everyone

involved has been dead and gone for a long time."

"Do you do this a lot?"

He lounged against the desk. "Investigate old murders? Yeah. Something to do in the evenings

besides watch TV."

"Talk about cold cases." She surveyed the contents of the room. "All of these books and

journals and pamphlets and newspapers, they're part of your research library?"

"Yes."

"Why do you do it?"

"Probably because I'm good at it." He paused. "And there's no harm done if I'm wrong."

"Because there's no one left to care about getting the answers?"

"Right. Just an academic exercise." He angled his chin toward the computer.

"I'm not the only

one who does this. There are others. We write up our investigation reports and post them for

people to read and examine."

"Who looks up the results online?"

"We attract a lot of genealogists and people who are interested in their family histories. The

site also pulls in a fair number of historians and academics who study the psychological and

social issues involved in murder."

"And probably a few weirdos, too."

"Sure. The world is full of weirdos."

She glanced over her shoulder, down the hall toward the theater, and then she looked at him.

"I assume you're investigating the death

of Camelia Foote?"

"Be hard to ignore it, given that I'm living here at Nightwinds."

"The official story is that she fell to her death in the canyon, right?"

He nodded. "There were rumors at the time that her husband might have pushed her, but

nothing was ever proven and the authorities did not go out of their way to pursue the

investigation."

"Do you think she was the victim of

domestic violence?"

"It's very possible." He picked up the Foote journal. "This is her husband's journal. According

to what I've read, he feared that she was having an affair with a man named Jeremy Hill. He

was outraged because she invited Hill to a large weekend house party here at Nightwinds. The

place was filled with guests. Camelia died sometime during the first night. Her body was found

in the morning."

"Who found it?"

He was impressed. "Good question."

"I've heard that the police always take a close look at whoever discovers the body. I know

they certainly asked me a lot of questions that day when I found Preston."

"It's very often the killer who reports the murder. And it could well be that is what happened

here." He opened the journal to one of the last entries. "Foote found Camelia that morning.

Here's what he wrote a few weeks later.

"... I still cannot believe that she is lost to me, all of her beauty, charm, and spirit

extinguished forever. I walk through the house and see her lovely, laughing ghost everywhere

I turn, mocking me...."

"Sounds like an inconsolable husband," Zoe said softly.

"I think he was distraught, all right." He closed the journal. "But the part about the lovely,

laughing ghost mocking him is interesting."

"Do you think Foote was suffering pangs of guilt and that he believed Camelia was haunting

him?"

"Maybe. I haven't finished the journal yet."

"You've got some doubts?"

"A few, yes." He put the journal down on the desk and scooped up the notebook in which he

had written his observations concerning

the Foote case. "There is some confusion with the

time line. Camelia was very visible off and on throughout the evening until sometime around

midnight. No one recalls seeing her after that. But earlier Camelia and Hill had disappeared

together for a while. Foote notes in his journal that he saw them returning to the house. He

was sure they had made love."

"Did Foote confront them?"

"According to his journal, he was so depressed by the knowledge that he could not compete

with Hill for his wife's affections that he went to his bedroom and finished off a bottle of

scotch. He remembers nothing more until he awoke the next morning, went for a walk to clear

his head, and found Camelia's body."

"His claim that he had passed out in a drunken stupor and slept until the next day does sound

like a convenient excuse."

"Could be. Or it could be the truth. None of the servants saw him after he went into his

bedroom. No one recalls seeing Camelia after midnight."

"If Foote didn't come out of his bedroom until the following morning, that leaves you with all

the house guests as suspects."

"I don't think so," he said, "I think it leaves Jeremy Hill as a definite possibility. The problem is

that although Camelia vanished from the party, Hill was seen by many people

throughout the

course of the evening until the household finally went to bed around three. But he must have

gone out a second time because one of the servants saw him return to the house through the

gardens shortly before dawn. Hill was alone. Said he'd gone for a walk."

"The lover. Why would he murder her?"

"Because he wanted her very much," he said quietly.

"And she refused to leave her rich

husband for him. But like I said, there's a problem with the

time line. The only two people who are missing from the party at the same time are Camelia

and Abner Foote."

"That settles it. I'm betting it was the husband. Such a common pattern." She studied him.

"How will you ever get at the truth?"

"Jeremy Hill married a couple of years after Camelia died. Evidently he drank heavily. His wife

divorced him and later remarried. Hill fell ill and died a short time after the divorce, leaving no

offspring. I'm trying to find some of his ex-wife's descendents to see if there are any letters or

journals that might shed some light on her first marriage. I'm also trying to find some letters

written by people who were guests here that night."

"Good heavens, you could spend months or years tracking down the facts."

"There's no hurry," he said.

"But it's worth it, isn't it?"

He shrugged. "Like I said, it's something to do in the evenings."

"No." She looked at him with deep, knowing eyes. "It's a lot more than that. It's a calling." She

walked to where he stood and touched his jaw with her fingertips. "When you do get the

answers, you create a little justice. You balance some invisible scales somewhere. Even if no

one knows or cares, you've done a good thing, Ethan."

She understood, he thought. His hobby intrigued some people and repelled others. A few took

an academic interest in it. But until now he had never met anyone who understood deep down

why he investigated the coldest of cold cases.

She raised her mouth and kissed him. He put his arms around her.

He heard the click and felt the rush.

Chapter Twenty-seven

The screams in the walls pierced the drug-induced fog in which she had been drifting all

morning. She stopped abruptly, digging in her heels. Frantically she tried to get her bearings.

There was an open door in front of her. Dr. McAlister had a hand on her shoulder, urging her

to enter the room. To her right, a burly-looking man in a uniform watched her with a grim

expression. She had a vague recollection of someone having addressed him as sheriff.

"No, please," she whispered. "I don't want to go in there."

"It's all right," Dr. McAlister said.

"You're not alone. I'm here with you."

"No." She tried to escape the hand on her shoulder. Dr. McAlister tightened her grip.

"You only have to enter the room for a couple of minutes," Venetia McAlister said coaxingly.

"Just step inside and look around. Tell

me what you sense."

"No."

The man in the uniform scowled. "I don't know about this, Doc. She seems real upset. You

sure you need her input?"

"I'm extremely interested in her reactions to the crime scene."

"She looks like she's gonna be sick. I don't need her messing up the evidence."

"She'll be all right. The drugs I gave her should keep her reasonably calm."

"She doesn't look calm to me," the sheriff said.

Damn right, I'm not calm. She opened her mouth and shrieked.

"Stop it," Dr. McAlistair shook her.
"Stop it. You're losing control."

Whatever. Anything to keep from having to enter that room.

She screamed louder.

"Get her out of here," the sheriff snapped. "I haven't got time for this."

Dr. McAlistair reluctantly guided her back toward the car.

She continued to scream. It seemed to be having the desired effect. McAlister was taking her

away from the house with the shrieking walls and that was all that mattered.

"Stop it," McAlister said, furious now. "Stop it immediately, do you understand?"

"Zoe, stop it. Wake up. You're dreaming."

She came awake in the middle of a muffled sob, opened her eyes, and saw Ethan leaning over

her. Perspiration was growing cold on

her body. She could feel her heart racing. It took her a

few frantic seconds to remember where she was. Then she saw the silhouette of a giant swan

wing.

Oh, damn. Another nightmare. At this rate, he was going to conclude that she really was a

basket case.

She sat up, clutching the sheet. "Sorry. I told you this might be a problem. If I'm going to

stay here with you, I'd better sleep in one of the other bedrooms."

"I don't want you sleeping in another room." He levered himself up against the pillows, reached

out, and pulled her into his arms. "I want you in my bed. What was the dream?"

"Just another bad one from the days when I was locked up. Trust me, you don't want to hear

the details."

"Yes, I do. Tell me about it."

Maybe it was because it was the middle

of the night and he had not turned on the lights.

Maybe it was because he had made slow, passionate love to her before they fell asleep.

Maybe it was because he had told her about his hobby and she had looked into some deep

places inside him that she sensed he did not reveal very often.

Maybe she just needed to talk to someone about the dream.

"I told you there was a doctor who took a special interest in my case."

"McAlistair. The one who did some consulting work for some of the small-town cops in the

area and tried to find out if you could do the woo-woo thing at crime scenes."

She winced. "You've got a good memory."

"This McAlistair was in your dream?"

"Yes. The dream was about an incident that happened while I was at Xanadu. McAlistair was

consulting on a murder case. She managed to sneak some meds into my food that morning

and then she drove me out to the house where the crime had been committed. Tried to make

me go into the room where two people had been murdered. I balked."

"Understandable."

"She tried to force me to go inside. Told me I had to learn to control my anxiety."

"As if not wanting to enter a room where people had been murdered was just some kind of

normal phobia. Something to get past."

"Yes. Anyhow, the sheriff was afraid

that I might throw up all over his crime scene. When I

started screaming, he ordered Dr. McAlister to take me away. I could tell that she was very

frustrated and angry but she drove me back to the Manor."

"The sheriff ever find the killer?" In spite of the fact that her pulse was still trotting along at a

brisk clip and her breathing had not yet returned to normal, she smiled. She should have

expected that question, she thought.

Ethan liked answers. More than that, he *needed* them.

"I saw a newspaper in the hospital library a few days later," she said.

"There was a picture of

the house and a headline about an ex-husband having been picked up on suspicion of murder."

"Did Dr. McAlistair ever try to pull that kind of stunt again?"

"One other time. With the same results. I started screaming and I kept on screaming until the

cops ordered her to take me away. After

that, I think she realized I wasn't going to respond

to that sort of therapy."

"It wasn't therapy. She was trying to use you." "Uh-huh."

He settled himself more comfortably against the pillows. "I don't like McAlister, but I can't see

that she has a motive for killing Grady."

She sighed. "You've got a one-track mind, you know that? What does my dream about

McAlister have to do with finding

Grady's killer?"

"Nothing probably. I'm just trying to make connections. My gut tells me that Grady's murder

relates to your situation." He slid one hand down her arm to her hip. "Think you can get back

to sleep or shall we go for warm milk?" She kissed his bare chest. "I've got a better idea."

"Yeah?" She kissed him again, closer to his firm, flat belly, and moved her hand down the front

of his body. He was hard and heavy.

"Yeah," she said.

He shoved his fingers through her hair.

"Definitely a very good idea," he said.

"Best I can remember in a long time."

She took him into her mouth.

"Excellent idea."

His hands clenched fiercely in her hair.

She felt him go hard and tight.

And then he was hauling her up
alongside him, rolling her onto her back.
When he entered her,

she was ready for him. She wrapped herself around him and hung on for dear life.

Chapter Twenty-eight

At eleven o 'clock the following morning, Zoe put down the pencil she was using to make a

sketch of a living room layout for a client and looked at Bonnie.

"You must be getting pretty bored," she said. Bonnie closed the romance novel that she had

been reading and smiled. "Don't worry, I'm not bored. Actually, it's rather pleasant to spend

some time with another adult female. I

haven't had a chance to meet too many people yet

here in Whispering Springs."

"It's always hard moving into a new community." "I'm getting involved with some activities at

my sons' school and that helps. But what I'd really like to do is find an interesting part-time

job. Financially, we're okay, thanks to my husband's insurance policy. But I need to get out of

the house more."

"Trust me, I understand. Got any ideas?"

"Before I married, I worked as a librarian," Bonnie

said. "I've been out of the field for a while, but I'm going to submit an application to the

Whispering Springs Public Library and also to the local community college library."

"Sounds like a plan," Zoe said.

"How did you get into the interior design business? Were you a designer before Forrest Cleland

shipped you off to Candle Lake Manor?"

"No, I got a degree in fine arts. I was working in a small art museum when I met Preston. He

had a special interest in a particular painter we both admired and asked some questions. The

next thing I knew – " She stopped.

"You were in love and making plans for a wedding," Bonnie concluded.

"Yes."

"That's how it was for Drew and me, too." Bonnie sighed wistfully. "The first year after he was

gone was hell. But in the past few months, I've noticed that I'm starting to think of my

marriage as an event that happened a long time ago."

"Another lifetime."

"Yes. It would have been so difficult without Ethan. Especially for the boys."

Zoe fiddled with her pencil.

Bonnie watched her doodle for a moment.

"You're wondering why Ethan and I never moved beyond our current

relationship, aren't you?"

she asked.

Zoe cleared her throat. "You do seem very close, and his affection for Jeff and Theo is

obvious."

"Ethan and I will always be good friends, but that is all we will be."

"You sound very sure of that."

"Some things you know from the start. I think of him almost as the big brother I never had. It

works both ways. Ethan views me as a sort of sister, not a potential wife."

Bonnie glanced at

the photos of Nightwinds. "Did you take those?"

"Yes. I was out walking with my camera that day."

"Great shots. The house looks like it exists in a parallel universe. Very otherworldly. Do you do

portraits?"

"Not professionally. Photography is just a hobby."

"Much more than that, at least judging by those pictures of Nightwinds. Rather like Ethan's

interest in solving old murders."

"He told me about that last night."

"Is that right?" Bonnie studied her intently. "Did it strike you as a little weird?"

"No. It struck me as very Ethan-like."

"Ethan-like." Bonnie chuckled. "Yes. That is exactly what it is."

"Ethan needs to pursue answers and balance the scales the way other men

need to drive fast

cars or search for gold. It's part of who and what he is."

"That's almost exactly what Drew used to say about him." Bonnie leaned forward in her chair

and folded her arms on her knees. "None of Ethan's previous wives understood that about

him."

Zoe wrinkled her nose. "I'd rather not discuss Ethan's previous wives, if you don't mind. It

brings to mind the fact that, because of me, he will soon have a fourth ex."

"Not necessarily."

Zoe blinked. "I beg your pardon?"

"Ethan has done a lot of things for his clients in the past, but he's never married any of them."

Zoe waved that aside. "Probably because he never saw the necessity to go that far. My case is somewhat unusual."

"Ethan has had some very unusual cases. Something else you should know about

him. He

doesn't sleep with his clients, either."

Zoe was starting to feel cornered. "Yes, well, I wouldn't read too much into the fact that he

and I are involved in a relationship. It was just one of those things, you know?"

Bonnie said nothing.

Zoe felt a tingle of inexplicable panic.

"Well." She put down her pencil and got to her feet. "I don't know about you, but I could use

some coffee. There's a little place around the corner. Why don't we take a short walk?" "Good idea."

* * *

Singleton Cobb showed up at two.

Zoe was interested to see that Bonnie suddenly seemed a bit more animated, almost as if

there was some extra energy running through her. For his part, Singleton had a hard time

looking away from her. He seemed

oddly flustered.

He turned to Zoe. "Looks like I'm your company until closing time. I'll drive you to Nightwinds after work."

"Okay," Zoe said, trying to appear pleased. This business of having a constant escort was

going to get old fast. She wondered how Arcadia was making out with Harry Stagg. Maybe the

phrase *making out* was not the best way of putting it.

Singleton cleared his throat. "Ethan invited me to join the rest of you for dinner. Heard tell

we're ordering in pizza and salads."

"The basic food groups," Bonnie assured him. She collected her shoulder bag and found her car

keys. "I'd better be on my way or I'll be late to pick up Jeff and Theo. See you all later at

Nightwinds."

* * *

At five o 'clock Zoe locked the door of

her office and dropped the heavy
doorknob key chain

into her tote.

"I need to stop by my apartment and pick
up some things," she told Singleton.

"No problem."

They walked together to the small lot
where Singleton's large SUV was
parked. He opened the

passenger door for her with a touching
gallantry and then he climbed in behind
the wheel and

fired up the big engine.

"This business of having a constant companion is probably starting to wear thin," he said,

reversing out of the parking slot.

"How did you guess?"

"I know how I'd feel if I were in your shoes." He gave her a reassuring smile.

"Don't worry. I

don't think this situation will go on for long. Ethan will get it sorted out."

"Probably."

"You and Truax going to give your marriage a chance?"

Great. He'd brought up the very last subject she wanted to discuss today.

"This isn't what you'd call a marriage," she said crisply.

"Yeah? What would you call it?"

"Ethan's notion of an expedient solution to a pressing problem."

"Truax says you've got a license and had a ceremony and everything." "That doesn't make it

real." "Can't argue that," Singleton said. "Makes it legal, though."

"Makes this whole situation very

strange, is what it makes it, if you ask me. And getting

stranger by the hour,"

"I talked to Bonnie while you and Truax were in Vegas. We both think the two of you sort of

fit together somehow. Why not let things go on as they are for a while after this is all over?

What have you got to lose?"

She was getting that panicky feeling again. Time to change the subject.

"Turn left here," she said firmly. "You

can park in front of that green wrought-iron gate."

"Sure."

Singleton did as instructed. She opened the door and jumped down from the high passenger

seat before he could get around the front of the vehicle. She walked quickly to the green

gate and reached into her tote for the key chain.

Singleton eyed the brass doorknob.

"Heck of a key chain ornament. Isn't it a little heavy to

haul around in a purse?"

"I'm used to it."

She opened the gate, led the way through the small garden, and unlocked the lobby door.

"You can wait here," she said. "I'll be down in a few minutes."

"Take your time."

She hurried up the stairs to the upper floor, trying to remember all of the items she wanted to

transport to Nightwinds. When she reached the top, she turned and went

down the hall. She

stopped in front of her door and inserted the key into the lock.

The door of the trash disposal room opened behind her. Startled, she turned to greet

whichever neighbor had just finished getting rid of his garbage.

But the man who rushed out of the small room crossed the narrow hall in a single stride and

grabbed her before she realized he was not a neighbor.

Ron.

"Gotcha, bitch."

He wrapped one arm around her throat, cutting off her air and slapped a palm over her mouth.

Her shout to alert Singleton died in her throat.

Another man emerged from the doorway of the vacant apartment on the left.

Where Ron went, Ernie was sure to follow.

"Get her inside," Ernie muttered.
"Hurry."

"Take it easy." Ron dragged her across the threshold of her apartment. "None of the neighbors are here."

She struggled, trying to grasp the edge of the door frame. Darkness hovered at the edge of her vision.

"There's someone downstairs in the lobby."

"Got the needle?" Ron demanded.

"Yeah, sure. Just get her inside where we can do this in private."

She became conscious of the weight of the brass doorknob dangling from the key chain

clutched in her fist. It centered her as nothing else could have done. She carried this sucker

around for a reason, she reminded herself. Her brain cleared a little and some of her training in

selfdefense kicked in at last. She could almost hear her instructor, *about time you started*

thinking.

She swung her arm up and back as far as

she was able, aiming the doorknob at the side of

Ron's head, praying she would not strike her own skull instead.

She was not sure of her target but she did connect with some portion of Ron's anatomy.

"Shit." He jerked back reflexively, briefly loosening his lock on her throat. "She's got something

in her hand."

"Singleton."

Ron tightened his arm around her throat

again, hurting her.

She swung a second time, a wide sweeping arc that would have caught Ernie in the chest if

he hadn't hurriedly stepped back.

"Just wait, bitch," Ron hissed in her ear.

"Just wait until we put you in those stirrups back at

the Manor."

"You got her?" Ernie asked nervously.

"I got her. Stick her. Hurry up, damn it, someone's coming."

Ernie closed in, syringe in hand.

She swung the doorknob again, wildly, trying to hit his arm and managed to knock the syringe

out of his hand.

The front door of her apartment slammed open. Singleton burst into the room, roaring.

"Let her go."

He grabbed Ernie, hauled him around, and slammed a fist into his face. Ernie hit the wall.

"Get outta here," Ron shouted furiously

at Singleton. "She's crazy. We're taking her back to

the hospital. We're medics."

"Yeah, she's dangerous, man." Ernie scrambled to his feet, clutching his jaw.

"We gotta take

her in."

"Bullshit," Singleton said. He rounded on Ron.

"We're medical professionals," Ron snarled.

Zoe swung the doorknob up and back a second time, striking solid flesh again.

Ron's ribs,
maybe.

"You crazy bitch."

He let her go so suddenly that she had no chance to catch her balance. She tumbled to her knees.

"Let's get outta here," Ron shouted to Ernie.

Ernie did not respond. He was already barreling toward the door. Singleton seized him just as

he started through the opening and hurled him back into the room. He slammed into Ron. The

two hulks went down like bowling pins.

"Come on." Singleton grabbed Zoe's hand and hauled her to her feet.

Together they ran out into the hall. When they were clear, Singleton stopped, whirled around,

and yanked the door shut. He held it closed with a two-handed grip on the knob.

"Call 911," he bellowed. "Then call Truax."

She dug her phone out of the fallen tote and started punching in numbers.

* * *

They ate cold pizza and salads on the patio beside the pool. Jeff and Theo had finished their

dinner while Ethan shepherded Zoe and Singleton through the police questioning process.

When they got back to Nightwinds, the boys had disappeared into the theater to watch

television on the big screen.

Ethan was not in a good mood.

"By the time we heard the sirens, the two had managed to lower themselves from my bedroom

window," Zoe told Bonnie, "But Singleton and I saw them get into a car. We got a description and a license plate."

"The police arrived just as Ron and Ernie went tearing off down the street." Singleton helped

himself to another slice of pizza. "They caught them within two blocks."

"They called Ian Harper from jail." Zoe fortified herself with a swallow of red wine, got up, and

started to prowl the patio in front of the pool. "Tried to get him to tell the authorities that

they were *trained medical personnel*, if you can believe it. They wanted him to explain to the

cops that he had sent them to pick me up."

"Harper denied everything, of course." Singleton munched pizza. "He called the cops

immediately and made it clear that Ron and Ernie were no longer employed by Candle Lake

Manor."

"Is that right?" Bonnie glanced at Zoe and then turned to Ethan. "He claimed he'd fired them?"

"According to Ian Harper," Ethan said slowly, "the orderlies were acting on their own."

"But why would they come all this way to get Zoe if someone wasn't paying them?" Bonnie

said.

"Good question," Ethan said. "The official explanation from Harper is that the two held a

personal grudge against Zoe because of something that happened when she and another

unnamed patient escaped. Harper said they wanted revenge."

"Yeah?" Singleton looked interested.

"What exactly did happen when you two busted out of

the Manor?"

Zoe stopped and gazed down into the pool. "I bashed Ron in the head with a

fire extinguisher.

Arcadia used a needle full of heavy-duty sedative on Ernie."

"Cool," Singleton remarked.

Bonnie smiled. "Yes. Cool."

"No charges were filed and the incident was never reported because Harper didn't want his

clients finding out that Arcadia and I were no longer in residence there."

"Got it," Singleton said.

"But now you're going to press a few

charges, right?"

Bonnie asked.

"Oh, yeah." She took another swallow of wine. "Assault and breaking and entering, for

starters."

Singleton looked at Ethan. "Do you think Ron and Ernie were acting on their own?"

"Not initially," Ethan said. "I'm pretty sure that Harper did send them after Zoe when he found

out where she was. He probably also

tried to call them off after she informed him that she

was married and no longer a good candidate for Candle Lake. But by then it was too late."

"Because by that time Ron and Ernie were in Whispering Springs and lusting for revenge?"

Singleton asked.

"I'd rather you didn't use the term *lusting*," Zoe said with feeling.

"Sorry." Singleton gave her an apologetic glance. "But it does explain why they threatened

you in such, shall we say, *personal* terms."

"Mmm." She stopped briefly and frowned at Ethan. "Do you think they might have killed Leon

Grady?"

Ethan rested his elbows on the arms of the pink padded lounge chair, stretched out his legs,

and pondered the question.

"It's possible," he said. "The cops traced their movements. They arrived in Whispering Springs

the same day Grady died. But they don't seem to know anything about his presence here in

town. They got a motel room and staked out Zoe's apartment, waiting for her to show up.

Evidently that's the only address they had. After waiting for her all afternoon, they took a

break that night and went to a bar. The next day, they went back to Zoe's apartment and

broke into the empty place next to hers. Also, there's no strong motive."

"Unless Harper instructed them to get rid of Grady because he was causing problems,"

Singleton said.

Ethan shook his head. "Like I said, they were in a bar, drinking, that night. Got a hunch their

alibis will hold up. Their only goal seems to have been to grab Zoe."

Zoe shuddered. "Bastards. I wonder if they'll actually do any time."

"I think so," Ethan said softly. "Maybe a lot of it. Detective Ramirez told me that they both

have prior convictions for assault, and Ron was arrested on a rape charge a few years ago."

"Just the sort of fine, upstanding employees you'd expect Harper to hire," Zoe said through

her teeth.

Bonnie winced. "I can't even begin to imagine what it must have been like for you and Arcadia

there."

"They're out of the Manor now," Ethan said evenly. "And they aren't going back."

Bonnie nodded. "Understood."

They finished the rest of the pizza in silence. The soft chirps and calls of the night rose from

the canyon; somewhere in the distance a coyote howled. Above, the stars were brilliant in a

way that Ethan had discovered was only possible in a desert sky.

After a while Bonnie checked her watch. "Well, it's getting late. I'd better get the boys home

and into bed."

She got up and started toward the French doors.

"Time I was on my way, too." Singleton hauled himself up out of a pink lounge.

"Enjoyed the

pizza, Truax." He cast a quick, veiled look at Bonnie, who was inside the living room now. "And

the company."

"Any time."

Ethan and Zoe followed Singleton through the house into the entry hall. Zoe hung back,

waiting for Bonnie and the two boys.

Ethan and Singleton went outside onto the front patio and stood looking at the parked cars in the drive.

"I owe you," Ethan said.

"No, you don't." Singleton shoved his big hands into his pockets. "You hired me to baby-sit. I

was just doin' my job. Hell, didn't even do it very well, when you get right down to it. I should

have gone upstairs with Zoe when she

went to pick up her things."

"You got there in time. That's all that matters in the end."

"Maybe." Singleton chuckled. "Gotta tell you, though, she was doing a damn fine job of

handling both of them with that big ole doorknob she carries."

"There were two of them and one of her. Those aren't good odds. Thanks, Singleton."

"Sure."

The door opened behind them. Theo and

Jeff shuffled outside with obvious reluctance,

followed by Bonnie.

"Do we have to go home already?" Theo whined.

"Yes, you do," Bonnie said.

Jeff looked at Singleton. "Mom says you saved Zoe from some bad guys today."

"Zoe helped save herself," Singleton told him.

"Mom says you're a hero," Theo announced.

Singleton blinked behind the lenses of his glasses and turned red. "Nah."

"Yes," Bonnie said. "You are a hero."

"She's right," Ethan said.

Zoe appeared in the opening. "He sure is."

"Cool," Theo said.

"Will you show me how you saved Zoe?" Jeff asked excitedly.

"I've gotta go home," Singleton answered, edging backward toward his vehicle. "Now. 'Night,

everyone."

He swung around, hurried to the SUV, got behind the wheel, and revved the engine.

"I think we embarrassed him," Bonnie said.

Chapter Twenty-nine

You could tell a lot about a person from the sound of his or her footsteps. Ethan listened to

the steady, determined tread on the stairs. Too heavy for a woman. A man in good physical

condition. Used to getting what he wanted. Accustomed to being in charge. « He heard the

outer door open and close. The door of the inner office was ajar about a third of the way, as

usual. He watched the mirror, studying the reflection of the tall, well-dressed man in the other

room. Expensive suit. Expensive haircut. Expensive shoes. Early fifties. Polished. No obvious

indication of a weapon.

This was the reason he had placed the desk in this corner and why the mirror was positioned

opposite near the window. Okay, so maybe the energy flow was lousy from a feng shui point

of view, but the arrangement had one

humongous business advantage, he reflected. From this

angle he could see visitors and clients before they saw him.

"Is anyone around?" the man in the other room demanded in a loud, irritated voice.

"In here," Ethan said.

The door opened wider. The man looked around the edge. "Are you Truax?"

"Yes." Ethan sat forward and folded his hands on the desk. "Forrest Cleland, right?"

"How did you –? Forget it."

Forrest walked into the office as if it belonged to him and took the chair that Zoe disliked so

intensely. On Forrest it looked more or less the right size.

"Did Ian Harper give you my address?" Ethan asked casually.

"He provided me with the information that you probably lived here in Whispering Springs

because that seemed to be where Sara was living, yes. I got your address out of the phone

book."

"Getting my money's worth out of that ad lately," Ethan remarked.

"We need to talk," Forrest declared.

"Is this the part where you try to buy me off?"

Forrest was silent for a few seconds. Studying his adversary. Ethan got the impression that

he might be adjusting his previous opinion just a shade.

"I think we can come to terms," Forrest said. "My objectives are simple. I want

Sara sent back

to Candle Lake Manor where she belongs. I also want to be certain that her block of shares

are voted in the best interests of Cleland Cage."

"Her name is Zoe," Ethan said. "Zoe Truax."

"She can call herself whatever she damn well pleases. But in case you haven't figured it out

yet, Truax, she is not well."

"She looks healthy to me."

"She hears voices in the walls," Forrest said grimly. "She claims those voices told her that I

murdered my cousin, Preston."

"Did you?"

"No, I did not."

"Just asking. Someone sure did."

"If you did any research at all before you got involved in this situation, you'd know that the

authorities concluded that Preston was shot by an intruder who was after cash and

valuables."

"A burglar who then dumped flowers all over the place and deliberately smashed an expensive

camera rather than try to fence it?"

Forrest went still. "She told you about the smashed camera and the flowers?"

"Yeah."

Forrest got slowly to his feet and went to stand at the window, looking down into the street.

"Did she also tell you that she was the one who found Preston's body?" he

asked.

"Yes."

Forrest glanced at him over his shoulder.

"You're a private detective, Truax. You must realize

that there is another possible explanation for my cousin's murder. One that accounts for the

apparent rage that was exhibited at the scene – the smashed camera and the crushed

flowers."

"Are you trying to hint that Zoe might be

the murderer?"

"The police considered the possibility and rejected it and that's fine by me. But the truth is

her alibi for the day Preston was killed is shaky."

"How's that?"

"She was supposedly attending a three-day conference put on by a private art foundation in

San Francisco. It was a big event. It would have been very possible for her to slip away

unnoticed."

"Got a handy motive?"

Forrest turned back to the view from the window. He clasped his hands behind his back. "The

oldest one of all. Jealousy."

"Was Preston having an affair?"

Forrest hesitated. "Maybe."

"This is getting a little vague, Cleland."

"I don't know the answer for certain. But the possibility exists."

"Got any proof?"

"No," Forrest said quietly. He turned around again. "And I'd just as soon not find out."

"Because it might raise doubts about Zoe?"

"I'd rather not discover that my cousin was shot dead by his wife in a fit of jealous rage."

"You don't want her to go to prison, is that it? You'd rather have her locked up in Candle Lake

Manor."

"It's the best place for her," Forrest said quietly. "Dr. Harper will cooperate."

"I'm sure you make it worth his while to be cooperative."

"I would prefer that she be in a hospital where she can be properly treated rather than in

prison, yes."

"So much easier to control her shares if she's in Candle Lake than it would be if she went to

prison, isn't it? Prisoners have more rights than folks who have been involuntarily committed to

a psychiatric hospital."

"Let's get to the bottom line." Forrest came back to stand in front of the desk.

"I know why

you married Sara."

"Zoe."

"Zoe. You married her because she's the key to a great deal of money." Forrest gave the

office a laconic survey. "Probably a hell of lot more money than you've ever seen in one place

at one time."

"You don't think we're talking true love here?"

Forrest's mouth curled humorlessly. "No, Truax, I don't think so. I did some checking on you

before I came here. Seems this is your fourth marriage. A year ago you lost your business. By

the time you paid off the creditors and your third ex-wife, you were flat broke. You're barely

keeping your head above water financially. I think the day you met Zoe, or whatever you call

her, you saw a way to recover in a hurry and you jumped at it."

"Going to make me an offer?"

"Yes."

"Thought so." It was always gratifying to have it figured right, Ethan thought.

"If you're smart, you'll take it," Forrest said. "I admit you would get more if the merger goes

through, but I'm going to fight it every inch of the way. If I do manage to hold Cleland Cage

together, you'll be looking at two to five

years downstream before you can cash out. And

you've got the added complication of having to stay married to a *crazy* woman for that whole

time."

"I get the picture."

"Take my offer now and all you have to do is help me put Zoe back where she belongs. Then

you file for divorce. I give you your money, and you're free."

* * *

Zoe lowered her camera and stared at Ethan, appalled.

"He offered you *how* much money?" she whispered.

"You heard me."

They were standing near the top of the trail that wound down into the shallow canyon below

Nightwinds. The sun was low in the sky. The onset of twilight was streaking the desert with

mauve and purple shadows.

Ethan had picked her up at her office a

few minutes ago, telling her he needed to talk to her,

but he had said little until they had come here.

She had known that, whatever he intended to tell her, it would not be good news. Maybe that

was why she had taken out her camera and started snapping off shots of cactus. It had given

her something to do with her hands while she waited for him to start talking.

"Yes," she said. "I heard you." She swallowed. "That's a lot of cash."

"Nah, it's a so-so amount, not a lot."

She looked at him. He was in some remote, centered place deep inside himself, she thought. It

was probably the same place he went when he was seeking patterns and searching for

answers.

"It is a lot," she said dryly, "given your present financial situation."

"Okay, relatively speaking, it's a lot."

There was a slight breeze blowing across the canyon, ruffling her blouse.

Absently she raised

a hand to hold her hair out of her eyes.

"Cleland Cage is the most important thing in the world

to him."

"I could see that."

"You did say he would probably try to buy you off."

"Cleland didn't just make me an offer. He said a couple of other things, too."

She watched him, worried by the too-even tone of his voice. "What things?"

"He implied that there was a possibility that Preston was involved in an affair at the time of his death."

For an instant, she was so shocked she could not speak.

"No," she said.

"I tried to pin him down, but he refused to get specific."

"Of course, he refused. That's because there was nothing to be specific about. Preston was *not* having an affair."

"You're sure of that?"

Her stomach clenched. "Absolutely positive. Preston would never have cheated on me."

"What if he did?" Ethan asked, quiet and relentless now.

It dawned on her that he was interrogating her. This was probably the way he dealt with

suspects and anyone else when he wanted answers. She did not like being the target.

"I don't understand," she said stiffly.

"Where are you trying to go with this?"

"Forrest implied that Preston's involvement with another woman might constitute a motive for murder."

Her insides turned to ice water. "He told you that I shot Preston, didn't he?"

"He didn't come right out and say it. Just sort of let the possibility hang in midair."

She swung around, anger evaporating the chill that had seized her. "But that's not what

happened. I didn't kill Preston. I couldn't have shot him."

"Even if you'd discovered that he'd been sleeping with another woman?"

"Even if I found out he'd cheated on me."
She felt steadier now that she was on
sure and

certain ground. "You have to understand
that Preston was a gentle man. What we
had

together, our love, was a very gentle
thing." "Gentle."

She struggled to find the words to
explain. "Even if one of us had found out
that the other

had cheated, the response would have

been sadness and disappointment.
Maybe grief. But

not rage and certainly not violence."
"What would you have done?" "You're
not going to let

this go, are you?" "I can't," he said. "I
have to find out where it leads." She
searched his

implacable face. "Yes, I can see that.
Okay, hypothetically speaking, if I had
discovered that

Preston had been unfaithful, I would
have cried for a while and then I would
have set him

free. You can't force love. You know that."

"Sure. After four marriages, I know that." She felt herself turn red. She wondered if he

thought she'd deliberately thrown his extensive experience of marriage in his face. That was

not what she had intended. It was his own fault if he took it personally, she thought. After all,

he was the one who had pushed her into this corner. "How about marriage counseling?" he

asked. "Counseling?" Startled out of her reverie, she frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Would you have suggested counseling if you had found out that Preston was having an

affair?" he asked patiently. "Oh, no, I don't think so." "Why not?"

She suppressed the urge to tell him what he could do with his questions and struggled to

dredge up more answers.

"I read somewhere that every marriage is based on certain unwritten ground

rules," she said

carefully. "Those rules are private, usually unspoken, and understood only by the people

involved. For some, an affair would be hurtful but not a complete deal-breaker, if you see

what I mean."

"Because faithfulness was not one of the bedrock rules of that marriage?"

"Yes. Maybe there are other factors that are more crucial in that particular relationship.

Emotional dependency or financial security or social status or a strong religious belief. A

person might have a great fear of failure or a dread of being alone. Any number of solid,

reasonable things might be more fundamentally important in that marriage than faithfulness."

"But for you, faithfulness would be one of the unbreakable ground rules, is that it?"

"Yes," she said quietly. "For me, trust has to be at the heart of a relationship. Without that,

none of the rest of it matters." She paused. "Do you understand?"

"Yes."

The quiet conviction in the single word reassured her as nothing else could have done in that

moment. She gave him a tremulous smile.

"Because trust is one of your nonnegotiable rules in a relationship, too, isn't it?" she said.

"Figure you gotta be able to count on something or what the hell's the point of getting

married?"

"Yes. Well, the point here is that I did trust Preston. I can't believe that he was cheating on

me. But if he had been involved with someone else, I would not have killed him. I would have

filed for divorce."

"Understood," he said.

"What's this all about?" she asked. "Did you really think that I might have been the killer?"

"No."

For some reason, that simple answer incensed her. "Then why the third degree?"

"It occurred to me that if Preston was seeing someone else and tried to break it off, that

other person might have had a motive to kill him."

She contemplated that for a moment.

"You're thinking about a romantic triangle like the one you're constructing for the murder of

Camelia Foote, aren't you?" she said. "I can see the logic, but that doesn't work

in this case.

Preston was not sleeping with another woman. Trust me. I would have known."

"Okay. Sorry about the inquisition. But I had to be sure."

She looked at him standing there, silhouetted against a dying sun, booted feet braced slightly

apart. He reminded her of an oncoming train. You might be able to kill a man like this if you

tried really hard and if you were fast enough and lucky enough, she thought, but that was the

only way you could stop him.

"I know," she said softly.

She raised her camera and took the picture. Going for the little glimpse of his soul that she

saw in that moment. The photo would give her something of him to keep when this was all

over.

* * *

Preston was a gentle man... our love was a very gentle thing....

Ethan was wide awake, looking up at the shadows of the ceiling and he knew that he was not

going to go back to sleep. He was familiar with this brand of insomnia. It was job-related. It

happened a lot when he was closing in on answers.

He had a choice. He could either lie here and brood or he could get up and go into another

room and brood.

Beside him, Zoe slept peacefully. He did not sense any of the restlessness that he

had come

to expect whenever she was having one of her bad nights.

He eased himself away from the warmth of her body, pushed aside the covers, and rose from

the winged bed. He found his trousers in the darkness, pulled them on, and padded barefoot

out into the dark hall.

There was enough moonlight coming through the windows to illuminate his path. He made his

way into the kitchen and turned on a light.

Inside the refrigerator, he found a plastic bowl full of leftover cheese ravioli. Zoe had cooked

dinner this evening. She had doused the ravioli in very expensive olive oil and freshly grated

Parmesan. He peeled off the lid and helped himself to a sample bite.

As he had suspected, it was just as good cold as it had been hot. Was he a trained detective

or what?

He dumped a little habanero-laced hot sauce on the pile of ravioli, located a fork, and carried

his treasure to the kitchen table. One of the pads of paper he kept handy in every room of

the house was on the windowsill together with a pen.

He sat down, ate some of the ravioli, and opened the notepad.

But the first word he wrote was not what he had planned to jot down.

Gentle.

Well, shit. This was not going to be a very productive night if he didn't get past the gentle thing.

He crossed it out very deliberately and tried again.

People with reasons to kill Leon Grady and Preston Cleland.

"What are you doing?" Zoe said from the doorway.

He put down the pen and looked at her. She was swathed in a white robe and a pair of

slippers. Her hair was mussed from the pillows and their earlier bout of passion. His wife.

He was startled by the heated rush of hunger and need that shot through him.

"Are you okay?" Zoe came toward him, concern darkening her mysterious eyes.

"Couldn't sleep. Thought I'd do some work." He indicated the plastic bowl.

"Want some cold

ravioli?"

"Sure."

She changed direction, opened a drawer,

found a fork, and sat down across from him. Leaning

across the table, she speared two ravioli and simultaneously craned her head to read his

notes.

"What did you cross out?" She sat back and popped the ravioli between her lips.

"A bad

conclusion?"

"Yeah." He watched her eat for a moment, thinking that this would be a good time to keep his

mouth shut. But for some reason, he could not seem to manage that simple feat tonight.

"I'm not like Preston, am I?"

She blinked, stopped chewing, and swallowed hurriedly. Then she cleared her throat.

"No," she said. "No, you are very different."

"You don't see me as a very *gentle* man, do you?"

She hesitated. "Gentle is not the first word that comes to mind, no."

"And our relationship," he said, unable to turn aside now, even though he sensed that disaster

was bearing down on him. "You probably would not describe it as a very gentle thing."

"Uh, no. Probably not." She reached across the table to fork up more ravioli. "Mind if I ask

what this is all about? Why the focus on our relationship here? It's not like we're really

married."

"Yeah, we are really married." He

realized his jaw had gone rigid. Always a bad sign.

She flushed. "You know what I mean. Our marriage is just a device. Part of your strategy for

dealing with my case."

"And the fact that we're sleeping together? How do you account for that?"

Her cheeks turned a deeper shade of pink, but her gaze did not waver. "We're sleeping

together because we're attracted to each other. Not because we've got a piece of paper that

says we're married."

"Does that sound a little complicated to you? It sure as hell does to me."

"We seem to be coping."

"Cleland assumes I married you because you hold the key to that block of shares."

"Forrest judges everyone by his own standards and motivations," she said.

"He wouldn't

understand a man like you in a million years."

"You think you understand me?"

"Not completely. Parts of you are pretty deep and you don't go out of your way to reveal

them. But I know you well enough to be sure that you didn't marry me for those shares."

"What makes you so damn certain of that?" he asked.

She paused with the fork full of ravioli halfway to her mouth. "If I say intuition, you'll do that

thing with your eyes."

"What thing?"

"You can make them appear amused and scornful and sort of steely all at the same time.

Something to do with the way you narrow them, I think. You do a squint that would have

looked good on Wyatt Earp."

"A squint, huh? Maybe I should make an appointment to have my eyes checked."

She smiled. "It's not just intuition that makes me sure you didn't marry me in a sneaky

maneuver to get hold of those shares. I've got some rock-solid evidence that

says I can trust

you."

"Like what?"

"I've seen the way you approach your work. I know you crave answers more than you'll ever

crave money. Something in you needs to do your bit to keep the karmic scales balanced. I

also know that when you sign on for a job, you'll do whatever it takes to see it through.

That's who you are."

"You make me sound like some kind of machine."

She put down the fork and folded her arms on the table. "Are you always like this in the middle

of a case?"

"Yeah."

She raised her brows.

"Well, maybe not," he said. "This case is different."

"How so?"

"You're different."

"From your usual client?"

"No." He picked up his fork and ate another mouthful of ravioli. "From all the other women I

married."

"Oh. Well, now that you've brought up the subject, curiosity compels me to ask, in what way

am I different?"

"You're just different, that's all."

"Okay, let's try this from another direction. How do you feel about me?"

"I'm not sure," he said. Might as well be savagely honest. Not like there was anything to lose.

"But whatever the hell it is, it isn't exactly soft and gentle."

"I see." Her mouth curved in a slow, inviting grin. "Is that a problem for you?"

"Not if it isn't a problem for you."

She got up, rounded the table, and sank lightly down onto his lap. She put her arms around

his neck.

"Trust me," she said into his ear. "It's not a problem."

Chapter Thirty

Radnor Security Systems sprawled across the second floor of a large building located in an

office park on the north side of town. The interior resembled an upscale brokerage or

insurance firm. The furnishings were sleek. The art on the walls was what Ethan privately

termed Southwestern generic – lots of stylized images of red rock canyons, desert vistas, old

adobe buildings, and sunsets, all done in shades of turquoise, red, and purple.

He was mildly impressed by the air of important hustle and bustle. Shiny new computers sat

on every desk. The employees who came and went from the glass-walled cubicles on one side

of the room looked serious and professional.

The receptionist was polished and polite. He sat behind an acre of curved and gleaming wood,

lord of a complicated-looking phone

system and a really spiffy computer. The little plaque on

the desk identified him as Jason.

"May I help you?" Jason asked.

"I'm here to see Nelson Radnor," Ethan said.

"Do you have an appointment?"

"No."

Jason looked regretful in a polished and polite sort of way. "I'm sorry, Mr. Radnor is in a

meeting. May I suggest that you make an

appointment?"

Ethan propped himself on the corner of Jason's glowing desk and folded his arms. "Tell him

Truax is here."

Jason was clearly troubled by this request, but after the briefest of hesitations, he reached

for the phone. "Truax, did you say, sir?"

"He knows me."

"Just a minute."

Jason punched in a number and spoke

softly into the phone. When he replaced it, he was

smiling again. Relieved. He got to his feet.

"This way, please. Would you care for coffee or bottled water?"

"Neither, thanks."

He followed Jason to an office at the far end of the long row of glass-walled cubicles. Nelson's

office did not have any glass.

Jason knocked once, opened the door, and ushered Ethan inside.

"Mr. Truax, sir."

"Come in, Truax. Have a seat." Nelson was in his shirtsleeves. He waved a hand toward a

padded leather chair. "I wasn't expecting a visit from the competition today. What's going on?"

Decide to take me up on rny offer of some subcontract work?"

"Not yet."

Ethan sat down and did a quick survey of the office. The desk was a hefty, burnished piece of

sculpture composed of steel and glass. Nelson's chair was an executive model with a high

back covered in black leather. The action was smooth. There was no squeak when he moved

in it.

The carpet was dark gray, and the framed southwestern scenes that hung on the walls were

suitably masculine. A handsome wooden coatrack stood in the corner. An expensively tailored

cream-colored jacket draped elegantly

from one of the hooks.

There was no pink anywhere.

The place had an uncomfortably familiar feel, Ethan noticed. It looked a lot like his old office in

L.A. He wondered if Radnor had gotten screwed by the same interior decorator.

"What can I do for you?" Nelson asked congenially.

"You can tell me who hired you to find Leon Grady," Ethan said.

"Who the hell is Leon Grady?"

He had to hand it to Radnor, Ethan thought. The guy did not so much as flinch. Then again,

maybe the ignorance was straight-up honesty. Radnor Security Systems probably did so much

business that the boss didn't bother to pay attention to the small skip trace and missing

persons work. It was a good bet he left those sorts of routine jobs to his underlings.

"Leon Grady was staying at the Sunrise Suites motel," Ethan said, making the effort to be

patient on the off chance that Radnor actually didn't know what the hell he was talking about.

"He turned up dead a few days ago. The cops think it was a small-time drug deal gone bad."

"Yeah, I think I did read something in the papers about a low-end dealer getting shot. But I

didn't pay much attention. Radnor doesn't handle security for any of the companies in that

part of town." Nelson cocked a polite brow. "One of your jobs?"

"Grady was linked to one of my ongoing investigations."

Okay, so he only had one ongoing investigation at the moment and the prospects of recouping

his expenses, let alone getting paid for his time, looked a little dim. *So sue me.* There was no

need to spell out the sorry details for the competition. In business you had to present a

strong, competent, successful image. The environment had changed over the eons, but the

rules of life in the jungle hadn't altered appreciably. Showing signs of weakness was a good

way to get eaten.

"I don't get it." Nelson did concerned puzzlement very well. "What makes you think Radnor

Security Systems is involved in this?"

"Call it a hunch. The cops are happy with the drug deal scenario but I've got some problems

with it. I think it's possible that someone from out of town killed him, and that means the

shooter had to find him first. Grady paid his motel bill in cash, presumably because he was

trying to hide. I know that no one called me up and asked me to trace him so that leaves

you."

"It does?"

"Radnor has the biggest ad in the phone book, so I figure someone calling from out of town

would feel more comfortable going with you. I want to know the name of your client."

"I see." Nelson cranked back in his squeakless chair and looked sincerely regretful. "I assure

you, I have no personal knowledge of the situation."

"I believe you. We both know that something this small would have been handled by one of

your lower level people. A clerk, maybe. We're talking basic trace work here. Nothing

complicated."

"I personally review every case that goes through this office at least once a

week. I haven't

noticed the name Leon Grady."

"Grady got murdered this week, not last. Maybe his file hasn't come up for weekly review."

"Even if we did trace him for a client, you know I can't discuss it with you, let alone give you

the name of the person who hired us."

"I know all about your keen regard for client confidentiality," Ethan said. "You made a big deal

of it to that reporter from the *Herald*

when you took credit for the Mason case."

"You know reporters. They never get the facts straight. You can't blame me for a journalistic

misunderstanding."

"Wouldn't think of it. But I figure you owe me. Did someone from this firm track down Leon

Grady?"

"I really can't discuss this, Truax. You know that as well as I do. There's a question of ethics

involved."

"Let me put it this way," Ethan said. "If you don't show me the file on Grady, I will be forced

to call the president of the Desert View Homeowners' Association and inform him that the

association might want to review its contract with Radnor Security Systems."

Nelson sat forward abruptly, no longer projecting polite regret. "What the hell is that supposed

to mean?"

"Just that I've got a hunch that the homeowners' association might be interested in knowing

that some of the Radnor guards don't take the firm's rules about client confidentiality to heart.

Some of them will, in fact, spill their guts about the personal lives of any of the folks living in

Desert View for a beer and a couple hundred bucks."

"Are you saying one of my guys took a bribe?"

"How do you think I cracked the Mason

case so fast?"

"Shit. You can't prove a damn thing."

"I don't have to prove anything. Like I said, all I have to do is plant a few doubts in the mind

of the president of the homeowners' association. Panic will no doubt ensue. Nothing rich folks

hate more than knowing someone will sell the details of their private affairs for a lousy two

hundred in cash."

Nelson glowered for a full minute. Then

he leaned forward and hit the intercom.

"Jason, bring me the case files for the past week. Yeah, I know this isn't the usual day. Get

"em."

Nelson released the intercom button and went back to scowling at Ethan.

"You play hardball, don't you?" he said.

Ethan shrugged.

The door opened. Jason appeared with a stack of printouts. He put them down on Nelson's

desk.

"Will there be anything else, sir?" Jason asked.

"No, that'll be all." Nelson reached for the first printout.

Jason glanced thoughtfully at Ethan. There was curiosity and a new level of respect in his

eyes. A few seconds later, the door closed softly behind him.

Silence punctuated by the occasional rustle of paper settled on the plush office. Several

minutes passed.

"Son of a bitch," Nelson muttered.

He sat back and regarded Ethan with an expression that was not all that different from

Jason's. Curiosity and the beginnings of something that might have been grudging respect.

"You guessed right." Nelson shoved the printout across the desk toward Ethan.

"We did do a

quick trace on a guy named Leon Grady. Client called in from out of town. Paid with a credit

card."

Ethan picked up the printout and read the name of the client. "Dr. Ian Harper."

"It was a legitimate case. Harper said that he was Grady's employer and that Grady had

disappeared with company funds."

"Yeah?" Ethan read quickly through the file.

"Hey, it says right there that my man verified that Harper was, indeed, Grady's employer."

"Uh-huh."

"Happens all the time, you know that. Embezzlement cases are almost as common as

insurance fraud jobs."

Ethan did not look up from the file. He badly wanted to make some notes, but he had a hunch

Radnor would come unglued if he starting writing things down on paper.

"Most employers don't gun down the embezzlers once they find them," he said absently. "They

just try to recover some of the money. Does it worry you that you might have

fingered Grady

for the killer?"

"Damn it, don't give me any crap about having set the guy up. Radnor maintains the highest

professional standards. All the rules were followed on that case. You can see that for

yourself. Hell, you don't know that Harper killed Grady. You just told me yourself, the cops

think it was a drug deal."

"You're right." Ethan finished reading

and dropped the file on the desk. "I don't know anything

for sure. Yet. See you around, Radnor. Consider us square for that little journalistic

misunderstanding on the Mason case."

He opened the door.

"Truax."

Ethan paused.

"If you ever decide you want to work for a real agency," Nelson said wearily.

"Let me know. I

could use someone like you."

Ethan gave the office one last survey, taking in all the familiar, expensive details. "Thanks, but

the decor doesn't work for me."

* * *

Fifteen minutes later , he walked into Single-Minded and stopped short at the sight of Zoe

perched on a stool, heels hooked on the bottom rung. Her head was gracefully bent over an

old, leather-bound book in her lap. Light

gleamed on her sleekly knotted hair. She wore a

purple tee shirt with a scooped neck and sleeves that went as far as her elbows. The myriad

knife pleats of a teal green skirt draped elegantly around her ankles.

A hungry, possessive tide rose through him, tightening his stomach and heating his blood.

This was his wife. At least for a while. And he wanted her.

She looked up at that instant and smiled.

"Ethan," she said. "I was starting to wonder what had happened to you. Did your hunch pay

off? Did someone hire Radnor to find Grady?"

"About time you got back." Singleton emerged from the gloom at the rear of the shop. "Any

luck?"

The small spell that had bound him shattered. He pulled his thoughts back from images of

damp, tangled sheets.

"It's a good news, bad news kind of thing," he warned.

"What's the good news?" Zoe asked.

Optimists, he thought. *You gotta love 'em.*

"I got the name of the person who hired Radnor to trace Leon Grady here in Whispering

Springs. It was, wait for it, Dr. Ian Harper."

"Harper. Well, isn't that interesting."

"Harper doesn't seem to have made any effort to conceal his identity or his goal,"

Ethan

continued. "Even used his Candle Lake Manor corporate credit card to pay for the search.

Claimed Grady had embezzled funds."

Singleton nodded. "Sounds like a reasonable story."

"It all fits," Zoe said, her expression fierce with satisfaction. "Maybe Grady threatened to

blackmail Harper or maybe Harper realized that Grady had become a threat and a liability.

Either way, Harper decided to get rid of Grady."

Singleton lounged against his counter. "He must have tracked Grady as far as Whispering

Springs and then used Radnor to find out where he was staying here in town. Then he flew in

and whacked him."

"Yeah, it's nice and neat, all right," Ethan said. "There's just one small problem."

"What?" Zoe demanded.

"Ian Harper has a real good alibi for the night of the murder, remember?"

She started to argue, and then he saw comprehension strike.

"Oh, damn." She sank back down onto the stool. "You're right."

Singleton frowned. "What's his alibi?"

"Zoe and me," Ethan said.

"We called him from Las Vegas sometime after midnight on the night Grady was shot," Zoe

explained. "I talked to him myself."

"Could have been faking it from his cell phone," Singleton offered.

Ethan shook his head. "Didn't call that number. You gave me both, remember? We dialed up his landline."

"Call forwarding?" Singleton offered.

"I don't think so," Zoe said. "Harper was groggy, like he'd dozed off watching late-night

television. An old movie. I could hear it in the background."

"The phone records can be traced,"

Singleton reminded her, "but it does sound like he was

probably back in Candle Lake."

She pinned Ethan with a steely look.

"Okay, sleuth, where are you going with this?"

"Funny you should ask that. I do, indeed, have somewhere to go if I don't clear my first big

case here in Whispering Springs. Radnor offered me a job."

She made a face. "Get real. You'd hate working for Radnor Security Systems."

He thought about the polished offices and the equally polished staff of Radnor Security

Systems. It was a scene straight out of his former life. Zoe was right. He had no desire to

return to it.

"Good point," he said. "Guess I'd better get busy and find out who murdered Leon Grady."

"What's the next step?" Singleton asked.

"As it happens, I'm sort of out of brilliant ideas so I'm going to do what a trained, experienced

professional detective always does when he runs out of sharp moves."

Zoe looked interested. "That would be?"

"Stir the pot and see what bubbles to the surface."

"What do I get to do?" she asked.

"Nothing. You sit tight right here in Whispering Springs and you do absolutely nothing at all."

She sighed. "You're going to Candle Lake Manor, aren't you?"

"Yeah. Figure it's time to take the offense. Not like I've got a whole lot of

choice."

"I'll come with you."

"No."

She slipped off the stool and stood.

"You'll need me. I know that place. You don't."

It was true and it would be useful to have her with him, but he also knew what it would cost

her to confront her nightmares.

"No," he said again. "I'll handle it."

She walked to where he stood and

touched his jaw lightly. "I understand why you think you

have to refuse my help, and I appreciate it more than you will ever know. But I have to do

this."

"Damn it, Zoe – "

She went up on tiptoe and brushed her lips across his.

"I'll go pack," she said.

Chapter Thirty-one

She was going back to Xanadu.

The growing tension that was twisting her insides and making her feel twitchy and anxious

was normal and entirely expected, Zoe thought. She had known from the outset that it would

be like this. She could handle it. She had to handle it.

She gazed steadily through the windshield as the narrow lane that led to Candle Lake Manor

unwound in front of the rental car. The scene should have been picture-postcard pretty. The

tall trees that arched so gracefully above the drive should have looked like something out of

an impressionist landscape. Instead, they seemed to loom ominously, cutting off the light and

the safety of the outside world.

Through the trunks of the trees, she caught glimpses of the dark lake. She thought of all the

times she had gotten out of bed late at

night and stood at her barred window
looking out at

the cold waters. Some nights she
wondered if some evil being lurked
beneath the surface

casting spells over the Manor. There
were times when no other explanation
seemed to make

sense of her miserable situation. On
other nights she had imagined what it
would be like to

swim out into the middle of Candle Lake
and let herself sink down into its depths.
The ultimate

escape.

The important thing to remember today was that she was not going back alone, she thought.

Ethan was with her. There was nothing to fear except fear itself, blah, blah, blah.

Yeah, sure.

She had been trying to hold back the old memories ever since she had made up her mind to do

this. But now she could no longer dam the flood. The images from her nightmares slammed

through her.

... The small room that had been both her prison and her refuge at night... Dr. McAlister's

hushed, shadowy office... The chandelier-hung dining room filled with unnaturally subdued

patients all eating bland, tasteless food... The medical examination room where the hulks had

taken their victims on the bad nights...

"You okay?" Ethan asked roughly.

She jerked at the sound of his voice and

immediately tried to conceal her start by reaching for

her tote. She had brought the chartreuse one today. The fierce, edgy color gave her courage.

"Yes, I'm fine." She opened the big bag and rummaged around for a tissue. Her fingers brushed

against the heavy brass doorknob key chain. The feel of it calmed her a little. She started to

breathe the way her instructor had taught her. *Finding the power source, centering herself.*

This time things would be different, she assured herself. She was no longer helpless. She was not alone.

"You sure you want to do this?" Ethan asked without taking his eyes off the curving drive. "I

can take you back to the inn. You can stay there while I talk to Harper."

"No. I'm going with you."

Ethan said nothing, but he took one hand off the wheel and reached across the small space

that separated them.

He covered her fingers with his own and squeezed once, gently.

Some of the acid-strong tension eating away at her in-sides was diluted. She did a little more

power breathing.

Ethan drove around one last curve, and the Manor came into view.

The three-story brick mansion squatted like a giant toad at the edge of the lake. Prison bars

that masqueraded as a handsome,

wrought-iron garden fence enclosed the grounds. The

scene was just as she remembered it in her dreams.

But there was something different about it.

She gave a soft, muffled cry of surprise.

"What?" Ethan asked.

"It looks smaller than I remembered," she whispered.

Ethan smiled for the first time since they had left Whispering Springs that morning. It was not

much of a smile, just a faint curve at the corner of his mouth, but it was real.

"I think that's a good sign," he said.

He was right, she thought. Maybe this wasn't going to be so terrible, after all.

A guard dressed in the familiar dove gray uniform of Candle Lake Manor security came out of

the tiny guardhouse at the gate. He gave Zoe a cursory glance, not recognizing her.

"I'm Dr. Truax and this is my assistant." Ethan flashed a business card. "We're here to see Dr.

Harper. He's expecting us."

"Yes, sir. You can park in the visitors' section on the right."

The guard went back into the guardhouse and pressed a button. The heavy iron gates swung

slowly open.

Zoe was impressed. "That went easily, just as you predicted."

"This place is designed to keep people from leaving, not to stop them from entering."

Ethan parked in one of the half dozen

slots allocated to visitors and turned off the engine. He

looked at Zoe.

"Ready?" he asked.

"Yes." She unlatched her seatbelt with sudden resolve and opened the door.

"Let's do it."

Ethan climbed out from behind the wheel and dropped the keys into his pocket.

She stole another quick look at him as they walked together toward the entrance. This

morning when he had dressed for the

confrontation with Harper, he had shown her a whole

new side of himself, the side that had once run a large, successful business. It was something

of a revelation.

Today he looked sleek and intimidating in an elegantly tailored steel gray jacket and trousers.

The charcoal gray shirt and silver-and-black silk tie added a not-so-subtle punch of quiet

authority. Not that Ethan required any additional sartorial touches to give him

that air, she

mused. It came naturally to him, even when he was dressed in jeans. But today he looked like

a man who could move comfortably in the corridors of power.

No wonder the guard at the gate hadn't questioned the phony business card.

They went up the stone steps and through the thick glass doors. Once inside the formal

lobby, some of her fragile assurance slipped. She felt her heart rate kick back up into high

gear.

The male receptionist greeted them politely. Zoe remembered him from the old days, but he

looked at her with no sign of recognition. Probably because she was not wearing one of the

shapeless hospital gowns, she figured. It only went to show how much clothes mattered.

Ethan did his trick with the business card, but the receptionist was not as easy a mark as the

guard at the front gate.

"I'll let Dr. Harper know you're here, sir." The receptionist reached for the phone.

"That's all right," Ethan said. "We know the way."

"To the left," Zoe said.

She did not pause, but moved immediately down the hall in the direction of the executive

offices, taking charge now that they were on her old turf, just as she and Ethan had planned.

Out of nowhere, a rush of adrenaline hit her, filling her with energy and self-

confidence. She

could do this.

"Lead on," Ethan urged. He fell into step beside her.

"Just a minute, Dr. Truax, please." The receptionist scrambled to his feet, alarmed. "You'll

need an escort."

But Zoe and Ethan were already turning the corner.

"Slick," Zoe commented.

"Yeah, the fake doctor thing always

works well in situations like this. Makes 'em hesitate a

couple of minutes before they summon the goon squad."

"And a couple of minutes is all you need."

"Usually." He looked around. "You know, on the surface, this place looks pretty classy."

"Appearances are deceiving. The first floor is all for show. The patient rooms are on the

second and third floors. In fairness, I think Candle Lake Manor may at one

time have been a

respectable institution."

"But that would have been years ago, before Harper took over."

"Yes." She came to a halt in front of the paneled door of the executive suite and took another

deep breath. "This is it."

"Gotta keep moving fast here." Ethan opened the door and ushered her inside.

"The

receptionist will be frantically trying to get through to Harper to tell him we're

on the way."

"Right." She walked ahead of him into the paneled confines of the outer office.

Fenella Leeds, seated at her desk, was talking into the phone. There was disapproval and

alarm gathering on her too-perfect face.

"... Dr. Harper does not have any appointments scheduled for today."

Fenella broke off at the

sight of Zoe and Ethan bearing down on her. Her gaze brushed briefly across Zoe without

much interest and came to rest on Ethan.
"Call Richards in Security. Tell him – "

"Forget it," Ethan said. He was already pushing open the door of the inner office.
"Harper

won't want to be interrupted."

"You can't go in there." Fenella was on her feet now. Apparently realizing she could not

physically stop Ethan, she turned back to Zoe who was right behind him. Belated recognition

widened her eyes. "*You.*"

"Hi, Fenella. It's been a while. Still screwing the guy in accounting?"

Fury blazed in Fenella's eyes. "How dare you?"

"It was no secret," Zoe assured her.

"When I was here, all the patients knew how the two of

you used to get it on down at the boathouse."

"You stupid little bitch," Fenella breathed. "You don't know what you're getting into."

"I'll take my chances."

She might have hung around to continue the exchange, but Ethan's hand closed over her arm.

He hauled her through the doorway.

"Try to stay focused, honey," he said into her ear.

He closed the door firmly behind them and took a split second to lock it before he turned to

face Ian Harper.

Harper was on his feet, scowling furiously at Ethan. "I don't know who you are, but I warn you

that Security will be here at any moment."

"And when they arrive, you will tell them to go away," Ethan said easily. He steered Zoe into

one of the two chairs and took the other one himself. "Two words, Harper. Leon Grady."

"Who the hell are you?" But Harper was staring at Zoe now visibly shaken.

"You're Sara

Cleland."

"Zoe Truax now." She crossed her legs and smiled at him. "Try to remember

that."

"I don't know what this is all about, but I can assure you that you need help," Harper said to

her.

"I'll pass."

"Let's get back to Grady," Ethan said.

Harper's jaw jerked once. "What does Grady have to do with this? The police told me that he

was murdered by a drug dealer in a town in Arizona a few days ago."

"We know," Ethan said. "We found the body."

Harper was clearly taken aback by that information. "I see."

"The cops think it was a drug deal gone bad, but Zoe and I are pretty sure we can prove

otherwise."

That got Harper's full attention. "What are you talking about? I assure you – "

A loud pounding on the door interrupted him. He opened his mouth to shout something to the

people on the other side.

Ethan held up one hand. "We have information that will give the cops reason to think that

you're a viable suspect in Grady's murder."

The pounding continued.

"Dr. Harper, are you okay in there?"

"Get on the intercom and tell the pretty lady out front that you don't need security

assistance," Ethan said in a level voice that brooked no resistance. "Do it now, or we'll take

our evidence to the police."

Harper sat down hard and hit the intercom.

"Tell Security I don't need their assistance," he repeated. "At least not right away. Tell them

to stand by in the hall."

"Are you sure, Dr. Harper?" Fenella asked, sounding like she thought he was an idiot.

"Yes." Harper released the intercom switch.

"Good move," Ethan said.

"What is this about me being a suspect in Grady's death?" Harper said hoarsely.

"That's not

possible."

"Your name and a Candle Lake Manor credit card were used to hire an investigation agency in

Whispering Springs to locate Leon Grady. Shortly after the agency notified their client of

Grady's whereabouts, he wound up dead. I've got a hunch we are not dealing with a

coincidence here. What do you think, Dr.

Harper?"

"I didn't kill Grady."

"Was he blackmailing you?" Ethan asked. "Threatening to expose your somewhat unorthodox

business and medical practices here at Candle Lake?"

"No."

"Did you hire Radnor Security Systems to find him?"

"No, damn it. I didn't hire anyone to find him. Grady went out of town on a business trip. I

thought he was on his way to L.A. He was supposed to report back to me when he found – "

Harper stopped in mid-sentence. He stared at Zoe.

"He went looking for me, didn't he?" she asked. "Somehow he managed to locate me. But I

wasn't in L.A. He lied to you, didn't he? Because he had plans of his own for me. He tried to

blackmail me. Wanted me to pay him a whole bunch of money to keep my secret."

"I did not know that," Harper snapped.

"All I can tell you is that my administrative assistant

became suspicious of Grady's behavior. She got the idea to check his charge card expenses

and managed to track him to Whispering Springs. Then she went through his personal email

correspondence with a hacker named GopherBoy. Grady had deleted it, but he was not what

anyone would call computer literate."

"But Fenella Leeds is," Zoe said. "She

found my name and address in Grady's computer files,

right?"

"Yes," Harper said wearily.

"GopherBoy supplied the information to Grady."

"And you sent the hulks to pick me up," Zoe accused.

"Hulks?" Harper scowled. "What are you talking about?"

"Ron and Ernie. You sent them after me, didn't you?"

Harper looked like he was about to deny

that, but then he drew himself up. "We sent two of

our trained medical personnel to Whispering Springs, yes. But then you called me, telling me

that you were married. I called the motel where Ron and Ernie were staying and left word that

they were to forget about you and return here immediately. I am not responsible for any

actions they may have take after that point."

"Ron and Ernie tried to kidnap me," Zoe

said fiercely.

"That is not my problem," Harper shot back. "I tried to recall them." He turned quickly to

Ethan. "Maybe they killed Grady."

"Don't think so," Ethan said.

"Got a good alibi for the night of Grady's death?" Zoe asked.

Harper was clearly panic-stricken. Then his gaze went to his calendar. He appeared to have

trouble putting it all together, but eventually he sucked in air and turned an

unattractive

shade of red.

"Grady was killed the same night that you called me from Las Vegas to tell me that you were

marrying Truax."

"Did I call you?" she asked innocently.

"I don't remember."

Harper turned purple. "*Yes*. You were gloating."

"Was I?" She made a *tsk-tsk* sound.

"You know, what with all the meds you fed me during my

stay here at the Manor, my short-term memory just isn't what it used to be."

"I was home in bed, here in town that night," Harper said loudly. "You know it as well as I do,"

"Are you sure?"

"I don't know what kind of game you're playing here," Harper snarled, "but if you've given the

police any reason at all to think that I was involved in Grady's death, you have to tell them

the truth. You have to inform them that you talked to me that night and that I was

here, not

in Whispering Springs."

"Why do I have to tell them the truth?"
Zoe asked softly. "After all the lies you
told people

about me, what possible motive would I
have for telling anyone the truth on your
behalf?"

"This is your warped vision of revenge,
isn't it?" Harper rasped. "I tried to help
you and this is

how you repay me. You really are a very
sick woman."

"So I've been told."

Harper turned back to Ethan, desperate now. "I talked to you, too, that night."

"Did you?" Ethan shifted slightly in his chair. "My memory's a little vague on that point, too."

"You can't do this to me. I'm an innocent man."

"Well," Ethan said, "we would like to find the real killer, naturally. But if that proves impossible,

we may settle for giving your name to the cops. They can take it from there."

"I did not murder Grady. I'll be able to prove that I was here that night."

"Sure," Ethan said, "you'll probably be able to clear yourself eventually, but not before there's

a lot of really unpleasant publicity. It'll be the kind of PR that will make your clients very

nervous. They pay dearly for privacy, don't they?"

"Oh, yes," Zoe chimed in. "Privacy is everything to your clients, isn't it, Dr. Harper? The last

thing any of them want is publicity and

there's nothing like a juicy, high-profile murder case to

draw that, is there? Just think what will happen if you're questioned about your link to the

murder of one of your employees."

Harper made an obvious effort to regain his composure. He gave Ethan a flat stare. "Let's cut

to the chase. What's in this for you?"

Ethan tapped his fingertips twice. "I like answers."

"Bullshit. You're in this for the money.

That's why you married Sara. It's the only thing that

makes any sense in this mess."

"The name is Zoe," Zoe said softly. "Zoe Truax."

Harper ignored her. He kept his attention fixed on Ethan. Zoe could see that he was mentally

putting the facts together to his own satisfaction.

"You plan to use her to get your hands on a chunk of Cleland Cage, don't you?" he said to

Ethan. "Fine. I wish you luck. But why come to me? I'm out of it."

"No, Harper, you are not out of it." Ethan uncoiled to his feet and reached down to take Zoe

by the arm. "When I pick up the phone and call the Whispering Springs cops, you will become

a person of interest in the murder of Leon Grady."

"I didn't kill him, and you know it." Ethan shrugged. "So, you hired someone else to do it to

ensure that Grady didn't expose your

business dealings. Ron or Ernie maybe."
"No."

"Either way, I'm sure the cops will be curious." They were at the door now. Ethan paused

before opening it. "We're staying at the Candle Lake Inn. Give us a call if you come up with

any ideas regarding who might have wanted you to take the fall for Grady's murder."

He opened the door. Zoe walked out of the room ahead of him. She had faced down Harper,

threatened him in her own small way, with a taste of what he had done to her — and she was

feeling quite accomplished.

A small crowd had gathered in the outer office. Fenella Leeds, two orderlies, and two men in

dove gray hovered uncertainly. They watched Ethan and Zoe emerge from Harper's lair.

"False alarm, people," Ethan said cheerfully. "Dr. Harper got a little confused. Probably missed

his morning meds. But we straightened

things out. You can all go back to work."

He kept one hand wrapped around Zoe's arm, moving steadily and swiftly toward the other

door. They went past the little gathering. No one made any attempt to stop them.

And then they were out in the hall, heading toward the lobby. Not much farther now, Zoe

thought. In another few minutes they would be driving away from Xanadu.

They turned the corner and nearly collided with Venetia McAlistair.

"Sara." Venetia halted, staring in astonishment. "You've come back."

"In your dreams," Zoe retorted. "And the name is Zoe now. Zoe Truax. Ethan, meet Dr.

Venetia McAlistair, otherwise known as the Wicked Witch of Candle Lake Manor."

"I don't understand." Venetia looked at Ethan. "Who are you?"

"Ethan Truax." Ethan gave it a beat. "Zoe's husband."

Venetia shook her head. "What is this all about, Sara? If you haven't come back to

Candle

Lake for more treatment, what are you doing here?"

"Investigating the murder of Leon Grady," Zoe told her. "Know anything about it?"

"Of course not. Why are you concerned with Grady's death? Dr. Harper said that he was killed

by some petty drug dealer in Arizona. I can't say I'm stunned with surprise. I always

suspected that he supplemented his income by stealing some of the patients'

medications and

selling them on the street. I told Harper of my suspicions several months ago, but he refused

to take action."

"Yeah, well somebody took some serious action against Grady." Ethan studied Venetia with

veiled curiosity. "If you've got any ideas on the subject, we'd be happy to listen to them."

"I just told you that I know nothing about the circumstances of Grady's death." Venetia

turned away from him, not bothering to conceal her lack of interest in the subject of Leon

Grady. She focused earnestly on Zoe. "I've been extremely worried about you, Sara."

"Zoe."

"Zoe," Venetia repeated patiently. "After all the stress you've been through lately, it's safe to

say that you are in an extremely fragile state at the moment."

"Good news, I'm getting tougher by the day," Zoe assured her. "If you'll excuse

us, we're on

our way – " She stopped abruptly, aware that Ethan was gently squeezing her arm. She

recognized the signal. He did not want her to blow off Venetia McAlister.

"We're on our way

back to the Candle Lake Inn. As Ethan said, if you think of anything that might be useful, you

can contact us there."

"I just told you that I can't help you with the Grady business." Venetia glanced at the hallway

behind Zoe and lowered her voice. "But it is extremely important that we talk."

The last thing she wanted to do was find herself alone in a room with Venetia McAlistair again,

Zoe thought. But Ethan was still squeezing.

"I'll be at the Inn," she said stiffly.

"May I stop by this evening?" Venetia asked eagerly. "I really must speak with you."

"Why don't you come by after dinner?" Ethan suggested coolly. "Say around nine o'clock?"

Zoe was surprised by the odd hour but she said nothing.

"That's a little late," Venetia said hesitantly.

"It will give us a chance to enjoy dinner in peace," Ethan said. "Zoe's had a long day. She

needs some time to relax."

"Oh, yes, of course." Venetia nodded approvingly. "Yes, I understand. I'll come by around nine.

We'll have a nice, cozy chat."

"Oh, boy," Zoe muttered. "Can't wait."

Still grasping her arm, Ethan whisked her around Venetia, down the hall, into the lobby, and

out of the Manor.

"What was that all about?" she asked a few minutes later when Ethan was piloting them back

down the tree-lined lane. "Why do you want Venetia to come to the inn this evening?"

"So you can keep her occupied while I see what I can find at her place."

She straightened abruptly in the seat.

"You're going to search her house? What

on earth do

you expect to find?"

"Haven't got a clue. It's like I told you before we came here, in the detective business, when

you run out of ideas, you start stirring things up."

"The detective business seems to have a few things in common with my business."

"Yeah? How's that?"

"One of the little tricks I've discovered as an interior designer is that when I

can't figure out

what's wrong with the energy flow in a room, I start shifting the furniture around until things

start to feel right."

"Shifting the furniture around." He thought about that.

"Yeah, that's exactly what I'm doing." He gave her a quick, searching glance. "Are you going

to be okay alone with McAlister this evening?"

"I can handle her."

He nodded, satisfied. "Figured you could."

Chapter Thirty-two

Zoe watched Venetia McAlistair bustle toward her across the cozy inn lobby and tried to

suppress a chill of unease. For the first time that evening, she conceded to herself that she

might have been somewhat hasty earlier when she had assured Ethan that she could handle

this meeting.

It was one thing to face down an old adversary with Ethan by her side. It was

going to be

another thing altogether to do it on her own with this long-standing enemy.

After giving the subject a great deal of thought, Zoe had decided to meet her here in the

lobby. The fire on the massive stone hearth gave off a reassuring warmth. In addition, there

was a scattering of other people around. While none would be within immediate earshot, she

would have the comfort of knowing that she was not completely isolated.

Just the sight of Venetia's grandmotherly features and rumped-looking suit was enough to

tighten her breathing tonight. The story of Hansel and Gretel flashed across her mind. On

second thought, perhaps it would have been wiser to sit a little farther away from the

cheerfully blazing hearth.

Stop it, she scolded herself silently. *You've got a job to do here*. She was pretty sure Ethan

could handle a simple search of

Venetia's house without getting into trouble, especially since

she would be keeping her busy while he worked. But she was feeling a lot of unease this

evening and not all of it had to do with the forthcoming conversation. If Ethan was right,

there was a killer running around loose.

"Sara." Venetia came to a halt in front of her. "Thank heavens. I was afraid you might change

your mind about talking to me."

"I will if you don't start calling me Zoe."

"Yes, of course, dear. Zoe." Venetia sat down in a large, padded chair and looked around.

"Where is Mr. Truax?"

"My husband is upstairs in our room," she said smoothly. "He felt we should talk in private."

"I see. I'm so glad he appreciates that a conversation between a patient and her therapist

should be confidential."

"Let's get one thing straight here,

Venetia, I'm not your patient. As far as I'm concerned, I

never was your patient. I was a prisoner at Candle Lake Manor."

"That is a very unrealistic view of the past, my dear."

"Yes, but it's my view. I agreed to see you this evening because you said it was important

that we talk. So start talking."

Venetia sighed. "You still appear to have a lot of hostility issues."

"You don't know the half of it."

"That is only to be expected, under the circumstances. I want to assure you that I have only

your best interests at heart. I'm here to help you."

* * *

Ethan clenched the penlight between his teeth and aimed the narrow beam at the file folders

in the drawer. Each was neatly labeled. No surprise there. Having gone through the bedroom

and the kitchen of the neat little house, he had already discovered that Dr. Venetia

McAlistair

was the methodical type.

The files Venetia kept here in her home office were mostly connected to her outside business

as an occasional consultant to law enforcement. She presented herself to her clients as an

expert in forensic psychology, but he could see from her private notes that Zoe was right.

McAlistair flirted a lot with the woo-woo stuff.

Her records of half a dozen murder investigations contained a lot of personal observations and

some wild speculation but very little in the way of hard facts. It looked like the good doctor

wanted very badly to believe in her own psychic abilities.

... Possible sexual overtones to the sensations experienced at the scene. Victim may have

had sexual contact with the killer...

... Sensed that victim knew the killer. Distinct aura indicating a personal

connection...

"Bullshit, Dr. McAlistair." He closed the folder and dropped it back into the drawer. "Pure,

unadulterated bullshit."

He was about to give up when the beam of light struck the label on the last file.
CLELAND.

* * *

"I realize this is a very difficult subject for you, Sara, I mean, Zoe. But I feel that until you

confront this aspect of your nature, you

will be unable to move forward."

Zoe smiled coldly. "I did move forward, Venetia. I moved right out of Candle Lake."

"What I'm trying to explain to you is that I believe you have a certain intuitive ability that

enables you to pick up information in some situations that might escape the notice of others."

"Gee. You think?"

"I understand you as no one else can, my dear." Venetia lowered her voice to a confidential

tone. "Because I have a similar ability."

"Oh, wow. Maybe you're even crazier than me. What a thought."

"Do you recall the two occasions when I took you to crime scenes?"

"Frequently." Zoe flexed the fingers of her right hand. "In my nightmares."

"If you have nightmares it is because you are attempting to deny the reality of your nature.

As long as you refuse to deal with it, you will be conflicted. I know this because I, too,

attempted to deny my own talents for a very long time. Why do you think I was drawn to the

study of psychology in the first place?"

"So you could torment people like me?"

"Don't be ridiculous." Venetia's brow wrinkled a little. "I went into the field because I felt an

overwhelming need to find a logical, scientific explanation for the sensations I occasionally

experience in certain places where great violence has been done."

"You really believe you've got some kind of psychic ability, don't you?"

"I don't like to use the term *psychic* because it carries a lot of negative connotations,"

Venetia said. "I prefer the word *intuition*. And, yes, I do feel that some people have stronger

amounts of it than others. You and I are among that small number of powerfully intuitive

individuals."

... Although the dose was doubled in an attempt to overcome her phobic-like

reaction, the

subject refused to enter the room where the crime had taken place. She began screaming

and would not stop until she was removed from the scene.

I suspect that the hysteria was, in part, staged by the suspect as a means of manipulating

the situation so that she would not have to enter the room. But even if that is the case,

such extreme resistance indicates just how powerful her ability may be. Why

else would she

have refused to go forward?

Ethan flipped through the remainder of the notes, a storm of dark anger brewing in his gut.

From what he could see, it was a near miracle that Zoe had survived her time in the Manor

with her sanity intact.

Maybe it hadn't been such a good idea to leave Zoe alone with Venetia McAlistair tonight.

He removed all of the notes from the file

and dropped the empty folder back into the drawer.

When McAlistair eventually discovered that her records had been stolen, she could use her

keen intuition to solve the crime.

He took the penlight out from between his teeth and checked the time. Ten-fifteen. Zoe had

been with McAlistair for more than an hour. He had learned nothing useful here. Time to go.

He slipped out of the house the same way he had entered it, through the

kitchen door, and

went back through a stand of trees to the place where he had left the car.

He got behind the wheel and tossed the notes he had taken from the Cleland folder down onto

the passenger seat. He sat for a while, considering possibilities and probabilities. He had

counted on finding something related to Leon Grady in Venetia's cottage since she was so

strongly linked to this thing, but he'd come up empty.

He thought about the cast of characters he had seen today at Candle Lake Manor. Then he

thought about corporate credit cards and people who might have access to them.

He fished the notebook out of his pocket and checked an address. He located it on the map of

Candle Lake that he had brought with him. Probably couldn't accomplish anything useful there

tonight, he figured. The odds were that the house would be occupied at this hour. But you

never knew.

No harm taking a look on the way back to the inn.

* * *

"I am offering you more than therapy," Venetia said. "That's important, of course. You need to

learn how to handle your experiences. But there's a financial aspect involved here that you

may not have considered."

"Ah. Now we get to the good part." Zoe sat back in her chair, feeling more in

control. "How

much do you intend to pay me to do your consulting work for you?"

"You will not be doing my consulting work for me." Venetia showed a flash of annoyance for

the first time. "You will be *assisting* me. I am willing to negotiate a reasonable fee for your

services."

"What do you consider reasonable?"

Venetia cleared her throat. "I will be providing you with counseling services

to help you deal

with your issues. My fees for those services are similar to what I charge my law enforcement

clients. So I think we can arrange a sort of trade here. For every hour of therapy I make

available to you, I would expect an hour of your time at a crime scene."

Zoe laughed. "You actually expect me to pay you for the privilege of doing your woo-woo

stuff at crime scenes? This is a joke, right?"

Chapter Thirty-three

To his surprise, the two-story Victorian-style house was dark. He could not see a car in the

drive, but there was every possibility that it was inside the garage. Might be a dog, too.

Problems, problems.

But as long as he was in the vicinity, it wouldn't hurt to get a little closer.

He left the car in another stand of trees, this one near the edge of the lake, and prowled back

toward his objective.

No dog barked when he got close to the house. He stopped to peer into the garage window

and saw the dim outline of a vehicle inside.

Damn. The owner was home and no doubt asleep.

He wandered around to the back and saw a screened porch. On the other side of the screen,

he could see the kitchen door.

So near and yet so far. He wondered if

the occupant was a light sleeper.

No, he was not going to go in, he told himself. That would be really, really dumb. He would

come back tomorrow after the occupant left for work. That was the smart thing to do.

He examined the knob on the screen door. It would be a piece of cake. The rest of the locks

were probably just as old and just as simple.

He took the gloves out of his pocket, tugged them on, and fiddled a little with

the screen

door. Experimenting.

The knob turned easily. Unlatched.

As long as he was this close, he might as well check the lock on the kitchen door. That way

he would know what tools to bring tomorrow.

He opened the screen very slowly and crossed the porch. In the shadows, he could see the

outline of two aging rattan chairs and a freezer. There was no hum from the

freezer. It looked

old. A large, half-filled garbage can stood immediately next to the kitchen door.

The kitchen door was unlocked, too. Not only unlocked but slightly ajar.

He eased the kitchen door open. From his vantage point, he could see through another

doorway into the darkened living room.

Something was crumpled in a pool of moonlight on the floor in the front room. From where he

stood, it looked a lot like a body.

There was always the possibility that the occupant had fallen asleep on the rug in front of the

television, but he'd seen scenes like this one before.

He was pretty sure Fenella Leeds was not asleep.

He listened to the silence for a moment and then he entered. Maybe Leeds was not yet dead.

* * *

"You may as well know that I'm planning

to hand in my resignation soon," Venetia said. "I will

be leaving Candle Lake Manor. I intend to pursue my consulting work full-time. If things go as

I believe they will, I may be able to use a junior partner."

"Don't look at me," Zoe said. "I've already got a day job, and I like my new life in Whispering

Springs. I'm not looking for another career with or without free therapy."

"I'm not asking you to make a decision right now. But I want you to think about

it. Speaking

as your therapist, I can tell you that if you don't learn to deal with your special abilities, you

will face the possibility of a serious mental breakdown."

Zoe glanced surreptitiously at the antique tall clock in the corner. It was going on eleven.

What the devil had happened to Ethan? He should have been back by now. How much longer

did he expect her to keep Venetia occupied?

"The closest I ever came to an honest-to-goodness real-life meltdown was during my stay at

the Manor," she said. "If I survived that, I can survive anything. Which reminds me. I've got a

question for you."

Venetia brightened. "Yes, dear? What is it?"

"I know you must have been aware of Harper's scam, how he arranged to keep certain

inmates, people like me, for example, safely doped up and tucked away for a

price. But I've

wondered all along how actively involved you were in it. Did he split some of the profits with

you?"

Venetia blanched. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Ah, come on, Doc. It's just us girls talking here. You can tell me. Did you actively assist him?"

Maybe provide second opinions when they were needed? Or did you just look the other way?"

"Are you suggesting that Dr. Harper deliberately misdiagnosed some of the patients at Candle

Lake?"

"Uh-huh."

"That's ridiculous. And, I must tell you, that it is an indication of a serious form of paranoia.

You really do need my help."

"Good thing I didn't take you up on your offer of a partnership, isn't it? Just think, you might

have found yourself working with a

crazy woman."

* * *

Fenella Leeds was dead. The rug beneath her was very wet. She had been shot at close

range. Recently. The killer had no doubt entered the house the same way he himself had,

Ethan thought. Through the kitchen door. He had probably left via the same route.

In the moonlight, he could see some signs of an intensive search. Not a desperate, chaotic

toss. The manner in which the shelves had been emptied appeared methodical and orderly.

Someone who knew what he was looking for and knew the places in which it was most likely

to be found, he decided.

Time to call the cops.

Just as he started toward Fenella's phone, he noticed the three suitcases parked near the

front door.

Fenella must have come straight home

from work and started packing for a hasty departure

from Candle Lake. There was only one good explanation for that move, as far as he could see:

the arrival of Zoe and himself on the scene.

It fit with the scenario he had come up with after leaving Venetia McAlistair's house, he

decided. As Harper's executive assistant, Fenella had inside knowledge and access to his

corporate credit card number. She could

have been the one who hired Radnor to track down

Grady. But judging by the fact that she was now dead, it was pretty clear that she had not

been working alone. And Grady's file indicated that it had been a man who had called the

agency to request the trace.

The ceiling squeaked faintly overhead.

The flood of adrenaline in his veins suddenly became a full-blown tsunami.

Someone else was in the house.

He could make the call to the cops just as easily outside in the safety of the trees as he

could standing here in the middle of the living room, he reminded himself.

He drifted back toward the kitchen door. The winking red light on the answering machine

stopped him.

Had the killer called first to make sure Fenella was home?

He hit star 69.

Somewhere in the deep darkness at the

top of the stairs, a phone rang.

That settled it, whoever was up there was probably the killer, and Ethan was pretty sure he

knew who it was now.

It stopped ringing.

Ethan ran for the back porch. He pushed open the screen door and let it clatter shut, trying

to give the impression of a man rushing away from the house.

But he did not go down the steps. He stayed on the porch, settling into the well

of night next

to the large garbage can.

An eternity of at least three minutes passed.

The stair treads creaked.

Another pause.

Footsteps inside the kitchen. The door opened cautiously.

After a few seconds, a figure exploded out the door.

Ethan had the garbage can ready, partially tipped on its side, balanced on

the bottom rim. He

shoved it straight into the fleeing man's path.

The figure shrieked in surprise and rage and then went down hard, tangling with the spilled

garbage and the heavy can. A gun thudded heavily on the wooden floor of the porch.

Ethan moved, pinning the killer in a pile of food scraps and empty cartons.

"It's over, Drummer," he said.

Al Drummer started to weep. "I loved

her. I did it all for her. But she betrayed me. I had to kill

her, don't you see? I had to do it."

Chapter Thirty-four

Zoe saw him the instant he walked into the lobby. She had been watching for him from her

post near the fire. He had phoned her twice, once just before he talked to the police and

again when he had finished and was in the car driving back to the inn. She had gotten only

the barest outlines of the situation from him on both occasions.

She flew across the room toward him,

heedless of the crew working the front desk, and threw

herself into his arms. He wrapped her close and kissed her hard.

"Are you okay?" she whispered.

"Sure." He tightened his arms around her.

For a moment she clung to him, wanting to stay this close as long as possible. But eventually

it dawned on her that they were in a public place. "The lounge is still open. We can talk in

there."

"I could use a drink."

They sat at a small table overlooking the black-and-silver surface of the moonlit lake. The

lounge was nearly empty. The bartender brought two glasses of brandy. Zoe let Ethan have

one sip before she started in with her questions.

"Al Drummer?" she said. "He was the killer?"

"He had a lot at stake," Ethan said

slowly. "For the past few years, he had been quietly

skimming some of the profits off the top of Harper's business enterprise. Harper wasn't a good

enough businessman to detect the embezzlement and of course he never called for an audit

because he didn't want anyone finding out about his own scam."

"Drummer had the perfect setup. An embezzlement operation that was not likely to ever be

detected by his boss."

"It was damn near perfect until Fenella Leeds came to work for Harper. Evidently she started

sleeping with the boss just to get a handle on possible angles. She figured out the game he

was playing with certain clients real quick."

"Arcadia and I were pretty sure that she was aware of what was going on."

"She realized the potential for embezzlement, dropped Harper, and seduced Al Drummer."

"Only to find out that Drummer already

had a nice little skim operation up and running." Zoe

nodded. "Arcadia and I used to watch the pair of them sneak down to the old boathouse. We

always wondered what Fenella saw in Drummer."

"They made a deal. She offered extensive inside knowledge of Harper's activities and pointed

out ways of upping the take from the embezzlement. They became business partners. At

least, it was all business on Fenella's

side. Drummer, however, fell in love."

"But it all started to come apart when Leon Grady located me and decided to start up his own

little blackmail business, is that it?"

"Yes. Fenella may not have had a degree in psychology, but she was obviously quite shrewd

when it came to judging people. She guessed almost immediately that Grady was up to

something when he told Harper that he was going to try to find you in L.A. She knew he was

chronically short of cash and that he would probably use the corporate card as much as possible."

"So she went straight to Drummer and told him to keep tabs on Grady?" Zoe asked.

"Yeah. According to Drummer, she was sure that Grady had become a loose cannon and that

he threatened the highly profitable operation she and Drummer had going. She decided that he

had to be stopped as soon as possible.

Drummer tracked him as far as Los Angeles, but lost

him there. Then Fenella provided him with Grady's personal credit card information."

"How did she get it? Off Grady's computer?"

"Yes, together with your address."

Zoe shuddered. "So she and Drummer were able to determine that Grady's real destination was

Whispering Springs."

"Yes, but Grady was living on cash at

that point, which meant that they couldn't use his

credit cards to pin down a location in Whispering Springs. So Drummer did the logical thing. He

called up the largest security and investigation firm in Whispering Springs and used Harper's

name and credit card to hire Radnor to do a quick search."

"And Radnor found him."

"Yes. But Fenella also realized that it was just as important to get you back. She had no way

of knowing what you might do and she considered you a potential threat to the embezzlement

scam."

"And besides, I was a high-profit patient," Zoe said bitterly.

"Very true. So she went to Harper and told him that she knew where you were. But she did

not mention that she had also located Grady. Harper sent Ron and Ernie to pick you up.

Fenella and Drummer made their own private plans to take care of Grady."

"Which one of them went to Whispering Springs to kill him?" Zoe asked.

"Fenella or Drummer?"

"Drummer," Ethan said. "I get the impression that Fenella was opposed to the notion of taking

personal risks, if she could avoid it.

Also no one took much notice of Al Drummer. He could call

in sick for a day or two and not raise any eyebrows."

"She convinced Drummer to do the dirty work, is that it?"

"There was a certain logic to the

decision." Ethan took a swallow of brandy and lowered the

glass. "Drummer had been a hunter all of his life. He knew how to handle a gun."

"I see. So Ron, Ernie, and Drummer were all in Whispering Springs on the same day, but the

hulks didn't know about Drummer."

"No. And neither did Harper. Later, with Grady out of the way, Drummer and Fenella hunkered

down here, hoping the whole thing would blow over."

Zoe felt a rush of fierce satisfaction.
"But things didn't blow over because we
got married, Ron

and Ernie got arrested, and you insisted
upon investigating Grady's death."

"The minute she saw us barge through
the door today, Fenella must have known
her problems

were just beginning. She routinely
listened in on the conversations that took
place in Harper's

office. She heard us tell Harper that we
were looking into Grady's murder and
that we figured

the killer was someone who had access to his credit card information."

"She realized we were going to pull it all apart, didn't she?"

"Probably." Ethan turned his glass between his hands. "She had to know that eventually we

would find out that Al Drummer was in Whispering Springs the night of Grady's death. And she

heard us tell Harper that we were going to make sure that the scandal got into the media. So,

after we left, she went home and started

packing."

"And Drummer followed her?"

"Not immediately. He did not know what was going on at that point. According to him, Harper

came to see him after we left and demanded to know if someone had used his corporate

credit card to hire an investigation firm in Whispering Springs. Drummer got the rest of the

story about our visit to the Manor from office gossip. By the time he figured out that there

was a huge problem, Fenella had left for the day. He went by her house to see her."

"That would have been, what? Fifty-three or six?"

"Right," Ethan said. "They quarreled. She told him she was ending their relationship. Drummer

left. He went home, had a few drinks, and worked himself into a fury. Called her on the phone.

She did not pick up. That really maddened him. He got a gun and went back to her house.

Confronted her and shot her."

"Why did he hang around? What was he doing upstairs when you arrived?"

"Before he shot her, she taunted him with the fact that she had recorded a couple of their

conversations, including one in which he told her that he had killed Grady. She told him that if

he gave her any trouble she would turn it over to the cops."

"He was searching for the recording when you arrived?"

"Yeah." Ethan looked out at the black lake. "He had just found it upstairs in a suitcase that

Fenella had not finished packing when he realized that I was in the house."

She closed her eyes against the knowledge of how close Ethan had come to getting killed. "My

God."

Ethan said nothing. When she opened her eyes, she saw that he was still watching the dark

waters of the lake. She could feel him moving deeper into that place inside

himself where he

could be alone and still.

"Ethan?"

"Mmm?" He took another sip of brandy, but he did not take his attention off the lake.

She reached across the table and put her hand on his arm. "Ethan, listen to me. I know what

you're thinking, but you're wrong. You could not have saved Fenella. You are not responsible

for her death, do you hear me?"

He did not say anything for a while.

"If I had gone there first, instead of hitting Venetia McAlistair's cottage..."

"No." She put both hands on his arm and tightened her fingers to get his attention.

"You can't

second-guess yourself like this. You were right to check McAlistair's place first. It was the

logical thing to do. Yes, Fenella is dead, but don't forget that she conspired in the murder of

another person. Grady is dead because of her."

"I know."

She did not like the sound of that. He was agreeing with her, but she could feel him sinking

deeper into the dark place.

She rose, went around the table, and hauled on his arm. He did not seem to notice.

"Ethan. Get up." It was like trying to levitate a large chunk of granite.

He frowned. "What?"

"Let's go."

"Where?"

"Upstairs."

He shrugged, finished his brandy, and got to his feet.

She took him by the hand and led him out of the lounge and up the stairs to their room on the

second floor. Pausing, she took out her key, opened the door, and drew him into the cozy

interior.

She closed the door, turned, and went into his arms.

"Kiss me," she ordered softly.

He did the narrow-eyed thing and finally started to focus on her. She could feel him

resurfacing.

She raised her mouth, twined her arms around his neck, and kissed him with everything that

was in her.

He came back from wherever he had gone with a sudden rush of heat.

"Zoe."

He tumbled her down onto the bed.

* * *

A long time later, he awoke and saw that the pattern of moonlight streaming through the

window had shifted. It now slanted across the bed, silhouetting the graceful curve of Zoe's

hip as she lay curled on her side.

He felt warm again. That came as a surprise. Earlier he had felt himself sinking into the familiar

ice zone. It was a place he had visited

off and on over the course of his life, but he had not

discovered the true depths of the zone until after Drew's death.

Tonight, when he had sat with Zoe looking out over the lake, thinking of how he should have

gone to Fenella Leeds's house first, he had figured he would be in the ice zone for a fairly long

period. He had wondered if Zoe would leave while he was there. He wouldn't have blamed her.

Others had made it clear that he was not

great company when he was off in that other place.

But he hadn't had a chance to go deep tonight. Zoe had dragged him back. He knew himself

well enough to know that the bad time had passed. He would be okay until the next trigger

incident, whatever that might prove to be.

But meanwhile, he had Zoe.

He put his arm around her waist and pulled her close against him.

He slept.

Chapter Thirty-five

"You know what really frosts me about all this?" Zoe said.

"What?" Ethan used his fork to push some of his scrambled eggs onto a slice of rye toast.

He was certainly eating a hearty breakfast this morning, she thought. She took that as a good

sign. Last night she had been worried about him.

They were sitting in the inn dining room. A handful of other tables were also

occupied.

Through the windows she could see a slice of the lake. The water looked like hammered steel

beneath the cloudy sky.

She really hated this place, she thought. She could not wait to leave. But today she and

Ethan were scheduled to give statements to the local police. They would probably not escape

Candle Lake until tomorrow.

"What bothers me is that Ian Harper is

going to walk away from this mess," she said.

Ethan paused in mid-chew and shook his head. "No, he won't. He's going to go down in flames,

financially, at least. His scam will be exposed. The publicity surrounding the murder of Fenella

Leeds will cause his special clients to run for the hills. Lawyers will swarm and some rough

justice will be done."

"You really think so?"

"Trust me."

"I hope you're right."

"Harper will no doubt try to disappear, but I'll keep an eye on him. If he pops up somewhere

else, I'll pull the plug on him."

Her mood lightened somewhat.

"Promise?"

"Promise. He'll never rest easy again. He'll always be looking over his shoulder."

"Okay," she said, satisfied. If there was one thing she was entirely certain of

these days, it

was that Ethan kept his promises. She went back to eating her oatmeal.

* * *

The Candle Lake chief of police was waiting for them in his office the next morning. He

informed them that Ian Harper had vanished. Ethan could see that Zoe was outraged, but he

tried to be philosophical. On the plus side, Harper had not gotten away with any of the funds

in the Candle Lake Manor accounts. Fenella Leeds had arranged to transfer most of the

available Manor assets into her own account shortly before she was murdered. Getting the

money back was going to be a legal nightmare.

"It's not our problem," Ethan told her as they drove away from the small municipal building that

housed the Candle Lake police department.

"There are a lot of folks who will be

staking claims to that cash." Zoe looked a little more

cheerful. "By the time the lawyers are finished, I doubt if there will be a dime left."

"Right."

His phone chirped and he answered. "Truax here."

"Everything okay there?" Singleton asked.

"We're still ass-deep in cops and statements. Anything new there?"

"I'm tying up some loose ends, too,"

Singleton said. "The Merchant made contact again. He

says he's satisfied that he has identified the files that were hacked by Gopher-Boy. Zoe's was

among those that got snatched, but Arcadia's is clean and untouched. It was a full-identity

package and the Merchant stores them in a different, more securely encrypted database on a

different computer. He is anxious to assure all of his clients that he has taken measures to

make certain that this sort of incident does not happen again."

"Measures?"

"He says he used a specially designed virus to destroy the hacker's hard drive." Singleton

cleared his throat. "I got the impression that the hacker won't come out of this in good shape

physically, either. But I didn't want to go there so I didn't ask any more questions. The

bottom line is that I think we can be reasonably sure that Arcadia isn't any

more at risk than

she was before this whole thing started."

"Talked to Stagg?"

"He and Arcadia are on their way back from New Orleans. Got the feeling Harry Stagg wasn't

in a rush to return though. I think he may be enjoying his work."

"Into every life, a little sunshine must fall, I guess."

"Don't think Stagg is a sunshine kind of guy. When are you and Zoe coming home?"

Home. It would have sounded very good if not for the fact that when this was over he was

going to be faced with the end of another marriage. He had gotten through three previous

divorces, he reminded himself. But he had a feeling that this one was going to be harder than

the others. He was not looking forward to it.

"It's getting late," he said. "We'll stay here tonight and leave after breakfast tomorrow. We

should be back in Whispering Springs around three or four tomorrow afternoon."

"See you when you get here," Singleton said and hung up.

"The hacker didn't get Arcadia's file," he said.

"Thank heavens."

"She and Stagg are on their way back from New Orleans."

She nodded and fell quiet for a moment.

"The meeting of the Cleland board is only a few weeks off," she said

eventually.

"Yeah."

"And then we can get our divorce."

"Guess so."

"You'll be free again," she said a little too brightly.

"So will you."

"Probably one of the shortest marriages in history."

"Maybe we'll get into one of the record books," he said.

"I'll be able to pay your full bill in cash in a few months after the merger takes place," Zoe said.

He tightened his hands on the steering wheel. "Our deal was that you would do the design work on Nightwinds."

"Well, yes, but that was back when we weren't sure how this would turn out. I didn't know if

I'd have the money to pay you then. But now it looks like I will."

"I'm satisfied with the original bargain."

She flashed him a quick, searching glance. "You still want me to work on Nightwinds? Why?"

You told me yourself it would be a long time before you could afford a lot of major remodeling."

"I know, but in the meantime, I could at least paint some of the rooms. Maybe pull up some of

that orchid carpeting. I've got to do something. I can't go on much longer surrounded with all

that pink."

She sat back in the seat. "Okay." He relaxed his hands a little on the steering wheel. The

arrangement was a little weird and there was still the divorce to get through. But at least he

would be seeing her on a regular basis for a while.

Something to be said for having your own private interior decorator.

* * *

They got back to Whispering Springs at three-thirty the following afternoon. Ethan parked in

front of Zoe's apartment building, opened the trunk, and removed her suitcase. Another wave

of uncertainty went through her. She had been tense and edgy ever since she had gotten out

of bed this morning and things were not improving.

Ethan's mood was just as prickly. They had both been overly polite in an attempt to avoid

snapping at each other during the trip home.

Now what? she wondered, twisting her

key in the gate lock. She could invite Ethan to join her

for dinner this evening, but she was not so sure that was a swell idea. He had other

obligations. There were Theo and Jeff and Bonnie to consider. Also, he did have a business to

run. He would probably want to check his messages and go through the mail.

He would no doubt appreciate some space, she thought. They had been living very closely

together for the past few days. The man

did have a private life. In spite of what he kept

saying about that damned wedding license, it wasn't as though they were really married. They

were involved in an affair that just happened to have a fancy piece of paper attached to it.

Ethan frowned as they went up the stairs. "You feeling okay? You've been acting strange all day."

"I'm fine."

"You don't look so fine."

"I said I'm okay." She stopped in front of her door and rummaged through her tote for the

heavy key chain. "I'm just a little tired, that's all."

"You're tense."

"I'm not tense," she said evenly.

"I know tense when I see it. You want to tell me what's going on?"

"I'm not the only one who's on edge here. I feel like I'm walking on eggshells around you."

"I'm doing just fine," he said. "You're the one who won't communicate here."

"Don't worry about me." This was ridiculous. They were on the brink of a full-scale quarrel and

there was absolutely no reason for one. "You've probably got things to do."

"Sure." He put the suitcase down with a thud, grasped her arm, and turned her around to face

him before she could unlock the door. "Things to do. Like figuring out where the hell this relationship is going."

That was too much. "Why ask me? How should I know where it's going? I've never been in a

situation like this."

"Neither have I."

"Look, the last thing I want to do is argue with you. Let's talk about this later when we're

both in a better mood."

He braced one hand on the door frame.

"You know what? I think I want to argue about this

right now."

"Well, I certainly don't."

The door opened without warning.
Singleton loomed.

"Better argue about it later," he advised
in low tones. "There's a party going on
in here."

Zoe was so startled she nearly dropped
the heavy key chain on her own foot.

Then she saw the large white banner
draped across her tiny living room.
CONGRATULATIONS

ZOE & ETHAN was spelled out in big
red letters accented with a lot of glitter.
Arcadia, Harry

Stagg, Bonnie, Jeff, and Theo were grouped around the banner. A small pile of packages

wrapped in silver-and-white paper were stacked on an end table.

Ethan frowned at the sign. "What the hell?"

"Surprise, Uncle Ethan," Theo called.

"We got a giant cake," Jeff said proudly. "They put your names on it, too."

"And ice cream," Theo said.

Singleton smiled benignly. "It was all Jeff and Theo's idea."

"It's not my birthday," Zoe said blankly.

"This isn't a birthday party," Arcadia said dryly. "It's a wedding reception."

Chapter Thirty-six

Bonnie sank deeper into the bubbling spa pool and gave Zoe an apologetic look. "Sorry about

catching you by surprise yesterday. Jeff and Theo came home from school bubbling over with

the party concept. Apparently one of their classmates got to be a ring-bearer in a major

production last week, and the kid went on and on about the big reception after the wedding."

"Don't tell me – let me guess," Zoe said. "Jeff and Theo got into the competitive mode, right?"

"Something like that. They concocted the notion of throwing a surprise party for you two.

Unfortunately, they talked to Singleton about their scheme before they brought it to me. By

that time they had Singleton on their side. I was outnumbered."

"Don't worry about it," Zoe said. At some point she had decided to adopt a mature,

philosophical stance toward the whole thing. "They meant well. It was just one of those little

awkward social moments that happen in life."

"Speaking personally," Arcadia murmured from the other side of the simmering spa pool, "I had

a lovely time. Great cake."

Bonnie chuckled. "Chocolate with Zoe's and Ethan's names spelled out in red frosting.

Definitely a culinary statement."

"It was quite dramatic," Zoe said. "Not your usual wedding cake."

Bonnie was amused. "You can say that again."

Zoe leaned back and put her hands out to either side on the underwater bench to brace

herself. The roiling waters felt good. She had not realized just how tense she had been during

the past forty-eight hours.

Arcadia was the one who had suggested that they all meet at her health club that afternoon.

Bonnie had jumped at the invitation and promptly made arrangements to pack her sons off to

Nightwinds with Ethan. Zoe had joined the other two women because she needed the

company of women for a time. Life with the male of the species had become tricky.

The interior of the elegant spa room was a vast, elaborately tiled and delightfully decadent

space. The club was heavily into water features. A variety of small- and medium-sized hot

and cold pools were grouped around a larger one. Waterfalls and fountains splashed in the

corners. Fluffy white towels were stacked in convenient locations.

Women, some nude, some in swimsuits, lounged in the waters. In the alcoves, others

stretched out on padded massage benches, allowing themselves to be pummeled into a blissful

state.

"To be perfectly honest," Bonnie admitted, "I didn't try very hard to shut

down the party

planning."

"It's okay," Zoe tilted her head back. The philosophical thing was working, she thought. "I

know you've been taken with the idea of seeing Ethan married again."

"What I'm taken with is the notion of you and Ethan giving this marriage a chance," Bonnie

said seriously. "I mean, you're already having an affair and you've got the license. Why not

just, you know, let things go along as they are for a while? See what happens?"

"She's got a point," Arcadia said.
"Divorce is expensive, even when no one wants to fight over

the assets. Neither you nor Ethan need a lot of lawyers' bills right now."

"I'll be able to pay for the costs of the divorce when I cash out my shares in Cleland Cage,"

Zoe said quietly. "I certainly don't expect Ethan to have to pay to get out of this situation."

"Ethan will insist on covering his half of the costs," Bonnie said. "I can guarantee it. It will be a

point of honor for him."

"This isn't a matter of honor. It's business."

Bonnie moved her legs under the surface of the water, scissoring them languidly back and

forth. "Maybe Ethan doesn't want to be rescued from the marriage. Have you talked to him

about it?"

"Of course he wants out." In spite of the soothing waters, Zoe could feel the place between

her shoulders tighten. On top of that, she was getting cross. So much for her newfound

philosophical approach to the situation. "Why on earth would he want to be trapped in this

marriage?"

"Because it's very convenient for him?" Arcadia raised her platinum brows.

"After all, you two

are sleeping together, so what's the big

deal with staying married until you're both ready to

split?"

"Believe me, it's a big deal," Zoe retorted.

"Why?" Arcadia asked.

Zoe drew up her knees under the water and wrapped her arms around them. "It just is, that's

all. Marriage is always a big deal."

"I'm not so sure Ethan is looking forward to another divorce," Bonnie said. "When you get right

down to it, he's a little old-fashioned about some things."

"Old-fashioned? Ethan?" Zoe asked in amazement. "The man's been married *four times*."

"Probably just a long run of bad luck," Arcadia said. "Hey, it can happen."

"You're attributing all four marriages to bad luck?" Zoe was starting to feel cornered. "That's a

bit of a stretch, don't you think?"

"I've explained the first three marriages to you," Bonnie reminded her. "And you know the

circumstances surrounding the fourth.
This one is not exactly Ethan's fault."
"What do you

mean?" Zoe shot back. "It was his idea."
Bonnie ignored that. "Speaking as his
concerned

sister-in-law and the one person who
knows him better than anyone else in this
spa, I don't

think it would be good for Ethan to go
through the stress of a fourth divorce.
Not right now,

at any rate."

"Don't worry," Zoe muttered. "Ethan can

handle the stress factor."

"I'm not so sure. He's vulnerable."

"Ethan? Vulnerable?" Zoe made a face.

"Give me a break."

"This is a rough time for him," Bonnie insisted. "Starting up a new business is always difficult.

You know how it is. He's got some serious competition with Radnor to worry about. He has to

establish new contacts in the local police department and on the street. And then there's the

problem of attracting paying clients."

"Hey, just a minute here, I'm a paying client." Zoe broke off. "At least, I will be very soon."

"Maybe, but in the meantime, you have to admit he hasn't seen any profit on this job. In fact,

you've cost him a bundle out of pocket."

"And forcing him to pay his share of the divorce costs will definitely be an added financial

burden that he doesn't need right now," Arcadia said.

"Aaargh." Zoe glared at her companions. "I don't believe I'm hearing this. You

duped me into

coming here today, didn't you? It was a plot. I thought I was going to be able to relax and

instead I get ambushed."

"Take it easy," Arcadia said. "All Bonnie and I are saying is don't rush into anything. Where's

the harm in letting the situation ride for a while?"

"We're talking about marriage here," Zoe said. "This is serious stuff. Maybe not to someone

who has been through it four times, but it certainly is to me."

"Ethan took every single one of his other marriages seriously," Bonnie countered.

"In fact, it's

my guess that you'll have to make the first move to end this one. I doubt if he will."

Zoe swallowed. "Then I'll do it."

Arcadia extended one foot above the bubbles and examined a platinum toenail. "You want out

that badly?"

Zoe hesitated. "I don't want to feel like I'm holding him in a cage."

Bonnie laughed. "If and when Ethan wants out of the cage, you'll know it. Trust me on this."

Zoe gave up. Time to change the subject. She pinned Arcadia with a look. "Enough about me.

Let's talk about you."

"What about me?"

"How was New Orleans?"

Arcadia slowly lowered her foot back into the water. An odd smile curved the

corners of her

full mouth.

"New Orleans was good," she said.

* * *

They sat in the shade of the patio and watched Jeff and Theo bounce a giant, inflated ball

around the pool.

Stagg reclined on the lounge. Singleton occupied a webbed chair. Ethan sat on another chair,

leaning forward a little, forearms resting

on his knees, hands wrapped around a can of soda.

He watched the boys splash exuberantly in the water.

Earlier, he had put out a bowl of chips and pretzels and a cooler filled with iced pop. He knew

Bonnie would not be thrilled with his choice of after-school snacks, but he consoled himself

with the thought that Jeff and Theo were working up a healthy appetite for dinner. He figured

he'd done his duty by reminding both

boys to put on plenty of sunscreen.

"Don't see why you gotta rush this divorce thing." Harry Stagg leaned back in the pink padded

lounger. "Looks to me like the two of you are getting along okay. Besides, divorces cost

money. I got one once a long time ago. I still remember writing the check to pay off the

lawyer. It was painful."

"The man has a point." Singleton leaned a little way out of his chair and helped himself to a

handful of potato chips. "You don't need any extra expenses right now. Got enough as it is.

Start-up phase of a new business is always dicey. You need to conserve your cash."

"It's not the money," Ethan said. "It's more complicated."

"You sure?" Harry was clearly skeptical. "Has Zoe told you that she wants a divorce?"

"Not yet," Ethan admitted. "But I'm sure she'll bring it up after the board meeting."

"You looking forward to a fourth divorce?" Singleton asked around a mouthful of chips.

"No," Ethan stated. "Been there and done that three times. No matter what they tell you, it's

never simple. It's always messy."

"Right." Singleton downed a mouthful of pop. "So why push for it? Like Stagg said, you and

Zoe are okay together right now. When things are no longer okay, you can worry about filing

for a divorce."

"I don't think it's going to be that easy," Ethan said. "Arcadia says Zoe agreed to do up some

new interior designs for this house," Harry remarked.

"Yeah." Ethan ate some chips. "Part of our business arrangement. So what?"

"Well, you sure as hell don't want to go through a divorce while she's working on this place,"

Harry said. "She might get distracted and that could be dangerous." "Dangerous?" Ethan

elevated one brow. "How?" "Stagg's

right," Singleton said, munching. "Wait until Zoe finishes

her design work before you start talking about a divorce. People get emotional in the middle of

a divorce. They become weird and unpredictable."

Ethan contemplated his previous three divorces. No doubt about it, there had been some

weird and unpredictable aspects. And those had been what people liked to call *good* divorces.

"You don't want to jeopardize the

remodeling here," Harry said. "I mean, let's face it, you

gotta do something about all this pink."

"Right. A man can't live with this much pink," Singleton said. "Not for long, at any rate. It's not

healthy."

"You get used to it after a while," Ethan said.

Harry and Singleton swiveled their heads toward each other and exchanged glances through

their dark glasses.

"He's getting accustomed to it," Singleton said ominously.

"Oh, man," Harry exhaled heavily. "Not a good sign. Time is running out. His brain is starting to

rot."

Singleton turned back to Ethan. "Look, forget the pink problem for now. Maybe you're trying to

make this whole situation a lot more complicated than it really is. Let's look at the facts here.

Neither you nor Zoe is looking over the garden fence yet, right?"

"I've been too busy since I got to Whispering Springs to look over any fences. Same for Zoe.

Neither of us have had a chance to develop anything resembling a normal social life. Singleton

turned a can of pop slowly between his palms and looked wise. "Not sure there is any such

thing as a normal social life."

"Huh." Harry was obviously taken with that observation. "You may be right. I sure as hell

never had one." Ethan glanced at him.

"What about New Orleans?" "New Orleans was

different." Harry's wraparound sunglasses made it impossible to read his eyes. "Normal?" Ethan pressed.

"Don't know that you'd call it normal." Harry's mouth twitched a little in what might have been

a smile. "But New Orleans was definitely good."

"Tell you what," Singleton said, "let Zoe bring it up first. That way you'll know if she really

wants a divorce."

"I'll think about it," Ethan said.

But he was not sure he could take the uncertainty. Marriage was a strange phenomenon in his

experience. Sort of like being pregnant. Either you were married or you weren't. He had never

been good with anything that required inhabiting a mushy middle ground.

Chapter Thirty-seven

Zoe stood in the center of the sprawling, lush, pink living room, a grid-printed sketchbook in

hand, and drew a rough floor plan. It was not easy envisioning the space without the

flamboyant furnishings. It was amazing how overpowering the color pink could be in all its

variants and mutations.

The bones of the house were good, though, she thought, mentally stripping

the interiors of

furniture and drapes. The dimensions of the rooms were pleasing and well situated to take

advantage of the natural flow of energy.

Maybe she could even do something about clearing out the bad vibes in the theater. One of

the things that she had discovered during the past six months was that there really was

something to the feng shui and Vastu theories. She could modify the invisible auras of some

rooms by changing the design.

She had the house to herself this evening. Ethan was at a school function with Bonnie, Jeff,

and Theo. She could feel the potential in Nightwinds. Maybe it was because it was the first

time that she had been alone in the residence, the first time that she had not had to worry

about the enormous distraction created by the owner.

It had been a strange feeling letting herself into the big house tonight. In the

legal sense, this

was her home, too. She was Ethan's wife, for a while, at least.

She finished the sketch of the living room and looked up at the painting hanging on the wall

above the mantel. Camelia Foote smiled down, taunting, mocking, and yet somehow tragic.

She had married for money and maybe the bargain had seemed like a good one at the time.

But it had brought her no happiness.

Zoe turned away from the portrait and walked into the formal dining room. Beyond the yards

of rose-colored drapery, she could see the shades of shadows that defined the desert night.

The moon was bright, washing the canyon in silver. The lights of other homes glittered in the

distance like so many bright, sparkling little gemstones tossed carelessly about.

She stood looking at the scene for a long time.

The doorbell chimed, breaking the

trance. She had been so lost in her reverie that she had not

heard the car arrive in the drive.

She went quickly toward the door, wondering if the school function had ended early.

But when she peered through the small glass peephole she saw Kimberley Cleland.

Damn. She did not need this. She was tempted not to answer the door, but her car was

parked in the drive. Kimberley would know that someone was home.

Reluctantly, Zoe opened the door. "What are you doing here?"

"Sara." Kimberley smiled tremulously. She was dressed in black trousers trimmed with a black

silk shirt. Her pale blond hair was pulled into a ponytail. An expensive-looking bag made of

soft, pliable black leather was slung over one shoulder. "May I come in? I need to talk to you."

"The name is Zoe and if you've come to offer another bribe to Ethan, you'll have to return

some other time. He's not here."

Kimberley shook her head. Her eyes darkened with some strong emotion that might have been

pain. "You're the one I want to talk to."

"How did you find me?"

"I went to your apartment first. When you weren't there, I knew you would probably be here."

"Where is Forrest?"

"Home. He doesn't know I'm in Whispering Springs. I left a message telling him that I went to

visit my mother for a few days."

"If you've come to plead with me not to vote in favor of the merger, you can save your

energy."

"Yes, I've come here to plead with you." Kimberley's voice was cracking at the edges. Tears

glistened in her eyes. "I'll get down on my knees, if that's what you want. Please, listen to

me, that's all I ask. There is so much at stake."

Kimberley was one of the many family members who had refused to talk to her at the wake of

Preston's death, Zoe reflected. She had stood by her husband and the rest of the Clelands

while Zoe was committed to Candle Lake Manor. *I owe her nothing. Not one single, damn thing.*

But just as she was about to slam the door in Kimberley's face, Ethan's words came back to

her. When in doubt, stir the pot and see

what bubbles to the surface.

Kimberley just might be the one person who could break Forrest Cleland's alibi. What did she

have to lose by talking to her? Zoe thought. If Kimberley was desperate, it was possible that

she might forget herself and say too much if pressed hard enough. Maybe she would drop

some small clue that would provide an opening to find proof of Forrest's guilt.

"All right." Zoe stood back. "Come in."

"Thank you." Relieved, Kimberley stepped quickly into the large hall. She stopped and looked

around with an air of surprise and gathering distaste. "How... unusual."

"The original owner did it for his wife. She liked pink."

"I can see that."

"The living room is this way." Zoe led her into the front room and waved Kimberley toward the

sofa. "Have a seat."

She took the chair on the other side of

the pink marble coffee table. Damned if she would

offer coffee or tea, she decided. Not unless Kimberley really started to get chatty and

informative.

Kimberley sat down somewhat gingerly. She put her black purse on the sofa beside her and

examined Zoe with a tiny frown.

"You look... very well," she said, breaking the small silence.

"For a crazy woman, do you mean?" Zoe

gave her a bright, brittle smile. "Oh, hey, I'm in great

shape. Been working out and eating right. But you know what, Kimberley? I barely survived

Candle Lake Manor. I blame all of the Clelands for putting me in there, of course, but most of

all I blame Forrest."

Kimberley's face was drawn and tight. "I swear, he only did what he thought was best for you.

You were so very ill."

"Please do not add insult to injury by lying to me. We both know why I wound up in there.

Forrest paid Ian Harper a lot of money to keep me out of the way."

Kimberley laced her fingers very tightly together. "I understand your anger and resentment,

but what else could we do? You weren't yourself in the weeks and months following Preston's

death. And after you made that last visit to the cabin, you seemed to take a turn for the

worse. All those accusations against Forrest. What happened to you that day when you went

back there? What was it that put you into such a state?"

"I thought you came here to talk to me about my shares of Cleland Cage."

"I'm sorry." Kimberley twisted her hands. "It's just that I've always wondered why you lost it

the way you did after that second visit to that cabin. Claiming to hear voices in the walls. It

was frightening, if you must know."

"In point of fact, I never claimed to hear voices in the walls."

"You said something about hearing an argument."

"No, I did not. I said I sensed rage. I didn't have to hear voices in the walls to know that

whoever murdered Preston had been crazy with it. It was pretty obvious, Kimberley. The

smashed flowers and the broken camera. All of it was evidence of a *really* sick mind."

"The police said that whoever killed

Preston was probably furious because there was so little

money in his wallet. That would be logical in a terrible kind of way."

Kimberley tightened her

fingers. "But it wouldn't mean the killer was crazy."

"This one was definitely nuts."

"How can you be sure?"

"Maybe it takes one to know one," Zoe replied.

Kimberley stared at her, shocked. "You admit that you're not well?"

"Let's get back to why you came here to see me tonight. I'm especially interested in the fact

that you didn't tell Forrest about this visit."

"He would not have let me come here," Kimberley whispered. "He'll be very angry if he finds

out what I've done."

"What, exactly, are you going to do?"

Kimberley got to her feet, hands still clenched. She bowed her head. "I'm here because I can't

stand the guilt any longer. Please forgive me, Zoe."

Zoe went very still. Then she rose cautiously from the chair. It was suddenly very hard to breathe.

"What guilt?" she whispered. "What are you talking about?"

"I've tried so hard not to think about this, but I can't pretend any longer." Kimberley raised her

head. She looked as if she was drowning in her unshed tears. "You're right. I'm afraid that

Forrest may have... that he might have shot Preston."

"Dear God."

"But not because of the shares." "What other reason could there possibly be?" "I think he may

have discovered that I was – "

Kimberley paused to wipe her eyes with the back of her hand.

"This is so hard."

Zoe went around behind the high, gilded chair and gripped the back very tightly.

"What are

you trying to say?"

"I'm so desperately sorry, but the truth is that I had an affair with Preston."

Kimberley was

sobbing full out now. She reached down, opened her bag, and took out a handful of tissues to

blot her tears. "And I think Forrest got suspicious and that he went to the cabin that day

and... and shot him."

* * *

Ethan's phone rang just as he bent over

to examine the robot Jeff was demonstrating.

"It picks up this little stick," Jeff explained proudly. He pushed a button to set the robot in

motion. "Watch this."

The robot whirred into jerky action. Ethan watched it clutch the small strip of wood while he

fished his phone out of his pocket.

"Excellent," he said to Jeff. "Most excellent."

Jeff beamed.

"Let me get this," Ethan said, indicating the phone. "I'll be right back."

"Okay."

"Truax," he said into the phone, working his way cautiously through the maze of low tables

that had been set up in the classroom.

"This is Singleton. I've got – "

The high-pitched voices of some twenty youngsters excitedly explaining their science projects

to their parents created a background din that made it impossible to catch what

Singleton

said.

"Hang on until I get outside," Ethan said.

Bonnie, standing on the other side of the room, talking to Jeff's teacher, saw him and gave

him an inquiring look.

He let her see the phone in his palm. She nodded and went back to her conversation.

Ethan went past a demonstration of capillary action, which featured purple-and-orange tinted

water and some drooping stalks of celery, and a handmade replica of the solar system.

"Okay," he said, stepping out of the room into the balmy night. "What's up?"

"I don't know if this is important or not," Singleton said. "But you told me to let you know if

any of the Clelands made any moves. I've been monitoring their online activities to see if

anyone bought any tickets."

"Forrest?"

"No. His wife. She got on a flight to Phoenix this afternoon. I didn't pick up the red flag until I

checked my computer a few minutes ago."

Ethan went cold. With a slamming jolt of deep certainty, all the pieces of the puzzle came

together.

"Well, shit," he said very softly. "I should have seen it coming."

"Mama, Mama, that man said the bad word," a high-pitched voice declared in ringing accents.

"I heard him."

Ethan looked down and saw a person of very small stature staring up at him. The short

person's mother was frowning.

"You're in trouble," the small person announced.

"You can say that again," Ethan said.

He ran for the parking lot.

Chapter Thirty-eight

An unseen ice storm swirled through the big house. It gave no outward indication of its

presence. No papers fluttered in the draft. The drapes did not billow. The chandelier in the hall

did not tremble beneath the driving sleet. But Zoe could feel the heavy, chilling sigh as it

passed through her, whispering along her bones.

"You're telling me that Forrest killed

Preston because of you," Zoe repeated very evenly.

"Yes. This has all been such a nightmare for so long. I can't stand it anymore. I can't sleep. I

can't eat. I'm living on pills. I'm terrified of my own husband because of what he did and what

he might do. It has to end. Don't you understand?"

"Oh, yes, Kimberley. I understand all of it now."

Kimberley pulled herself together with a visible effort. "The truth has to come out,

or I'm afraid

that I'll be the one who will end up in
Candle Lake Manor."

"I called it Xanadu." Zoe released her
death grip on the back of the chair and
moved back a

step toward the arched opening of the
central hall. "It was an unreal place in
some ways, you

see? A place of sunless seas and caves
of ice, just like in the Coleridge poem.
There were so

many nights when I lay there in bed
looking out at the lake thinking that this

couldn't be

happening to me, that I was living in a nightmare."

"Yes." Kimberley raised her tear-smudged face. "Living in a nightmare. That's what it feels like."

I should never have gotten involved with Preston. But he wanted me so much and I was so

unhappy with Forrest."

"Really? How strange." Zoe took another pace back. "Say, I've got an idea. Would you like a

tour of this house? It has a fascinating history. Maybe even what some people would call a ghost."

"A ghost?" Kimberley was confused now. Anger sparked in her eyes. "Come back here. I don't

want a tour of this damned house. I'm trying to explain how it was between Preston and me."

"But I don't care anymore how it was between you and Preston." She was at the arched

opening. She turned and walked away

down the long, grand hall. "That's one of the things I

learned during my stay in the Manor, you know. Not to care. It's better when you don't care.

That way there's no pain. No sense of loss."

"Don't walk away from me."

Zoe kept going.

Kimberley followed. Zoe looked back and saw that she had retrieved her black bag.

"You know, Kimberley, if you really are

going crazy, you might want to consider checking into

Candle Lake yourself. I'm sure for certain types of people, it would be a lovely place for a

vacation. You can have all the pills you want."

"I have to tell you about Preston." Kimberley hurried after her, clutching the purse. "I know

this comes as a shock to you. But the truth is we had been seeing each other in secret for

some time. Preston begged me to leave

Forrest. But how could I do that?"

"Really, Kimberley, you're not being at all logical here. Why would it have been so difficult to

leave Forrest if you no longer loved him?"

"Oh, please, Sara – "

"Zoe. I really must insist that you call me by my new name. I left the old name behind at the

Manor." Zoe laughed, a high, sharp, edgy sound that echoed eerily in the long hall.

"Yes,

indeed, that place made a new woman of me."

"I couldn't possibly walk away from my life with Forrest just to marry a man who teaches art

history, could I?" Kimberley's voice rose. "I had everything I wanted. I couldn't turn my back

on it all."

"How sad. Now you'll never know what you missed, will you? You're doomed to live out your

perfect life with Forrest." Zoe started to hum.

"Stop it. You're acting crazy."

"Probably because I am crazy. Just ask
any of the folks back at the Manor.
They'll tell you

how crazy I am."

"You have to listen to me."

"One of the great benefits of having been
declared insane is that I no longer have
to listen to

anyone unless I really, really want to
listen and I don't think I want to listen to
you,

Kimberley. Now, then, where was I?

Oh, yes, I was giving you a tour of this magnificent

residence. A man named Abner Bennett Foote built it for his wife. That's her over the mantel

in the living room. Did you happen to notice? She was lovely and, I think, just a little bit

crazy, too. She married Foote for his money, you see. Don't you think that's a crazy thing to

do?"

"I don't want to hear anything about her. I don't care about a dead woman. I want

you to

know about Preston. How he cheated on you with me."

"Then again, maybe you don't think it's crazy to marry for money. After all, that's what you

did, isn't it?" Zoe stopped in front of the pair of elaborately worked theater doors. She winked

at Kimberley. "Wait until you see this room."

She flung open both doors, took a deep breath, braced herself, and stepped into the darkened

theater.

The whispers of old pain and rage that still clung to the walls stirred the small hairs on the

nape of her neck. She forced herself to take three more steps into the room and flipped one

of the light switches at random.

She stepped through the heavy, velvet curtains into the seating section.

Kimberley trailed after her, fumbling her way through the hangings. When she emerged on the

other side, her face was a mask of anger.

Somewhere in the distance a phone rang.

"You can't face the fact that Preston loved me, can you?" Kimberley said in a low, fierce tone.

"Me, not you. He wanted me."

"She died in here, you know." Zoe leaned back against one of the seats in the last row and

stretched her arms out to the sides. "This is where he murdered her."

"Murdered who?" Kimberley peered around the shadowy theater. "What are

you talking about?"

"Camelia Foote. They all thought she died in a drunken fall in the canyon, but that's not what

happened. She died in this very room. I know that because I can sense the killer's rage. It's

still locked in the walls." She looked up. "And in the ceiling and floor, too, I suppose. Still so

strong, even after all these years."

"You're lying. You can't feel anything. You're making it all up as you go along."

"I wish that was true." Zoe pushed herself away from the row of seats and strolled slowly

toward the marble bar in the corner.

"But the unfortunate fact is that I really do feel things

sometimes. And what I'm picking up in this room is very similar to what I picked up at the

cabin after Preston was killed. A sick, uncontrolled rage. I went back the second time a few

months later just to make sure."

Kimberley watched her nervously. "You

really are crazy, aren't you?"

"Maybe." She grasped the edge of the velvet curtains that hung next to the bar and pulled it

aside. "Maybe not. But I'm pretty sure they met here around midnight."

Kimberley scowled, trying to follow the shifting currents of the conversation.

"Who met here?"

"Camelia and her lover, Jeremy Hill. They had both been drinking heavily all evening. Flirting

madly. Maybe they had made love in the gardens earlier. At any rate, Hill was

desperate.

Probably begged her to leave her rich husband. But Camelia refused."

"You don't know any of this. You're just telling a story. One that I don't want to hear."

"Are you sure you can't hear it in the walls?" Zoe went behind the high, polished marble bar

and folded her elbows on the cold stone.
"Listen closely, Kimberley. Maybe if you try real hard,

you can feel some of what Camelia felt that night because the two of you had

something in

common."

"I have nothing in common with that woman. Stop it, right now."

"You both married for money. You both got everything you thought you wanted in life. Wealth.

Social connections. A spectacular home."

"I don't want to hear another word about that old murder."

"Both of you told yourselves that you had everything you desired, but that

wasn't true. You

each tried to have your cake and eat it, too. You wanted love and passion, but you did not

want to risk your cozy little financial setups to get them. So you and Camelia went looking for

love on the side."

"That's not true."

"Neither of you found the real thing. Oh, sure, Camelia managed to find a man who could give

her something that looked like passion,

but he became obsessed and in the end he killed her."

"Shut up." Kimberley sounded calmer now. She reached into her purse. But this time she did

not take out some tissues. When her hand reappeared there was a small, silvery gun in it.

"Just shut up, do you understand?"

Zoe's mouth went dry. She hoped the heavy marble bar was thick enough to stop a bullet

because it was all that stood between her and Kimberley.

"What sent you over the edge, Kimberley?" she asked in a conversational tone. "Was it seeing

how happy Preston and I were together? You wanted to be happy too, didn't you?"

"I deserve to be happy."

"You've been reading too many self-help books, I'm afraid. But getting back to your little

story, I assume that you tried to convince Preston to have an affair with you. Naturally he

turned you down. Gently, of course. He

was a very gentle man."

"He did not turn me down." Kimberley kept the gun trained very steadily on Zoe. "He loved me.

We had an affair."

"No, he did not love you, and you did not have an affair."

"You can't be sure of that."

"I am sure of it. Very sure. Preston would never have betrayed me."

"That's what you want to believe."

"I know it deep inside. I have no doubt,

however, that you threw yourself at him.
But when he

refused to get involved, you became
desperate, didn't you? You followed him
to the cabin

that day and tried one last time to
convince him to have an affair with you.
But he turned you

down again. And you couldn't stand it."

Something crumpled in Kimberley's
face. "He wouldn't listen to me. I tried to
tell him how much

I loved him, and he wouldn't listen."

"Of course not. Because he loved me.
And you couldn't stand that, could you? I
was the little

nobody from nowhere. No family, no
social background. No money. Yet
Preston loved me, not
you."

"It should have been *me*. All those
flowers he bought, they should have
been for *me*. He

should have picked out a special gift for
me, not you."

"This is all about you, isn't it?"

"I tried to tell him, but he refused to listen. He actually told me to go away. *Me*. I loved him

and he told me to go away."

"And you did go away, didn't you? But you returned later."

"I left the car at the side of the road and walked back through the woods to the cabin and I

waited. After a while, Preston came out onto the back porch to get some firewood. I had the

gun."

"When he turned to carry the wood into the cabin, you shot him in the back. And then you

put another bullet in his head, just to be sure."

"He needed to die."

"Because he had rejected you."

"Yes. *Yes.*"

"After you killed Preston, you went into the cabin and tore it apart. It was your insane rage I

felt in those walls, not Forrest's."

"Don't you dare call me insane."

"Camelia's lover went over the edge, too." Zoe touched one of the heavy candlesticks. "Lost it

big time. He must have been as obsessed as you were, Kimberley."

"*I was not obsessed.* Only crazy people are obsessed."

"I can't hear you because I'm listening to the silent screams of rage in these walls. Surely you

can pick up some of the energy? They say crazy people can do that."

"I don't hear anything. I'm not like you."

"After that last quarrel, I think Jeremy Hill picked up the nearest heavy object." Zoe closed a

hand around each candlestick and hefted them experimentally. They were not much heavier

than her tote when it was fully loaded.

Kimberley seemed irritated by the candlesticks. "Put those down."

"Camelia turned to walk away and that's when he struck her. From behind. The same way you

attacked Preston."

"Preston deserved it, I tell you."

"Got news for you, Kimberley, only crazy people talk like that."

Zoe heaved the candlestick she held in her right hand across the top of the bar, putting

everything she had into it.

Kimberley shrieked and jerked back reflexively, scrambling to avoid the long metal object

hurtling toward her.

The gun roared.

Zoe ducked behind the bar, clutching the second candlestick. The heavy marble shuddered

under the impact of the bullets.

Kimberley fired again.

Zoe moved. Keeping her head beneath the level of the top of the stone counter, she ran for

the curtains that veiled the bartender's entrance.

She plunged through the thick hangings into the tiny lobby and raced out into the

hall.

Behind her, she heard Kimberley running toward the entrance.

She whirled and tugged frantically on the heavy, gilded doors. Kimberley burst through the

curtain, stark madness in her eyes. The doors swung ponderously closed a split second before

she reached them.

Heart pounding, Zoe angled the second long candlestick through both elaborately curved

handles, effectively barring Kimberley inside the theater.

Half a second later, the heavy doors trembled. In her fury, Kimberley had thrown herself

against them.

Zoe fled down the hall.

She rounded the corner into the living room and collided with Ethan.

"What the hell?" He grabbed her arms.
"Are you okay?"

Muffled shots thundered at the other end of the hall.

"Kimberley," Zoe gasped. "I locked her inside the theater. She's got a gun. But I don't think

she can get out."

Ethan eased her aside and went to the arched opening.

He looked cautiously around the corner. Another shot boomed.

"Oh, man," Ethan said. "She sounds really pissed."

"Actually, she's really crazy."

Chapter Thirty-nine

They gathered in Ethan's office the following morning. It was a large crowd, including as it did

Zoe, Arcadia, Bonnie, Singleton, and Harry Stagg. Ethan went across the street to the small

cafe and bought six cups of coffee. What was one more item under miscellaneous expenses?

"I was wrong about Forrest all along," Zoe said soberly.

Ethan frowned. He had been worried

about her today. She had come through the dangerous

events last night with flying colors, but this morning she was definitely looking depressed. Now

he finally understood why.

"Don't blame yourself for picking the wrong bad guy." He sat forward at his desk. "You were

right about the fact that Preston was murdered by someone who knew him. The police should

have looked deeper than they did."

"For two years I blamed Forrest, though. No wonder he thought I was a real nutcase. Preston

didn't change his will because he thought Forrest was dangerous in the physical sense. He

was just afraid that his cousin wouldn't do what was best for the company."

Arcadia, seated on the window ledge, swung one foot in an absent motion.

"Ethan is right,

you can't blame yourself for thinking that Forrest was the killer. It was a perfectly logical

assumption under the circumstances."

"I agree," Bonnie said forcefully.

"Logical enough that the cops should have probed the alibies

of everyone connected to Preston Cleland much more thoroughly than they did."

"If they had done their job," Singleton said, "they would have turned up the interesting fact

that the one person who did not have a good alibi for the day of the murder was Kimberley

Cleland."

"No one even considered her, least of all me," Zoe said. "Because there was no obvious

motive," Arcadia pointed out. "After all, you knew that Preston was not involved with anyone

else, so why would you even consider the possibility that a woman might have murdered him?"

"When you come right down to it," Stagg said, examining the cafe logo on his plastic cup as if

it contained the key to a great secret, "Forrest has a lot to answer for, even if he didn't pull

the trigger."

"Damn right, he does," Ethan said. "If he'd mentioned his theory that Preston was having an

affair, the investigation would no doubt have gone in a different direction. One that could

have led straight to Kimberley."

Zoe wrapped both hands around her cup and studied the contents. "That brings up another

question. If he suspected that his wife was having an affair with his cousin, why did he look

the other way? I can't see Forrest putting up with a cheating spouse."

"Maybe he loved her too much to face the truth," Bonnie suggested.

"Forrest Cleland?" Zoe gave a ladylike snort. "Passionately in love with anything except Cleland

Cage? Get real."

"You know what?" Ethan said softly, "The question of why he chose to ignore the possibility

that Kimberley was having an affair with Preston, or anyone else, is a good one." He looked at

Zoe. "What do you say we ask him?"

* * *

Forrest met them in the lobby of Las Estrellas resort. He looked weary and grim when he sat

down across from them in a quiet section of the spacious room.

"I hope this isn't going to take long," he said, glancing at the face of his titanium watch. "I

just got back from a long session with the police and in a few minutes I have to call the

lawyer I hired for Kim."

"Gee," Ethan said. "We sure do apologize for wasting your valuable time. After all, it's not like

we've got any right to a few answers. Your wife did try to murder mine last night, but what

the heck, not like we're talking about anything *serious* here."

"Save the sarcasm, Truax. What do you two want?"

Zoe looked at him. "We want to know why you chose to look the other way if you thought Kim

was having an affair."

Forrest clearly looked startled. "But I never thought Kim was having an affair with Preston or

anyone else. And, in point of fact, she wasn't."

"No, but she was obsessed with Preston," Ethan said.

"Apparently." Forrest rubbed his temples. "But I was unaware of that. I had my hands full with

the negotiations for a new acquisition at the time. I wasn't spending much time at home."

"So how did you arrive at the conclusion that Preston was involved with someone?" Ethan asked.

Forrest paused, evidently searching his memory. Then he shrugged. "Kim mentioned it in

passing one day shortly before Preston was – " He stopped and came at it again. "Shortly

before she killed him. She just said it very casually. Like it was gossip she had picked up at

the country club. I don't know why she

would do that if it wasn't true."

"Maybe you weren't paying attention,"
Ethan suggested softly.

Anger flared in Forrest's face. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

Zoe shook her head. "Maybe
unconsciously Kim dropped some clues
hoping that you would

pick them up."

"Why would she want me to think she
was involved with Preston?" Forrest
demanded. "She

must have known that if I believed

anything of the kind, I would have filed for divorce on the spot."

"I'm sure she did know that," Zoe said quietly. "Which is very likely why she just hinted

carefully around the edges. She was crazy, but she wasn't stupid. A part of her was still sane

enough not to want to jeopardize her cushy position as your trophy wife."

"I still don't get it," Forrest said. "Why hint at all?"

"Don't you see?" Zoe asked. "If you believed that Preston was having an affair with someone,

anyone, it would have made her private little fantasy that much more real to her."

There was a short silence while Forrest absorbed that.

"Hadn't thought of it that way," he said at last. "When she mentioned the possibility that

Preston was seeing someone on the side, the only thing that occurred to me was that you – "

"Had a motive for murder," Zoe

concluded.

"I'm sorry," Forrest said evenly. "But I could see what the two of you meant to each other. I

was afraid that if you had found out that Preston was cheating on you, you might have gone

a little crazy."

"But you never mentioned that possibility to the cops," she said.

"No," he said.

"Because you knew that I could still control my shares from prison?"

Forrest flattened his hands on his thighs.
"I know you won't believe this, but I
honestly

thought that you would be better off at
the hospital. Harper said he was sure he
could help

you."

Zoe took some deep breaths. "I will
never forgive you for that. Do you have
any idea of what

it was like there? Harper did not even
allow visits from the patients' friends
because he said it

interfered with the course of therapy.

Not that anyone outside the Cleland family even knew

where I was, thanks to you. Everyone I ever knew vanished from my life."

His jaw tensed. "Maybe if I had been paying more attention to what was going on at home, I

would have realized that Kim was the crazy woman, not you. Perhaps I could have stopped

her before she went too far."

Zoe did not know how to respond to that so she kept silent. Ethan did not move in his chair,

but she could feel him analyzing the currents that flowed both above and beneath the surface.

"Things have not been going well between Kim and me for the past few months," Forrest said

eventually. "She's been drinking a lot. There was a scene at the club a few weeks ago. She

flew into a rage with no warning. I was planning to talk to my lawyer about a divorce, but I

had decided to put it off until after the

board meeting. I knew it was going to cost me a

bundle to get rid of her, and I needed time to work out a strategy. Looks like things will be

even messier now."

"Probably," Ethan said without any trace of detectable sympathy.

There was another heavy pause.

After a while, Zoe reached into her crimson, tote and pulled out an envelope. She gave it to

Forrest.

He accepted it with a frown. "What is this?"

"A proxy made out to you so that you can vote my shares at the annual board meeting. I

know you'll do what's best for the company."

His hand clenched around the envelope. "You know I'm going to reject the merger."

"I know."

"That means I won't have the cash to buy you out for another two years, at least. Maybe

longer."

"I sort of figured that. Luckily I've got a day job." Zoe got to her feet and hitched her tote

over her shoulder. "Shall we go, Ethan?"

"Sure." He rose from the chair and took her arm.

Together they walked out of the lobby and into the warm, bright glare of the desert sun. In

the distance, the mountains raked the endless blue sky.

Ethan opened the door of the car for her.

"What made you decide to do that?"

"Give him the proxy?" She slipped into the passenger seat. "The Clelands aren't a nice family

but they *are* a family. That company belongs to them. More than that, it's what holds them

together as a clan. Now that I know that Forrest didn't kill Preston, I don't have any reason to

destroy them."

"Even though they treated you like a second-class Cleland?"

For some peculiar reason, she felt lighter and happier than she had in a long, long time. She

smiled up at him, blinking a little against the dazzling light.

"I'm not any kind of Cleland now," she said.

"Damn right," he said. "You're a Truax."

He closed the door.

Chapter Forty

Three days later, on a warm, scented night, they went out onto the pool terrace after dinner

and reclined on two of the padded loungers.

Zoe braced herself as she did every time things got quiet between them, wondering if this

would be the moment when the subject of the impending divorce came up.

"How did you know that Jeremy Hill killed Camelia Foote in the theater?"

Ethan asked.

The question startled her. It wasn't the one she had been expecting.

"I was just guessing," she said carefully.
"Making up a story to lure Kimberley into confessing.

Did Hill kill Camelia there?"

"I think so. I finished Foote's diary, and I put together some information I found in some

letters that were written by people who were guests here that night. I also got lucky and

turned up some personal notes written by the chief of police who investigated Camelia's

death."

"What did you discover?"

"Jeremy and Camelia were seen going into the theater sometime around midnight by at least

two different people. No one remembered seeing Camelia again after that although Hill was

very much in evidence. The chief considered all of the guests' statements extremely shaky

because everyone was drunk. But he also talked to the members of the household staff.

Remember I told you that one of them noticed Hill returning to the house from the direction of

the gardens just before dawn?"

"Hill went outside the second time to dispose of the body in the canyon?"

"Probably. I think that after the quarrel in the theater, Hill hid Camelia's body behind the bar

and locked the theater using her keys. He went to bed late, along with everyone

else. When

the household finally seemed quiet, he went back downstairs, unlocked the theater, and

carried Camelia outside to the canyon. Probably cleaned up whatever blood there was, too.

He would have found water and sponges and towels in the bar. Could have packed the soiled

stuff in his suitcase."

"It was a risk," Zoe said. "What if he had been seen with the body?"

"He could have wrapped her in his jacket and carried her in his arms as if she had passed out

drunk. I doubt that anyone would have looked twice. It was probably common knowledge that

they were having an affair."

Zoe thought about it. "It fits."

"I'm satisfied with it."

"Going to publish the case at that Web site you told me about?"

"Not as long as I'm living here," he said dryly. "I sure as hell don't want curiosity

seekers

knocking on my front door asking to see the murder scene."

"I can understand that."

Ethan folded his arms behind his head.
"You didn't answer my question. How did you know that

Hill killed her in the theater?"

"I told you, it was just a story I was spinning for Kimberley. I wanted to rattle her a bit, make

her incriminate herself."

"Try again," Ethan said.

She had known that, sooner or later, this moment would arrive, she thought. But she had

hoped it would be later. She looked out into the moonlit night and thought wistfully about

what might have been.

"You'll think I really am crazy if I tell you the truth," she said quietly.

"So, it's true? You do sense things in rooms?"

"Sometimes."

"I was afraid of that." But he sounded resigned to the inevitable. Not angry or disbelieving.

She waited for the other shoe to drop.

The silence deepened.

"Intuition," Ethan said.

"I'm weird, Ethan."

"The older I get, the more I realize that everyone is a little weird in some way." He shifted on

the lounge. "So, have you got a plan for rescuing me from all this pink?"

She turned her head on the padded
lounger and looked at him. But it was
impossible to read

his expression in the warm darkness.

"I'm working on one," she said
cautiously. "Not all pink is bad, you
know."

"I have it on good authority that
prolonged exposure to it can rot a guy's
brain."

"Only if the brain in question is very
weak to begin with. Yours is not."

"You're sure about that?"

"Positive."

"Good to know that." Ethan paused.

"How long do you think it will take?"

"To draw up all the plans and select all of the furnishings? Months, probably."

"Maybe by then I'll have enough cash to pay for some of the remodeling and some new

furniture. If nothing else, I can at least paint the place."

"Bonnie mentioned that you got a new client today," she said.

"Insurance job. They want me to verify

some facts concerning a suspicious claim. Strictly

routine, but it's the kind of bread and butter business that keeps a small agency going."

"I like the sound of the word *routine*. We've all had enough excitement lately."

"Uh-huh."

Zoe waited, but Ethan did not offer anything more.

"So," she said. And stopped.

"So, what?"

She gathered her nerve. "About our divorce."

"It occurs to me that neither of us can afford one right now."

She held her breath. "Are you suggesting we stay married until we can afford to get

divorced?"

"It isn't just the money," Ethan said. "I gotta tell you I'm not looking forward to becoming a

four-time loser. No one looks kindly upon guys who have been married and divorced four times.

We appear shallow to the untrained eye."

"And then there's the problem of replacing the bed," she offered.

"Don't remind me. I don't even want to think about having to buy a new bed right now. You

know how much they cost?"

"Sure. I'm an interior designer, remember? I can tell you exactly how much a new bed costs.

What you're saying is that we should stay married partly because of the financial aspects and

partly because you don't want to deal with another failed marriage."

"There's also the fact that we're sleeping together," Ethan said softly. "Looks to me like things

are working pretty good in some areas right now. Why fix it if it ain't broke?"

She pondered that. It was, she realized, the first time in a long while that she had dared to

think about her own future. Hope and possibilities, tantalizing and bright, glittered at the edge

of her vision. If she stretched out her

hands, she might be able to touch them.

"Those are all sound, sensible reasons for staying married," she said, trying to keep her voice

very even.

"I thought so."

The desert night settled around them like dark silk.

She got up from the lounge, took the small step that separated them, and slowly lowered

herself until she was lying on top of him, her legs tangled with his.

He framed her face with his hands. "Ah, Zoe."

"It wouldn't be easy, you know," she said, wanting to get it all out into the open. "We would

be wise to take it very slowly. Keep our own homes for a while. Give each other some space.

Get to know each other before we try living together."

"Sure." He traced her cheekbones with the edge of his fingers. "Nice and slow."

She felt his body responding to hers, and she caught her breath. "We'll have to

make up some

of the rules as we go along. You're not the only one who's bringing a lot of heavy baggage to

this marriage. I'm a genuine escapee from Xanadu, remember? It's true I was there for all the

wrong reasons, but there's no getting around the fact that I've never been what most folks

would call normal."

"Neither have I."

"I'm probably going to continue having

some of my bad dreams, and I'm not going to stop

sensing things in walls."

He touched the edges of her mouth. "I've got a few bad habits of my own. Been known to be

moody at times. Bonnie says I'm complicated."

"So am I."

"And you're a decorator."

She smiled ruefully. "We all know your opinion of interior *designers*."

"I agree it won't be easy and that we'll have to invent some of the rules." He brought her

mouth very close to his.

"But maybe that's a good thing in our case. What do you say?"

Hope and possibilities glittered.

"I say yes."