

***STEPHANIE
JAMES
Renaissance
Man***

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Romance

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In the end, Alina Corey decided with
acute self-disgust, she had made it easy
for him. She had surrendered her small
fortress without a battle, handed over the
keys of the villa, unsuspectingly
welcomed the enemy inside the castle

walls. In other words, she opened the door of her condominium one cool spring night in Santa Barbara, California, and

found Jared Troy standing on the doorstep.

She didn't recognize him, of course. How could she? They had never met except through an exchange of fiery

letters begun after Troy had published an article in an obscure little Renaissance studies journal. The battle had been

initiated in the letters-to-the-editor column. But when neither had proved sufficiently tolerant to await succeeding

issues of the journal in order to wage the newest skirmish, the letters had become direct and even more impassioned.

But they had never set eyes on each other. So Alina smiled up at the intent, dark-haired man on the step and wondered

vaguely why she felt she knew him even as she realized she'd never seen him before in her life.

„Good evening,“ she said with a charm she later rued. „You must be Brad Dixon's friend. Won't you come in? You'

re a little late, but that's all right There's

plenty of food left and the party's just getting into full swing.“

For a long, silent second Alina had the sensation of being pinned like a butterfly beneath a pair of nearly green

eyes which seemed to flicker with an assessing hunger. The unexpected forcefulness of the man's raking glance sent a

faint shiver down Alina's spine. What was the matter with her? she wondered irritably. She was accustomed to the

passionate intellectual intensity of some of her academic friends. Hadn't Brad said something about his acquaintance

being a poet? Burning glances were de rigueur for poets.

„Thank you,“ he finally murmured in a deep-timbred voice which fit him perfectly. And then he smiled. There was

something very unpoetic about that smile, Alina decided as she politely stepped back to allow him entrance. The

slight, mocking twist of his hard mouth had the effect of a small dagger thrust

„It’s kind of you to have me in on such short notice.“

Alina rallied her uneasy forces, annoyed

with herself for succumbing even briefly to her overactive imagination.

„No problem,“ she assured him warmly.
„I’m not certain where Brad is at the moment, probably out in the kitchen fixing

himself another drink. I believe he said your name was John? I’m Alina Corey. Make yourself at home, John. You

know, you really don’t look like a poet, although Brad tells me you’re a very good one.“

He followed her as Alina led the way through a coolly tiled hall and into the uncluttered, almost Mediterranean

living room of her home. She had done the entire place in white and rich, chocolate browns, taking pleasure in creating

the atmosphere, if not a particularly precise imitation, of a villa by the sea.

Tonight her guests added the glittering contrast of brilliant color and intelligence which made the graceful,

restrained surroundings a perfect setting. The living room, with its wall of French glass doors opened to the balmy

night and the view of the city and the sea, was crowded with men and women in bright array. The sophisticated, lively

crowd of academics, artists, and writers had few inhibitions about expressing themselves and their life-style through their clothes.

Alina decided her latest guest added a sober counterpoint to the brightly dressed people around him, and she

wondered at the conservative business suit, the dark tie, and the closely trimmed, cocoa-dark hair of Brad's friend, the

poet Still, poets often tended to be a little different...

„What do I look like?“ the stranger

asked interestedly as Alina led him to a table where several ice buckets held a variety of chilled white wines.

„I beg your pardon?“ Alina pulled her hazel glance back from a satisfied perusal of the successful party and smiled

inquiringly.

„You said I don't look like a poet,“ he reminded her calmly, accepting the glass of Chardonnay she handed him. „I

was wondering how I do appear to you.“

„Oh.“ Alina narrowed her eyes a

fraction and smiled blandly. „Will you be offended if I tell you that you could pass

for a prosperous capitalist?“

„A businessman?“ His daggerlike smile flashed briefly and he shrugged as he sipped the wine. „Not at all. I

understand you're – uh – in trade, yourself.“

Alina laughed up at him. „We dealers in books like to think of ourselves as above the common level of commerce.“

„Well,“ he conceded lightly, „if it's any consolation to you, I will admit you

don't look like a business woman.“

„I'm almost afraid to ask how I do appear,“ Alina murmured dryly, conscious of a light flush at his appraising expression.

She knew how he looked to her. Poet or not, he *did* have the aura of the quietly ruthless businessman who has

made it to the top over a few bodies. A man who looked as if he would be totally professional about the bloodletting

along the way. Five hundred years ago,

dressed in a suit of armor, this poet could have been mistaken for one of

Renaissance Italy's *condottieri*, the soldiers of fortune hired by wealthy city-states to fight the unceasing battles with their neighbors.

The deep-set green eyes were shadowed by surprisingly thick lashes, which lay along the ridge of strong,

thrusting cheekbones. The angular line of his jaw had a grim cast that would have looked quite appropriate under an

iron helmet Not a handsome face but one which might have been capable of

inspiring more than a little wariness in
an

opponent The extra fillip of experience
emanated as an almost tangible force
from him. He must have been around

thirty-eight, perhaps a year older, Alina
decided. The edging of silver at his
temples would probably mark the heavy,

cocoa-brown pelt of his hair rather
heavily in another couple of years.

He was dark and he had an intensity that
suggested power, but this poet had none
of the sulky, brooding quality

she expected from one of his profession.

„You look quite right for the setting you've created,“ the stranger said quietly. „A modern-day Renaissance

hostess, surrounded by a glittering court of dilettantes.“

Alina raised a curious, faintly quelling eyebrow. It was all very well for her to relate herself and the world around

her to the fifteenth century, but what could this man possibly know of her private passion? Perhaps Brad had

mentioned something of her personal interests to him.

„I'll assume that's a compliment,“ she

said dryly, scanning the crowd for Brad. It was about time he appeared to

take his poet friend off her hands.

Normally it was second nature for her to make a guest feel welcome in her home, but

for some reason, tonight Alina was beginning to feel edgy about this poet who didn't look or act like a poet.

„It is,“ he assured her unsmilingly, studying her once again. „You'd have fit very well into a Medici court Your hair

is a little too brown, perhaps. Not quite the blond ideal of the period, but there's a nicely burnished look to it In the

right light I expect it's almost a tawny color.“

Alina's head snapped around as she stared at him, startled by the determined cataloging of her features. It was all

she could do to keep from putting a hand to the smooth sweep of light brown hair which she had caught in a

deceptively casual swirl at the back of her head. Before she could say anything he was continuing.

„Good eyes,“ he said with an approving nod as he assessed her slightly slanting hazel glance. „Nice, strong nose.

Chin a little on the challenging side but that's all right A woman of spirit is always preferable to the simpering sort as

long as a man is prepared for the occasional battle....“

„John... whatever your name is,“ Alina began very forcefully, „I don't think...“ She didn't need to be told her

features were short of the ideal of delicate perfection, especially by a poet whose last name she didn't even know. She

had enough self-honesty at the age of thirty to know that her face could most

charitably be described as attractively intelligent. But there was no stopping the mysterious John.

„The dress isn't Renaissance style, of course, but the mood is: not-quite-restrained opulence.“ His gleaming eyes swept the gold-edged cognac silk with its deep purple hem. He even took in the low-heeled, bronze leather shoes with their delicate metallic inserts across the toes.

„I am prepared,“ Alina stated in an even tone laced with annoyance, „to permit a certain amount of latitude to the

artistic temperament I am not prepared to tolerate outright rudeness!“

„Naturally not,“ he agreed at once.

„Rudeness has no place in the courtly illusion, does it? Even the direst of

challenges must be issued with well-bred civility and wit“

An electric tension lanced across the small space separating them as Alina met the stranger's direct gaze.

„*Are* you issuing a challenge of some sort?“ she drawled with a cool humor that only she knew was a trifle forced.

Deliberately she tried to make him feel

like a minor curiosity. Where was Brad?
If he didn't show up soon to take

responsibility for his increasingly
irksome friend, Alina would hunt him
down.

„Not yet At the moment I'm still
assessing the strength of my opponent...”

Before he could finish his startling
sentence, the green-eyed man was
interrupted by a cheerful, masculine
voice.

„Hey, Alina! Have you seen any sign of
my friend yet? He should have been here
by now. I gave him very explicit

directions....“

Brad Dixon politely shouldered his way through a group of writers vehemently arguing over the merits of the East

Coast style of novel. His sandy blond hair and blue eyes were a perfect foil for the dark, royal blue shirt and

close-fitting black slacks.

He nodded briefly at the man beside Alina and went on quickly. „He probably got wrapped up in the call of his

Muse. Not like him to turn down free food and wine, though!“

Alina's eyes widened as she took in the implications of Brad Dixon's remarks along with his obvious lack of

recognition of the stranger at her side. „I was under the impression that your acquaintance had already arrived,“ she murmured in a chilling little voice.

„I don't see him. You can't miss him when he's around Full beard, kind of short...“ Brad broke off as he realized

Alina's assumption. He smiled. „No, this, sure as heck, isn't him! Hello. I'm Brad Dixon. I don't believe we've met
A

friend of Alina's?" He stuck out his hand.

„Not yet," the man admitted calmly, ignoring Alina's sizzling look in favor of shaking hands briefly with Brad

„Alina and I are still in the process of getting to know each other. I'm Jared Troy."

„Jared Troy!" Alina sucked in her breath, her fingers tightening dangerously around the stem of her glass. The

wave of guilt-inspired panic that washed over her took an incredible amount of willpower to subdue. Jared Troy! And

she'd invited him into her house as if he were a welcome guest!

„I'm afraid so,“ he said half apologetically as Brad excused himself and left in search of the missing poet Jared eyed

her with a trace of what might have passed for amusement „You didn't give me a chance to introduce myself.“

„You made no effort to correct my false impression,“ she countered icily.

There was no need to panic. He might not know what she had done. He might only have dropped by to meet her

since he happened to be in the area. After all, their correspondence had been going on for over three months. Yes, if he were passing through Santa Barbara he might have decided to stop and introduce himself to his feisty opponent.

„It seemed the easiest way to get myself invited inside,“ Jared acknowledged quietly.

The haunting music of a lute playing a fifteenth-century ballad filtered through the crowded room from the stereo.

For an instant Alina felt as if she had been transported back in time. But it wasn't because of the feeling invoked by

the lute. Her response was a direct reaction to the probing, speculative, and somehow *satisfied* glitter in the green eyes

of Jared Troy. He might, indeed, have been a *condottiere* who had just successfully breached the fortress walk without firing a shot.

„Did you think I would have refused to allow you inside my home simply because of our ongoing disagreement?“

she managed with a commendable touch of humor.

„It occurred to me that you might be a

little hesitant to continue the discussion face to face,“ he said slowly.

„Nonsense,“ she retorted spiritedly, deciding to take the offensive right from the start „Ours is a purely intellectual

quarrel. I would hardly have taken such a matter so personally as to bar my opponent from my home!“

„As Battista did to Francesco?“ he murmured, sipping his Chardonnay meditatively.

The names of the Renaissance *condottiere* and the lively, intelligent lady he had wanted were all it took to kindle

the fires of battle in Alina's eyes. It was over these two relatively unknown footnotes to history that she had found

herself engaged in such passionate battle with Jared Troy.

„That,“ she declared with ringing conviction, „was hardly an intellectual disagreement! The man had seduced her

and then blithely taken his leave! He had a hell of a nerve coming back a year later to try the same stunt all over again!

Battista had every right to have the villa doors barred against him!“

„Francesco had a job to do,“ Jared

pointed out with suspicious reasonableness.

„Signing a contract to go fight somebody else's war is hardly the same as catching the eight-o-five commuter train into the city!“

„Battista was a professional courtesan. She knew what she was doing!“

„She was a courtesan because there weren't any other well-paying professions open to intelligent women in those

days! Don't equate her with a prostitute. She ran a small palace, had a retinue of

servants to feed, responsibilities. Her

literary salons were greatly admired, you know. Poets and historians and philosophers came from all over to

participate, your Francesco was damn lucky to even get in the door the first time. She rarely took up with anyone who

wasn't as well educated as she was, and Francesco was, after all, merely a member of the *condottieri*!“

„He was good enough to go to bed with her! There is no indication that he resorted to rape! She accepted him as a

lover....“

„He seduced her!“

„Battista was the professional seductress!“ Jared protested forcibly. His tone was still low but there was an

underlying intensity that indicated he was as wrapped up in the argument now as Alina.

„Exactly! And as a professional, she would never have wasted time on anyone who wasn't up to her usual

standards unless she had fallen in love. Francesco convinced her that he was in love with her, that he would marry

her! He seduced her, dammit!“

„And when he got back a year later he found her with another man.“

„Someone had to pay the rent on the villa and feed all those servants. There is no evidence that Francesco

bothered to send home a *scudo* of his pay!“ Alina replied loyally. „He simply showed up a year later expecting

everything to be as he left it“

„Instead of which he was obliged to fight a duel with Battista’s current lover!“ Jared was all coldly possessive

male, as if it had been he himself, rather than a long-forgotten soldier of fortune, who had fought the duel to regain the woman he wanted.

„Typical male approach to the situation. As you may recall, killing off her latest source of revenue didn't exactly

endear Francesco to Battista! She still refused to let him into the villa!“

Jared lifted one shoulder in an indifferent shrug and swallowed a third of his glass of wine. „He got inside in the

end.“

In spite of herself, Alina smiled up at him with poorly concealed triumph.
„You don't know that for certain.“

„Yes, I do. I know Francesco as if he were a close friend....“

„Or as if you were his incarnation?“
Alina suggested with acid sweetness.

„You're the one who seems to be having the identification problem,“ he retorted smoothly, glancing significantly

around the gracious, colorful room. „A small change of costume and this could easily be one of Battista's grand

literary salons, couldn't it?

Loads of bright, witty, well-dressed and well-mannered people busy impressing each other and decorating your

living room. How far have you carried the identity mix-up in your own mind, Alina?" The strongly etched lines at the

edge of his hard mouth tightened as he scanned the guests.

Alina felt the color wash momentarily out of her face and then return in a vivid wave of red. With great mental

effort and a firm reminder of how Battista might have managed the situation, she got control of the hand that itched to

slap the intruder's face. Taking a deep, steadying breath, she looked up at him through her lashes, hazel eyes glittering.

„Are you asking me which of the men present is paying my upkeep? Unlike poor Battista, I have other means of earning my living. A few things have changed in the world since her time. I'm not obliged to choose my lovers according to their bank accounts. I do try, however,“ she concluded in a lofty tone, „to maintain her other high standards of selection.“

She could have sworn that a dull flush briefly marked Jared's tanned cheekbones, but he didn't apologize. Instead

he went back on the attack.

„Don't forget that the one time Battista chose a lover without regard for his bank account, she picked Francesco, not one of her effete, scholarly admirers.“

„A momentary lapse from which she soon learned her lesson. Francesco did *not* get back inside the villa a year later when he finally saw fit to return for

a little R and R!“

„What makes you so sure? There is no record of what finally became of either of them,“ Jared said with such easy

certainty that Alina dared to hope he really didn't know about the business with the microfilmed letters.

„I'm sure of it because I know Battista as well as you think you know Francesco,“ she said airily. „Battista was too

smart to be taken advantage of again by the same man!“

„If he succeeded in convincing her of his

love...”

„He got away with it once. He’d never have managed to trick her again.

Francesco wasn’t in love with her. If he had

been, he wouldn’t have abandoned her for a year. At the very least, he would have married her before he left on that

last campaign and provided for her support“

„There were other factors involved,“ Jared said mildly. „One didn’t casually turn down Medici offers of

employment in those days. The least

Battista could have done was remain faithful for a year. I'll bet Francesco not only got back inside her villa after he killed her latest lover, I'll bet he took his belt to Battista, too! She deserved it“

„You obviously have no genuine understanding of the situation,“ Alina began heatedly, her brows drawing together over her firm nose. „One of these days, I'm going to prove...“ She broke off in horror at her runaway tongue.

What on earth had possessed her to say that?

„Yes?“ he invited politely. „Just what are you going to prove? Better yet, with no known records of their lives other

than the ones we've turned up so far, just *how axe* you going to prove anything?“

Alina swallowed uncomfortably, searching her brain for a reasonable answer. She was saved from a direct lie by a

familiar voice.

„There you are, Alina. I've been looking for you. Someone said you'd disappeared into a corner with a stranger.“

Alina gratefully put out a hand to draw the handsome, older man a little closer. It was a small gesture – one she was

- hardly aware of – but it drew Jared's enigmatic gaze like a magnet.

„Nick, this is Jared Troy. He just showed up on my doorstep. Jared, this is my partner, Nicholas Elden. He's the

first half of Elden and Corey Books,“ she said chattily, anxious to deflect Jared's interest from the subject of why she

thought she could find a conclusion to the story of Francesco and Battista.

The two men shook hands gravely. In the soft light, Nick's silvered red head inclined in an almost courtly manner.

He was a gentleman, Alina thought, not for the first time. Jared Troy's brusque response stood out in contrast.

„*The* Jared Troy?“ Nick was saying in gracious amusement, ignoring the younger man's cool attitude. „The one

responsible for sending poor Alina off into periodic rages and vows of merciless vengeance?“

„She does seem to take our little historical disagreement personally, doesn't she?“ Jared murmured, his eyes

on

Alina's annoyed expression.

„That's putting it mildly. I've seen her throw your letters down on the floor and stomp on them when they arrived at the book shop.“ Nick chuckled.

„Only the ones in which he made particularly inaccurate comments about Battista!“ Alina defended herself spiritedly. „I certainly never stomped on the ones which commissioned us to find certain rare books!“ she added.

„You two have established quite a

reputation for difficult out-of-print and rare-book searches,” Jared said in what sounded like an attempt to calm troubled waters. „I was very grateful to Elden and Corey Books for locating that nineteenth-century history of Renaissance military armor.“

„Alina did all the work on that one,“ Nick told him with a kindly smile for his partner. „And when it arrived in our shop she went through it very carefully to see if there was any mention of your Francesco before sending it on to you!“

„Afraid I might have accidentally come across some conclusion to the story?“

Jared inquired blandly of Alina. „I

do have other interests, you know. I haven't devoted my entire life to the tale of Francesco and Battista!“

„No,“ she agreed coolly, „I didn't think you had. Your interests and collection are well known, Jared. Known and

respected.“

„Even if my academic background is not?“ he prompted with one lifted brow.

„It bothers you that I entered your

closed little world of the Renaissance

via Wall Street instead of from the elite ranks of academia, doesn't it?"

„Of course not!“ she protested much too quickly, stung by the appalling accuracy of his comment. She was not a

snob. Was she?

„I should hope not“ He smiled dangerously. „After all, even the Medici were a family of bankers. The businessmen

and the *condottieri*, who were also businessmen in their fashion, made the Italian Renaissance possible.“

„Look,“ Nick Elden interrupted

hurriedly, eyeing the flags flying high in Alina's cheeks as she prepared to reenter

the fray, „if you'll excuse me, I'll leave the two of you to argue this out Nice to have met you, Jared. It's been a

pleasure having your business over the past few months. I hope we'll get another chance to talk.“

The older man removed himself from the tension around the other two, disappearing into the crowd. Alina didn't

bother to watch him go, her attention was focused entirely on Jared Troy.

„Your partner, hmmm?“ Jared murmured before she could take him up on his earlier statement „What other role does he play in your life?“

„That’s absolutely none of your business,“ she retorted, sidetracked.

„I’m afraid it is,“ he countered softly, the green eyes clashing with hers in a way that revived the chill down her spine.

„What are you talking about?“ she challenged boldly, reminding herself to stay on the offensive. „Just why are

you here tonight?“

„First things first,“ he replied steadily, still holding her eyes. „I’m here because you more or less invited me.“

„That’s ridiculous! I’ve never invited you to my home! Our correspondence has been entirely composed of

business matters and our discussion of Francesco and Battista!“

„You invited me, my little virago, the minute you decided to use my name to get hold of a copy of those letters you discovered in the Molina collection.“

The words were casually, almost negligently spoken, but their effect on Alina was electric. She promptly choked on

a sip of wine and nearly dropped the glass.

„Are you all right?“ Jared asked with what could have passed for genuine concern, she thought uncharitably as

she gasped for breath. He pounded helpfully on her back.

„Yes, yes, I’m okay!“ she got out, stepping out of the way of his hand before it could descend between her

shoulder blades again. „I'll be fine. Just give me a minute. I'll run to the kitchen and get a glass of water----“

„Oh, no, you don't,“ he murmured mildly, catching hold of a small-boned wrist „I'm not coming all this way only to

have you slip out the back door on me!“

„I wasn't thinking of doing anything like that!“ she objected indignantly, disdaining to struggle against the gentle, but unshakable grip.

He glanced down at the broad, chased gold bracelet on her wrist, rubbing his

thumb across the dully gleaming

metal with an absently thoughtful gesture. He seemed to be composing his next words carefully before uttering them.

When at last he raised his eyes to meet her wary gaze. There was an intimidating determination in every line of his

harshly carved face.

„I suppose,“ she began carefully, „that you think I should just turn the film over to you? After all the work I did

locating those letters and persuading

Molina to let them be filmed?“

His mouth quirked upward at her defiantly tilted chin. „Since it was only with the use of my name that you

persuaded him to let the letters be filmed, I do have a certain claim on them, don't I?“

Alina ground her teeth against the stupid guilt which again threatened her. So what if she'd had to resort to using

his clout to get those letters? She was the one who'd traced them to the Molina collection! She had a right to use them

first to write the devastating article

which would crush Jared Troy's theories on the outcome of the Francesco-Battista

affair!

„You can relax,“ he advised gently. „I didn't come here tonight to demand the microfilm.“

She stared at him uncomprehendingly. „You didn't!“

She'd been prepared for accusations, threats of exposing her rather underhanded methods; at the very least she'd

expected him to demand the film as his

own.

„I'll admit the business with the film hastened my arrival,“ he said quietly.
„But I was preparing to come to Santa

Barbara anyway. The film provided the impetus to make the trip this month instead of next“

„I suppose there's some deep meaning to your statement!“

„Not so deep. I'm only saying I'm here for the same reason Francesco returned to Battista. I've come to claim my lady.“

For Alina, the remainder of her lovely, sparkling party passed in a daze. At various points during the evening she told

herself she was dealing with an unstable, perhaps actively crazy man. Then she would remind herself of Jared Troy's

sober, formidable reputation in the world of rare books. Surely rumors of genuine mental instability would have

reached her by now? On such flimsy arguments she talked herself out of calling the police.

Instead, half on instinct, half on sheer determination to maintain the growing reputation of her parties, Alina

managed to act as if there was absolutely nothing out of the ordinary about the tall, quiet man who had appeared on

her doorstep.

Accustomed to their own eccentricities, which tended to be flamboyant rather than cold and quiet, most of the

guests regarded Jared with minor curiosity and general politeness.

Alina lost no time in snagging a white-maned professor of Italian history and

smoothly but forcefully introducing

him to Jared. Dr. Hopkins was delighted and Alina took the opportunity to escape.

She had reacted in the only way possible to Jared Troy's startling statement, she decided as she hurried off to lose

herself in her own crowd. She had blinked in astonishment, her heart skipping a stunned beat as she finally recognized

the source of the tingling sensation down her spine. Fear. Pure, primitive, feminine fear. She had never known it before

in her life, and already since meeting Jared she had felt its unnerving fingers more than once.

But in the next instant she had recovered herself and her sense of humor. It was all some sort of joke he was

playing on her. He was going to exact a bit of revenge for her escapade with the microfilm after all And the punishment

was easy enough to understand. He intended to make her feel a little as the beleaguered Battista must have felt when

she had discovered Francesco on her doorstep demanding his rights as a lover.

With a cool nerve that Alina was very proud of, she had smiled brilliantly up into the disturbing green gaze. „I'm a

firm believer in learning from history,“ she had replied in mocking response to his shocking statement „I see no reason to repeat the mistake Battista made.“

Fortunately, Dr. Hopkins had appeared at that point and Alina had succeeded in foisting Jared off on him.

Her uninvited guest made no further effort to track her down during the remainder of the evening. He stood in a corner near an open French door and

spent virtually the entire time talking to the professor of Italian history. Alina

cast him uneasy glances from time to time as she moved among her guests, but he seemed oblivious.

It was too much to hope that he would simply walk out the door with the others when people finally began taking

their leave. She slanted a hopeful look in the direction of the corner he still occupied with Dr. Hopkins and saw the

cocoa-dark head still bent attentively to the conversation he was having with the older man.

„It’s been a great evening, Alina, as usual,“ Nick Elden assured her breezily as he trailed Brad Dixon and the poet,

who had finally arrived, out the door. Brad had been correct about his friend’s enjoyment of free food and wine. The

poet had made surprisingly sharp inroads into the refreshments in the short time he’d been there.

„I’m glad you had a good time,“ she said warmly, lifting her face for his brief farewell salute.

It was as Nick raised his head with a small show of reluctance that Alina finally saw Jared glance across the

room.

She knew he'd seen the casual little kiss and she saw the sardonic expression in his eyes as he acknowledged the

implications. No harm in letting him know that she was on excellent terms with a number of men, she told herself smugly. Just in case he really did have any notions of carrying out his threats!

„I'll see you at the shop on Monday,“ Nick was saying pleasantly. „Have a good weekend, Alina.“

„You, too.“ She smiled and watched him leave with a trace of reluctance. The

only ones left in the room now were

Dr. Hopkins and Jared. She turned just as the professor reluctantly ambled across the thick brown-and-white-striped

area rug in front of the white fireplace, aiming toward the door. Jared strode by his side. The two were still deep in conversation.

„The old style of warfare changed completely after the Battle of Marignano in 1515, of course,“ Hopkins was

saying a little sadly as if regretting the change. „With the development of heavy

artillery... But I can see it's time to

stop talking about guns. Alina, my dear, I'm sorry to be the last one out the door.“ He, as had most of the other men in

the crowd, bent to drop a gallant little kiss on her cheek.

„Not quite the last one, sir.“ She smiled meaningfully over his shoulder at a blandly watching Jared.

Hopkins looked surprised. „Oh? I was under the impression... Well, never mind. I'll be seeing you soon, I expect,

Alina. I can't stay away from your shop

long, you know that It's like an addiction! Jared, it was a pleasure meeting

you. I'd like to continue the conversation sometime in the future.“

„I'll look forward to it,“ Jared said politely, waiting silently as the older man disappeared down the steps. „You

needn't bother holding the door open any longer for me,“ he finally advised Alina. „I'm not going anywhere just yet.“

With a stifled groan, Alina closed the door and trailed him back into the now quiet living room. She threw herself

down onto the curved, white-upholstered
banquette, her cognac and purple sheath
moving fluidly over the supple

curves of her body. Intent on dominating
the scene with her only weapon, casual
self-confidence, she stretched her

arms out on either side of herself along
the curving back of the banquette.
Crossing her legs with graceful

nonchalance, she tipped back her head
and smiled aloofly at the man who was
watching so intently.

The tiny lines around the corners of his
eyes crinkled in wry amusement „Very
nice,“ he approved, moving to stand

beside the fireplace. In deference to the balmy evening, Alina had filled the dark interior of the hearth with dozens of

candles in all shapes and sizes. Their cheerfully flickering light had cast a glow over the party without providing unwanted heat.

„Me or the fireplace?“ she asked in amusement.

„Both. You do have more than a touch of the style Battista must have had,“ he said quietly, his eyes on the

candles in the fireplace. „But, then, I already knew that“ He glanced up,

pinning her with his gaze. „I never
threw your

letters on the floor and stomped on
them.“ He grinned.

Alina made a dismissing movement with
one hand. „Nick was exaggerating. I
didn't resort to that sort of temper
tantrum, either!“

„Liar.“ He chuckled. „I'll bet he was
telling the truth or very near it I know a
great deal about you after all the

correspondence we've exchanged. I'm
well aware of your spirited feelings on
the subject of Francesco and Battista.

You defended the lady with wit and style and passion. Just as she would have defended herself. Just,” he clarified, „as you would defend yourself, if need be.“

„Fortunately,” Alina stated flatly, „there is no need.“

„I hoped you’d see things that way, but to tell you the truth, I really didn’t expect such a reasonable attitude.“ He

rested one arm on the brown rife mantel and eyed her with the same hungry, assessing glance he’d given her when she

’d first opened the door.

„I can afford to be very reasonable about a subject in which I'm not particularly interested,“ she shot back

smoothly, her toes curling tensely inside her shoes. She schooled her nerves not to betray any more visible indication of her heightening tension.

„I see.“ He nodded. „Well, I shall just have to make you take some sort of interest then, won't I? I meant what I

said, Alina Corey. You've been seducing me with your passionate, intriguing letters for over three months. I knew,

sooner or later, I would have to come and find you. The coup you pulled off by obtaining a copy of that undiscovered

material from Molina was the last straw, I couldn't wait any longer. I had to come and see for myself if the real woman

was anything like I imagined her from the evidence of her correspondence.“

„But I never meant anything... anything personal in those letters!“ Alina snapped, taken aback by the sheer

satisfaction radiating from him. „I never discussed anything aside from business or the argument we were having over

Francesco and Battista! You must know that!“

„It wasn't what you said in your letters so much as how you said it“ He smiled.

„I couldn't resist I had to come

looking for you, and I wasn't at all disappointed. The real woman is even more intriguing than the passionate little creature who emerged from the letters.“

„That's crazy!“ she exclaimed, trying to remain cool and aloofly amused by the incredible situation. But she didn't

know how long she would be able to maintain the pose. Already she could

feel her nerves fraying around the edges under the impact of the electric tension in the room.

He shook his head, stalking slowly over to a brown leather chair and lowering himself into it with masculine grace.

Alina realized with a start that he was a physically powerful man. He wasn't massive or bulky. It was a catlike power of

lean, coiled strength, and it was somehow more intimidating to her feminine senses than bulging muscles might have

been.

„It's not crazy,“ he countered gently. „I never discussed anything in my letters to you except the same subjects,

but I'll bet you can tell me a lot about myself.“

„I've never been tempted to psychoanalyze you from your correspondence!“

„Try it,“ he invited.

„I'm not sufficiently interested to bother!“

„Did I sound that dull?“ He sighed

regretfully.

„Dull!“ she echoed without thinking.

„Dull is the last word I would have...“

„See? You did have some mental image of me, didn't you?“

She glared at him, one bronze-toed shoe swinging gently in annoyance. „All right,“ she agreed, goaded. „I'll tell

you exactly how I pictured you!“

„I have a feeling I'm going to regret having asked,“ he groaned ruefully.

„Probably,“ she told him unsympathetically. She lifted her eyes to

the white ceiling with its brown molding
and

began to tick off her various impressions
as if summarizing a job candidate's
resume. „If asked, I would have said you
were probably in your forties....“

„Close enough.“ He sighed wryly. „I'll
be forty next year.“

„A quiet, self-contained individual, who
didn't care for parties such as the one I
gave here tonight...“

„Most socializing is a nuisance.“

„I would have described you as rather

hard and ruthless in some ways,“ she went on deliberately.

„Why do you say that?“ he asked, looking mildly offended.

„That assessment was based originally on your reputation, not your correspondence,“ she admitted.

„Everyone in

the book world knows you made your money the rough way on Wall Street and that you still appear occasionally to

terrify the market before disappearing into the sunset with a new bundle of cash. There was nothing in your letters to

me to cause me to discount that initial impression. You were always so ruthlessly logical in your justification of

Francesco's military actions as well as the business affairs of the time. Except, of course," she amended with a superior

smile, „when it came to poor Battista's business affairs. There was no logic to the way you criticized her. But you were

every bit as hard and ruthless in your remarks as Francesco seems to have been!"

„Probably because I'd feel as strongly as he did about the seemingly endless supply of men she found to fill those

literary salons of hers!“

„She certainly didn't sleep with everyone who came to the salons! A good portion of her income came from the

admission fees, and those attending expected and received nothing more than a fine intellectual afternoon or evening.

She only took as lovers the pick of the lot! That was the way all the grand courtesans operated. They were queens of

society!“

„We seem to be straying from the

subject,“ Jared interposed mildly.

Alina’s eyes narrowed. „As far as I’m concerned, discussing Francesco and discussing you are one and the same exercise!“

„Ah!“ There was a wealth of understanding in the single utterance.

Alina winced as she realized how much of her image of him she had revealed. „It was only natural I should come to see you very much as I saw Francesco. I mean, you always argued his case as if you were he!“

„Go on,“ he coaxed quite gently, a smile in his eyes. „Tell me exactly how you see Francesco and me.“

„There’s not much more to tell, is there? Quiet, hard, ruthless, interested in making money through the most

pragmatic means available; as a *condottiere* in his case, as a Wall Street tycoon in yours.“ She broke off reflectively,

remembering all the other impressions she had garnered from the letters. „We may never know how Francesco

invested the money he must have received from his Medici employers, but

the odds are he did the same as you and put it into art or rare books. It was. common practice men, as now, for men. to use such things as a safeguard against inflation.“

„Quiet, hard, ruthless,“ he repeated thoughtfully, turning the words over on his tongue. „Anything else?“

She hesitated, not wanting to reveal what little remained The last impression had been too fleeting, too intangible, and not very important, anyway.

„Tell me,“ he murmured, leaning back in

the chair and stretching his expensively clad legs out in front of him.

„It's nothing.... Probably highly inaccurate!“ she muttered.

„Please?“

She wondered at the gentle insistence.

„Well, if you must know, I had the feeling you were a little... isolated,“ she finally said quietly.

„Lonely?“ he guessed, using the more accurate term.

„Perhaps.“ She looked out toward the darkened garden beyond the French

doors.

„Is that why you maintained the correspondence?“ he asked a little abruptly. She heard the probing need to know.

„Because you felt sorry for me?“

„No,“ Alina replied quite honestly. „I figured that if you were lonely it was from choice. I didn't continue to write to you out of sympathy! I wrote because you were so damn stubborn about admitting Francesco was a bastard!“

He laughed and Alina heard the echo of released tension in the sound. As if her

answer had pleased him. „Does it

occur to you that we seem to have taken a lot of other things for granted about each other?“ He leaned forward,

resting his elbows on his knees, clasping his hands loosely.

„Such as?“ she demanded haughtily, irked at having let the conversation become so personal but unsure how to

stop it He *did* have a legitimate reason for being here after what she'd done by misrepresenting him to Molina.

„You knew I wasn't married, didn't you?“ he asked shrewdly.

She blinked and then nodded slowly. „I guessed you weren't“

„Just as I knew you weren't There was too much energy and passion in the letters. Did you realize that?“ he asked wistfully.

„Nonsense!“

„It's true. I knew from the first that there was no particular man in your life. But knowing Battista, I figured you

probably had a whole court of unimportant men hovering around. And I was right about that“ He didn't look pleased

at the notion.

Alina suddenly grinned, finding his displeasure enormously amusing. „A whole court of unimportant men hovering

about is exactly the way I like it!“

He glanced at her sharply. „Because it's safer that way?“ he hazarded.

„Because it's much more pleasant than making one man important and having him disillusion you!“ she snapped back.

He looked straight at her. „I know what

it means to be disillusioned. You're not alone. Why do you think it took me

three months to work up the nerve to come and get you?"

„What are you talking about?"

„I was terrified that when I finally came for you, I'd find I'd been wrong in everything I'd learned from those

letters," he said as if confessing a grave weakness in himself. „I was afraid you might turn out to be cold or

passionately in love with someone else or cruel in the ways only a woman can be cruel." He saw her staring at him in

blank astonishment and shook his head wryly. „I mean, I *knew* everything would be all right Intellectually and, for the most part, emotionally, I was sure of what I would find. But some small part of me was still a little afraid. Don't you understand?“

„No!“ Alina yelped, appalled. She rose to her feet in a restless movement, and almost instantly he was standing in front of her. „I do not understand any of this! You show up at my door and get yourself inside by trickery...!“

„A slight misunderstanding on your

part," he soothed.

She ignored him. „And then you tell me you know about that business with the microfilm. Then you start sounding

as if you'd followed me halfway around the world....“

„Instead of just from Palm Springs?“

„What little humor there ever was in this bizarre situation is gone. I'll thank you to stop teasing me. I don't know

what you're after unless you're somehow trying to get that microfilm from me! And I can tell you right now, I'm not

going to give it up until I've learned all I can from it I'm going to prove once and for all what finally happened between

Francesco and Battista!“

„I'm not after the film,“ he interrupted gruffly, his hands coming out to close over the thin silk on her shoulders.

„I'm after you, can't you get that through your head? I want you, Alina Corey. I've spent three months learning to

want you, and I'm here tonight because I couldn't resist you any longer. When you opened the door to me this

evening, it was like having one's private

fantasy come to life!“

„I’m not Battista!“

„I’m not Francesco!“

„I’m not so sure about that!“ Alina stormed.

She was about to say more, much more, but suddenly it was too late. The strong hands on her shoulders tightened

implacably, and she was hauled against the taut, waiting length of him.

„Oh!“ Her mouth opened on the small cry of surprise and protest His lips came down on hers, swallowing the tiny

sound and going on to plunder further.

Stricken with the unexpected impact of the hungry, literally ravishing embrace, Alina stood utterly still, her

fingertips braced against the dark fabric of his jacket It had all happened too fast, she realized dimly. He had gone from

the verbal argument to the physical one before she had fully realized the depths of her danger.

The force of his desire came at her in waves. The hunger in his kiss was like that of a wild creature which has been

pent up far too long. The fundamental

need in him poured over her as he explored the warmth of her stunned mouth.

She almost flinched as the tip of his tongue flicked along her lower lip in sharp, urgent little movements. Then it moved further, seeking out her own tongue and drawing it forth into a sensual, intimate battle.

She reacted because there was no option, she told herself. Against such an assault, every instinct rallied to fight back. But the skirmish loosed other powers, powers that involved more and more response.

His hands slid down from her shoulders, his fingers probing through the silk to find the contours of her slender

back. „My God!“ he murmured huskily, not quite lifting his mouth from hers.

„I’ve dreamed of this for three months.

You don’t know how I’ve ached----“

Before she could protest, tell him it was impossible to want a woman so intensely just from three months of

correspondence, his mouth was once again moving damply, warmly on hers.

Alina’s senses whirled as the energy in his kiss pulsed throughout her entire

body, bringing it curiously alive.

No, it was impossible not to respond, even if the response was this dangerous impulse to match the challenge in him.

In some ways, she knew, it would probably be safer to shrink before it But something in her would not allow the weakness of such a reaction.

„Alina, my sweet, passionate Alina!“ he grated. She felt the fine trembling in his hands as they worked their way

down to her waist and then tugged her lower body closer to his own.

She was left in no doubt of his highly aroused state. He forced her thighs gently against the heat of his own,

urging her silently to accept the reality of his need.

„Jared, please...!“

„Don't tell me to stop,“ he pleaded, tracing the line of her jaw with his lips.

„I know you too well. You don't really

want me to stop, so please, don't say it!“

„You can't know me that well!“ She shivered as his teeth sank gently into her earlobe, closing around the tiny,

glittering amethyst earring she wore.
„Jared! We've only written each other a few letters! Be...be reasonable! We've done nothing but argue....“

„Trust me, sweetheart,“ he breathed, releasing her ear to bury his face against the nape of her neck. He caught the fine, soft hair there with his lips and gently tugged. The tiny sensation of pain was exquisitely, astonishingly erotic.

Alina gasped.

She felt the satisfaction in him as she trembled against him, her eyes shut tightly against the unfamiliar level of her

own reaction. What was the matter with her? This wasn't like her! It wasn't how she wanted to be! She had created

exactly the world in which she wished to live and this sort of passion had no place in it.

Jared's hands slipped lower, cupping the roundness of her bottom and sinking his fingers luxuriously into the

silk-covered flesh.

„You were right, you know,“ he breathed against her throat, the tip of his tongue tasting her skin. „I have been

isolated, lonely....“

„Jared!“ She didn't want any masculine appeals to her softer instincts! That was an old trick and she was wise to it.

He lifted his hands slowly along her rib cage until his thumbs rested under the weight of her small breasts. „Don't

fight me,“ he begged, inhaling the scent of her. „I've been wanting you for so long. Wanting your passion, your fire, your warmth...”

„Stop it, please, stop it!“ she hissed and then swallowed thickly as his thumbs sought the budding tips of her

unconfined breasts. „You don't

understand!“

„What don't I understand?“ he challenged. „I know you so well.“

„Damn you, Jared Troy!“ she rasped, „I won't let you do this to me! I've found my world, created my own niche in

it You're not going to come along and ruin everything!“

With every ounce of strength at her command, she pushed against the solidity of his chest She succeeded in

forcing a small distance between them, and then his hands went back around her, not pulling her close, but locking her

within the confines of a loose embrace. Green eyes flamed avidly, longingly over her as she ripped her head up to face him.

„Don't be afraid of me,“ he murmured as if soothing a frightened young filly. He swayed her gently to and fro in his arms. „There's nothing to be afraid of. It's going to be all right...”

„Will you stop talking to me as if I were an hysterical sheep or something!“ Alina exploded. „I'm not afraid of you, I'm simply trying to tell you I'm not

interested in an affair with a man I've barely met and with whom I've exchanged

nothing but arguments!“

„You knew me well enough to take the risk of using my name to sweet-talk Vittorio Molina into having those

documents filmed.“ He grinned engagingly.

„That's got nothing to do with it! I'd have done just about anything to get hold of a copy of those letters! And if

you're suggesting I should be willing to go to bed with you in order to repay you,

you're out of your mind!“

„You just said you'd do just about anything to get hold of them....“ he taunted lightly, confidently.

„It's much too late to convince me I need to go to bed with you in order to get them. I've already got my hands on them. The first you're going to know of the contents of that film is when I publish my rebuttal in the *Journal of*

Renaissance Notes and News!“

„By that time I won't care about your rebuttal. I'll have you safely in my bed.“

She shook her head disdainfully. What was the matter with him? Didn't he know how to take no for an answer? „I

meant it, Jared,“ she told him steadily.

„You're not going to be allowed to disrupt my life. No man is. I've got

everything I want, and there's no room for an affair with you.“

For the first time she saw a flicker of doubt in the green gaze.

„Are you,“ he asked very carefully, „trying to tell me there's someone else?“

„A whole roomful of someone elses,“ she retorted. „Didn't you see that

tonight? I get all the masculine attention I need or want, Jared.“

He went very still. „You’re not in love with any of the men who were here tonight I would have known!“

„I love them all.“ She smiled easily.
„And they love me.“

„Don’t you dare try to tell me you’ve been to bed with any of them! I’d have known, dammit! Oh, I saw all those

charming good-night kisses, but that’s all they were. There wasn’t a male in the group who’s getting any more man a

good-night kiss from you!“

„I'll grant you that,“ she agreed lightly, slipping out of his slackened grip and stepping just out of reach. „And

that, too, is precisely the way I want it Everything in my life is precisely the way I want it I've worked hard to make it

that way.“

„And a serious commitment to one man doesn't fit into your gracious, superficial, courtly little world, is that it?“ He

searched her face so intently that Alina

experienced another little shock of guilt
As if she was deliberately demolishing
the private fantasy he'd come here
tonight hoping to find.

„Serious commitments, as I've learned
the hard way, have a habit of dissolving
overnight No, Jared, I'm not

looking for a serious commitment Not
anymore. That was a stage I went
through in my twenties. I'm over it
now.“

His face softened as he observed the
remoteness in hers. „Tell me about it,“
he said.

She quirked an eyebrow, stooping gracefully to pick up a couple of empty glasses. Deliberately she started toward the kitchen, aware that he was following her. „Confession time?“ she murmured. „I tell you about my great

disillusionment and you tell me about yours?“

„Why not? It’s as good a place to start talking as any.“

She swung around in the kitchen doorway, and he nearly collided with her. „You’re serious, aren’t you?“

„Very.“

Something in him tugged at her, filled her with a hopeless sense of loss. Which was utterly crazy. She'd made her

decision and she intended to stick to it. Alina lifted her chin in unconscious defiance. „I will try to explain this in the

simplest possible terms, Jared. I was married three years ago to a handsome, charming, brilliant professor of

twentieth-century philosophy. Within the year he had used the incredible rationales available in twentieth-century

philosophy to justify sleeping with one of his beautiful, brilliant students.“

„Alina...“

She lifted a hand to ward him off. „Let me finish. I want you to understand completely. In the painful months

everyone goes through after a divorce, I stumbled across the story of Battista. I knew what was waiting for me when I

reentered the social world Everyone knows what the world of the desperate, swinging singles is like. I wanted no part

of it, but I also knew myself well enough to realize I'm basically a sociable creature. Battista, I saw almost at once, had

solved the problem. She had the world coming to her.“

A slow smile lit Jared's green eyes. „So instead of joining the wild singles' scene, you decided to take a leaf out of

Battista's book, is mat it? You made the world over in your private Renaissance image.“

„It wasn't hard, but there is a key,“ she informed him coolly, turning back into the kitchen and depositing the

glasses on the counter.

„The key is to convince yourself and therefore everyone else around you that

you really don't want to remarry.“

Alina swiveled around on her heel, bracing herself against the white-tiled counter as she faced him, smiling. „It's a

matter of basic male psychology. Men feel 'safe' around a woman who isn't threatening them with marriage or too

many demands. In a perverse way they start falling all over themselves to have the butterfly that no one can catch.“

Jared lounged in the doorway, watching her as if she were, indeed, a colorful butterfly he wanted in his net He said

nothing.

„It started out as a kind of game,“ Alina admitted, thinking back to the traumatic first year after her divorce. „I told

myself I would simply follow Battista's rules for handling men. She really took very few as lovers, you know. Battista

wasn't a prostitute. She was the quintessential tease, Jared. She gave a man everything but herself. The vast majority

enjoyed her charming company, her intellect, her good food, and the brilliant, colorful guests she invited to her parties.

But that was all they got“

She paused tauntingly to see if he wanted to argue the point When he still remained silently propped in her

doorway, Alina shrugged lightly and continued.

„As I said, it started out as a game. A way to build a social life without recourse to the singles' bar. I had been a

faculty wife long enough to know just what appeals to the intellectual type. I used what I had learned, what Battista

had taught me, and I set out to be the perfect incarnation of the kind of lady who could dominate a Renaissance court

It was a challenge,“ she added with a curving twist of her mouth. „And I intended to do it only until the right man came

along. After all, underneath the veneer, I was still Alina Corey who knew she wouldn't be happy unless she remarried.“

„When,“ he asked interestedly, „did you discover you were no longer that Alina Corey? That Battista had, indeed, become a part of you?“

She laughed. „Full marks for your perception,“ she applauded. „About a

year ago, I think. It's difficult to pinpoint the time. It was an evolutionary process. I didn't just wake up one morning and realize that I no longer had any interest in marriage, that my life was too full, too exciting, too interesting as it was. I think I first acknowledged it to myself after I turned down an offer of marriage from a man who was an ideal candidate for Mr. Plight. I declined his offer without even pausing to think, and later I realized the old Alina Corey would have jumped at the chance. He was perfect. A successful writer with an interest in

history. Good-looking, charming, intelligent, and affectionate.“

„And you turned him down without a qualm.“

„I’m afraid so,“ she murmured. „He asked me one evening shortly after I had discovered that Francesco had had the nerve to show up at Battista’s door a year after leaving her. All I could think about during the champagne and

candlelight dinner Mr. Right was treating me to was getting back home so that I could find out what had happened.

I

spent the rest of the night pacing up and down my living room in a rage because, when I finally got rid of Mr. Right

and got back to my books, I learned there was no record of what had become of Battista and Francesco!“

„You were more wrapped up in their story than in your own, is mat it?“ He dislodged himself from the door frame

and came toward her, a considering look on his strong face. „Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that Battista’

s story has become your own story.“

Alina sensed the faint, masculine menace

in him and moved lightly out of his path, ostensibly to put the glasses

into the dishwasher. „I’m only trying to make it clear to you, Jared, that I am quite happy with my life. I love my books,

my parties, my work I have no need of anything else, especially marriage.“

„Who,“ he asked very casually, „said anything about marriage?“

3

The glass Alina had been putting into the top rack of the dishwasher slipped from her hand as Jared spoke. She barely

caught it before it fell. Slowly she straightened and faced him, a cool fury staining her cheeks and flashing gold sparks

in her hazel eyes.

He stood eyeing her with sardonic amusement. The expression replaced the urgent longing which had been

radiating from him only a few moments earlier. „You said Battista was the ultimate tease,“ he drawled, „but she made

one mistake in her career, didn't she? Francesco was the one man who demanded and got everything from her.

He got

more man just the fine food and sparkling company which others paid for and received. He even got more than the

lucky few she took to her bed. She fell in love with Francesco, didn't she? And that's why she was so damn mad when

he showed up a year later. Any other client who paid his tab would have been welcomed as a repeat customer. But

Francesco had claimed everything Battista had to give as a woman and then disappeared. She barred him from the villa

when he returned because she was afraid of him. . . .“

„Battista was afraid of no man! She could handle them all!“

„Except Francesco. Her low-born *condottiere*, who had bought his way into the upper classes by selling them his sword, who couldn't even read Latin or Greek, and who collected art as an investment rather than out of noble

appreciation, he was the one who reached out and caught the butterfly in his net, wasn't he?“

„Battista learned her lesson.“ Alina

sniffed, slamming the dishwasher shut
Jared came away from the counter,

catching her gently by the shoulders and
holding her still in front of him. „Don't
try barring me from your home the

way Battista tried to do with Francesco.
It won't work with me, and I'll lay you
odds it didn't work with him. If s too

late. You, like Battista, have already
given too much of yourself to a man. Oh,
yes, if s true, honey. You put all of your

inner warmth and passion in those letters
you wrote to me. You revealed too much
of yourself. Did you think you were

somehow safe letting down your barriers with a stranger through the medium of those letters? Or did you have an

illusion of safety because you could pretend to yourself that you were discussing another woman's feelings instead of

your own?"

„I think,“ Alina forced herself to say evenly, „that it's time you left!“

He hesitated and then nodded slowly. „I suppose it is. But I'll be back. I know too much about you, and I'm going

to use everything I've learned over the

past three months to convince you to come to me.“

„Why, you arrogant, insufferable...!“

„Careful,“ he advised with a flash of white teeth, „or I'll demand that microfilm back before you've had a chance to

write your scathing rebutted for the journal!“

„You're not getting your hands on that film until I'm finished with it!“ she vowed seethingly.

„How can you deny that I have every right to it?“ he inquired with mocking

reasonableness.

„I worked hard tracking those letters down! They belong to me!“

„They might have, if you had figured out another way to persuade Molina to film them for you. But you decided

my name would be the magic key you needed, didn't you? You knew Molina would be impressed by a request from me...!“

Alina chewed her lip for an instant, anxious to change the topic. „How did you find out what I'd done?“ she finally

asked slowly. „I just got the film yesterday.“

He slid his hands from her shoulder up to encircle her throat, his eyes warming with private humor. „I'll tell you in

the morning,“ he promised softly, „over breakfast“

He used the gentle hold on her throat to keep her still for his kiss. This time he didn't ask for a response. His lips

molded hers with quick possessiveness, and then he was freeing her, striding toward the door.

Without a backward glance at Alina's

bemused face.

Jared let himself out into the night
Belatedly jerking herself free of the
enthrallment he had succeeded in placing
on

her senses, she hurried to the window in
time to see a sleek black Ferrari pulling
away from the curb. It disappeared

down the hill and into the night.

Alina realized with a start that her
fingers were shaking as she lowered the
white curtain. Almost compulsively she

headed toward her study at a quick, light
run. It was as if she had to make certain,

had to be sure nothing had
happened to the precious film.

She swung around the door into the white-carpeted room, reaching the old oak rolltop desk in a rush. Yanking open the drawer she drew a sigh of satisfied relief at the sight of the little film canister. Of course it was safe. Why shouldn't it be? Jared Troy had been in the living room every moment. And he wouldn't have known where to start looking anyway.

Still, she told herself resolutely, as long

as he was anywhere in the vicinity she would have to take care. Slowly she

shut the desk drawer. She knew Jared Troy very well after three months of impassioned argument, in spite of her

attempt to deny that earlier. He hadn't fooled her for an instant this evening. He'd come to Santa Barbara for one thing

and one thing only. He wanted the microfilm she'd wangled from Virtorio Molina's private collection of rare historical

books and papers.

Flinging herself down into the leather chair behind the desk, Alina leaned back and propped her crossed ankles on

the oak surface. The bronze leather of her small, low-heeled shoes gleamed in the lamplight, throwing sparks off the

delicate inset pattern of metal; lie trim. With a determined frown she studied the portrait on the opposite wall. With the

ease of long familiarity she met the eyes of the other woman who shared her study.

It was not a genuine portrait of Battista, of course. Alina had never been lucky enough to find one and couldn't

have afforded a genuine Renaissance painting even if she had found it. The artist had been a modern one, but he had caught the essence of what Alina knew Battista must have been – what the new, emerging Renaissance woman must have been like.

She was dressed in a rich gown of green velvet and gold brocade. Her near-blond hair was piled high in one of the elaborate coiffures of the age, a string of pearls marking the artificially high forehead. Battista, like many fashionable women of the Renaissance, had probably

plucked her hair to achieve that much-admired high forehead. The brocade

bodice of the gown was cut very low, revealing an elegant curve of breast. Gold and emerald chains encircled the

slender throat. The portrait was cut off at the waist, but Alina knew the woman would have been wearing the

high-heeled slippers that came into fashion during the time, partly as a defense against muddy streets, but ultimately

because women had liked the look of them.

The clothes and jewelry were beautiful, a feast for the eye. But it was the face of the woman that held the attention.

There was no smile on the sensuous lips. People took portraits seriously in those days. But Alina was sure there was

humor in the blue-green eyes. Certainly there was a hint of elegant challenge. Battista had forced the world to come to her on her terms.

„He wants to know what happened to you, Battista,“ Alina told her friend and mentor. „He’s as curious as I am. But he’s another Francesco. He thinks he can

seduce me into giving him the film. You should have heard him tonight All

that talk of having fallen for me because of my letters. It's just a ruse, naturally. He'd do anything to get hold of the

film and prove to himself that he was right about the ending of your story."

She toyed with a pen, thinking of the man who had intruded into her world tonight. Jared Troy had been not quite

real to her for the past three months. A safely distant fantasy man from the past Not one who could ever reach out and put his hands on her. Until this evening.

She shivered for no accountable reason and got restlessly to her feet The bronze shoes sank deeply into the plush

white carpet as she trailed slowly over to the window. Her condominium was perched on a hill above the town. Below

her an array of lights washed down to the ocean's edge. The night-darkened Pacific stretched on from there to infinity.

She felt the familiar guilt that always welled up when she remembered how she had used Troy's name to convince

Molina to have the documents filmed.

„But he’s being just as underhanded in his efforts to get the film from me,“ she declared staunchly to Battista. „He

didn’t just show up at my door tonight and demand that I at least share the information with him. He probably knew I’d

never surrender it until I have the answers, regardless of how guilty I feel! No, he was much craftier. He thinks he can

seduce me the way Francesco seduced you. But I won’t make the mistake you did, Battista. Francesco threw a real

monkey wrench into your life, didn’t he?

And then he walked out, leaving you to put all the pieces back together again.“

Alina caught her lower lip between her teeth as she thought about her own past. The divorce had been a traumatic experience. All divorces were. But she knew in her heart that it hadn't been the emotionally damaging experience

Battista had been through with her Francesco. Alina had been lucky. It was only after her professor of philosophy had

betrayed her that she realized he had

never been and never would be the great love of her life.

She'd begun creating her Renaissance fantasy, using all of Battista's cleverness, with the vague notion of

somehow finding the great love she thought must be waiting for her. She would know him when he came along, she

thought He would be intelligent, beautifully mannered, witty, and utterly captivated by her. So entranced, in fact, that

she would never have to wonder if he was out sleeping with one of his

students! Because, of course, he would probably be a professor. A successful author or artist had also been a distinct possibility, she acknowledged, but he would definitely be well educated and well acquainted with the elite world of academia. He would most certainly not be a businessman!

And then, after having put together her witty, glittering court of literary and academic friends, it had dawned on her that she no longer needed that great love, that, in fact, it was undoubtedly a

mythical thing, anyway. She was, to put it

simply, content with the world she had created.

With the perverse manner of the world, that inner satisfaction had somehow only served to attract other people

and success in general. She had, Alina told herself once again, everything she wanted. No brash, domineering,

arrogant male was going to convince her otherwise.

„Thanks for the chat, Battista.“ She smiled at the portrait as she swung

around to walk out of the room. „Keep an

eye on the microfilm for me, will you?“

It was the sound of the doorbell ringing far too early for a Sunday morning which finally roused Alina from sleep

several hours later. She pushed the long hair out of her eyes and blinked owlishly at the clock on the white bedstand.

Who would have the nerve to be ringing her bell at this hour after a late party?

She waited a few more minutes, hoping whoever it was would go away, but such luck was not to be hers. Perhaps it

was something important.

Pushing back the bedclothes with a groan, she fumbled in the closet for a green velvet robe and belted it around

the green satin nightdress she wore. A glance in the hall mirror as she passed showed a sleep-tousled woman gowned

in a tight-sleeved, low-necked robe which could have been worn five hundred years ago. It was an incongruous

picture, Alina thought with a wryly twisted smile. The robe looked much too elegant to be worn with sleep-mussed hair

and no makeup.

„Who is it?“ she called, her hand on the doorknob.

„Jared,“ came the crisp response. „I’ve got something for you.“

Alina started fully awake, her hand freezing on the knob. „What on earth are you doing here at this hour?“

„Open the door and you’ll find out“ His deep voice sounded patiently amused. „I told you, I’ve got something for you.“

With a barely stifled sigh, she opened

the door a crack, peering out resentfully.
„No,“ she said flatly.

„No, what?“ he asked innocently.

„No, you aren't getting your hands on my microfilm.“

He looked very wide awake, she thought broodingly and wondered vaguely where he'd spent the night He was

wearing dark slacks and a long-sleeved, pin-striped shirt The collar was open and the sleeves were rolled up on sinewy

forearms. There was a fair amount of very tanned, hair-roughened masculine

flesh on display.

„I didn't come here for your microfilm,“
he assured her with his quick, dagger
smile. „I'd much rather get my hands
on you – Wait!“

He caught the edge of the door just as
she stepped back into the hall and tried
to slam it shut Fast as his reaction

was, it wasn't quite quick enough to stop
the door in time. In horror, Alina saw it
close briefly on his fingers.

„Jared!“ she squeaked in dismay,
yanking the door quickly open. „Oh,
Jared, I'm sorry!“

He said something explicit and unprintable, cradling the injured fingers carefully in his other hand. He shot her a reproachful look from under dark brows.

„Are you... are you all right? I tried to stop it before it closed completely. Do you think anything's broken?“

Seriously concerned, Alina reached for his hand. He gave it to her with alacrity, the rest of his body following

smoothly across the threshold. „They don't appear to be bruised,“ she said, not noticing he was inside the hall until

he closed the door softly behind him.

„They’re fine.“ He chuckled, withdrawing his hand. „There was a good sixteenth of an inch to spare. Close, but no

prize, I’m afraid.“

She glared at him. „Do you always get inside people’s homes with tricks?“

„Believe it or not, I occasionally get an invitation. Stop frowning at me like that. Don’t you want to know what I’ve got for you?“

„A bribe?“ she suggested sweetly. „It won’t work, you know. You couldn’t offer me enough money to make me

give up the film.“

„Breakfast,“ he declared succinctly.

„What?“

„I’ve brought breakfast for you. It’s in the car. Go get dressed and we’ll take it to the beach.“

She eyed him warily. „It’s foggy outside. It’ll be another couple of hours before it lifts.“

„Details, details. Where’s your sense of adventure, woman?“

She thought about that Where *was* her sense of adventure? She could handle

this man. She had something he

wanted, and she wasn't about to hand it over. It was a contest of sorts. An intriguing game. That was the way to look

at it The man hadn't been born who could defeat both her and Battista. She smiled slowly.

„Yes,“ he murmured, seeing the smile. „I rather thought you'd see it that way, sooner or later. If I were the truly

sporting type, I'd remind you of what happened to Battista after she decided she could handle Francesco....“

„Will you still be looking so pleased with yourself after I’ve published the ending of their story?“ she mocked,

turning to walk crisply back down the hall.

„Knowing, as I do, how it will end, I expect I will.“

„I’ll bet Francesco had that expression on his face when he first knocked on Battista’s door after killing her lover in

that duel! Shortly before she dropped the contents of the kitchen slop pail on his head from the second-story

window!“

„You made that up,“ he accused.

„There’s no record of her doing any such thing. Stop embellishing history and go get dressed.“

She left him in the living room and walked back to her bedroom with a regal tilt to her head. Carefully she reached

out and closed the door of the study as she went past. No sense tempting him to start prowling around in there. She

smiled to herself as she caught Battista’s eye just before shutting the door, however. Last night she had been taken

off guard. This morning she was prepared to deal with Francesco's reincarnation.

She wore the snug-fitting jeans which were really the only practical choice for the beach, but added the touches of

which Battista would have approved: a ruffled blue chambray shirt and a cream-colored, shawl-collared jacket of

softest chamois trimmed in bold brown stitching. She belted the buttery jacket with a wide silver and turquoise belt

and stepped into short, medium-heeled boots. With her shoulder-length hair caught up in a loose twist that left wispy

tendrils to tease her throat, she felt rakish and daring.

Jared's green eyes glittered with approval as she reappeared in the living room. „I wonder how the Renaissance

poets who spent hours composing odes to a woman's dress or her jewels would have dealt with the advent of jeans.“

He chuckled.

„If men still wrote poems about women's clothes, perhaps no one would have bothered to invent jeans!“

„It would have been a serious loss to the world,“ he drawled, taking her arm. „I

like you in silk, but there's

something challenging about a woman in jeans. Hungry?"

„After all that exercise I had trying to smash your fingers, yes. What did you bring? Better yet, where did you find anything at this hour of the morning?"

„Nothing like a little mystery to arouse a woman's interest," he declared complacently.

„Well?" she demanded as he eased her into the Ferrari.

„I found a bakery," he admitted „Fresh

croissants, unsalted butter and coffee.
Will that do?“

„Perfectly.“

„I thought it might Our tastes in many
things are quite similar.“

„You’re so sure of yourself,“ she
marveled, slanting him a sidelong glance
as he guided the sleek car down the hill
into town and toward the beach.

„During the past three months I’ve spent
a lot of time reading between the lines.“
He chuckled He drove with quiet
flare. Efficiently, competently, but not

recklessly. It was probably the way Francesco had ridden his war-horse.

She heaved a dramatic sigh. „Okay, why don't you tell me how you found out I had the film?“

„Simple enough. Molina called me yesterday morning.“

„He called you!“ she gasped, flinging herself around in the seat „He *called* you! Why on earth should he have

done that? I deliberately handled the whole thing as a routine request“

„He was curious about why I should be interested in the letters of an eighteenth-

century English tourist He knows

my main focus has been on Renaissance military history.“

„What... what did you tell him?“ Alina whispered, thinking of the jeopardy in which she had placed her

professional reputation. If a collector like Vittorio Molina had discovered she'd lied...!

Jared's mouth twisted briefly. „I'll have to admit, the call took me by surprise. Fortunately, he casually mentioned

your name as the dealer who had made the request on my behalf. As soon as I

heard that, I was able to put two and two together fairly quickly. I knew there was only one reason you'd risk misrepresentation."

„Battista and Francesco.“ Alina sat back, a little more relaxed. Apparently he'd covered for her with Molina. The extent of the relief she felt was considerable.

„Right. So I said I wasn't sure yet what I was going to find on the film but that I had hopes of pursuing the history of a particular *condottiere*. I left it pretty vague but he seemed satisfied.“

„And as soon as you hung up the phone, you raced over here to find out exactly what I'd discovered,“ she

concluded with a decisive little nod.

„It was, as I told you last night, the last straw. I couldn't wait any longer to meet my modern-day Battista,“ he

agreed softly.

He parked the Ferrari in a turnout above the crashing surf and eyed the fog-shrouded beach. „I think this is going to be an indoor picnic.“

„It's all right I don't have any objection

to dropping crumbs on your nice leather seats.“

„In exchange for which privilege, you could at least tell me what's of interest in those eighteenth-century tourist

letters,“ he murmured, reaching behind the seat for a white sack.

„Ah hah! I knew it! You're trying to find out what's on that film!“

„Well, I can't deny that I'm curious,“ he soothed, handing her a Styrofoam cup of coffee and arranging the

croissants carefully on a napkin. „I'm not asking for details, just a general

idea...?“

Alina hesitated, torn between the need, to gloat and the need for secrecy. She wrestled with the two for a while and

finally compromised. „The English tourist,“ she stated with barely repressed excitement, „appears to have stayed at the

villa which had once belonged to Battista.“

There was a thick silence. She knew that in spite of his claims, Jared was suddenly, fiercely alert.

„Before it was gutted by fire?“ he

breathed as if hardly daring to ask for clarification.

She nodded with a triumphant smile.
„And there was a library....“

Jared whistled silently, croissant forgotten. „Oh, my God!“

„And this wonderful, unremembered tourist wrote letters home to a friend, telling him what he was discovering in

the library,“ she concluded kindly.

„Things about a certain former owner of the villa...”

Jared manfully swallowed a large swig of coffee, clearly trying to act as

nonchalant as possible. He didn't fool

Alina for a second. She remembered her own indescribable thrill when she'd first realized what she was on to. He was

going through the same thing.

She watched him drag himself back under control and hid a smile.

„Have you – “ He broke off and tried again. „Have you had a chance to view the film?“ He sounded as if he were

walking on eggs. Cautious.

„No. I'm going to take it down to the library and use one of their microfilm

readers. It's going to take a lot of time

because there's bound to be a considerable amount of unrelated information in the letters, and you know how hard it

is to read that eighteenth-century handwriting. I'll start on the project early next week. I don't want to be rushed."

"No..." The remains of the Styrofoam cup disintegrated between his fingers. Jared looked blankly down at the

crushed plastic as if not quite realizing he'd done it. Alina's smile broadened. He glanced up and caught it, and his

glance flashed with enigmatic warning.

„If,“ he began coolly, „I give you my word not to dangle you by the heels out over the surf until you agree to let

me see the film, will you promise to have dinner with me tonight?“

Her laughter was uncontainable. It bubbled over in triumphant, elated glee.

„Poor Jared!“ she taunted lightly,

warmly, understanding^.

He brushed the remains of the cup from his slacks, deftly whisked the croissant from her lap, and yanked her lightly

across his knees. „Not so poor,“ he growled, holding her trapped between his chest and the steering wheel.

„You’ve

got the answer to what happened between Francesco and Battista, and I’ve got you. It all comes to the same thing in

the end.“

„Not a chance!“ she retorted bravely, aware of the electric excitement flowing through her even as she tried to

struggle up from the confining embrace.

He drew tantalizing fingers down the

line of her throat, his gaze turning very green. „It’s been a long time since I

made love to a woman in the front seat of a car.“

He eased her head back onto his shoulder and took her lips, gently crushing her cry of protest.

4

Her protest having been made, Alina resigned herself to the kiss with rueful understanding. She knew exactly what

was going through Jared Troy’s head, and she understood completely. He was really doing very well to limit his

outward signs of frustration over her possession of the film to a mere kiss. If the situation had been reversed, Alina

knew she would have seriously considered giving herself the satisfaction of pushing him into the ocean.

Unable to move as his mouth swept down on hers, Alina told herself to be patient. There was no point fighting

him. What could he do to her in the front seat of a car? No, she was safe enough for the moment, and after a while he

would have worked off some of his natural and understandable aggression....

But even as she let herself relax against him, Alina knew she was becoming far too conscious of the hard body

against which she nestled. Beneath the fabric of his shirt she sensed the strength in him. And as she lay sprawled

across his thighs, the urgent, demanding maleness of him pressed against her.

Alina stirred with belated uneasiness, but as she did so the gently crushing kiss began to change, invoking the

brief passion she had first experienced at his hands the previous evening.

Her feelings of triumph and of having the

upper hand because she held the film
wavered. The impact of the

sensually increasing desire in Jared
started to blot out the facts of the
situation, filling up all the space in her
mind with

a demand that she acknowledge his need.

His lips moved on hers, deeply, with a
lazy aggression that told her he was
confident of the eventual outcome. As

confident as Francesco had been of
Battista. She lifted her hands, intent on
levering herself away from him, only to

find them caught and carefully held „It's

a small enough price to pay, isn't it?" he growled huskily against her mouth.

„You owe me something for the way you got that film....“

Alina turned her head aside in annoyance. „I don't owe you anything!“

„You're wrong. You've promised so much during the past three months....“

Before she could argue the point further, he was invading the intimate warmth of her mouth, his tongue seeking to

mate with hers. When she lost her patience and knew the next thing to go would be her willpower, Alina began to

fight

back.

Deliberately she used her teeth on his marauding tongue, sinking her amber-frosted nails deeply into the

pin-striped shirt at the same time.

He winced at the sudden punishment and she heard the muttered oath as he momentarily drew away.

Wordlessly he examined her challenging, warning expression, his eyes narrowed and thoughtful. „The arrogance of

a woman,“ he finally rasped, „can be incredible. No wonder Francesco was reduced to beating Battista!“

„He never...!“

This time her words were cut off by the flash of ruthless dominance which washed over her. The gentle demand

was gone from his kiss as he forced her mouth open once more and used his teeth not quite gently on her lips.

In spite of herself, Alina acknowledged that she might have deserved the small attack. She also knew with sheer

feminine intuition that it would cease as

soon as she surrendered. Jared wanted her. He didn't want to fight her for the embrace.

As that fact registered, another shock awaited. Jared's hand moved boldly, possessively to her breast, slipping

inside the chamois leather jacket to close warmly over the soft curve.

Caught between the realistic knowledge that she was ultimately quite safe here on a public beach and the mounting

level of beguilement filling the confines of the car, Alina stopped struggling. She let the waves of his desire wash over

her and knew, even as she did so, that she was glorying in the power she seemed to have. Something told her that

Jared Troy did not lose his self-control easily.

„You are so exactly as I imagined you would be,“ he breathed, ignoring her small attempts to restrain his fingers as

they found the buttons of the chambray shirt „So exactly what’s been missing in my life.“

When he slid his fingers inside the blue shirt at last, gliding unerringly across the slope of her breast to find the

exquisitely sensitive nipple, Alina sucked in her breath and found herself arching into him.

„I need you,“ he whispered throatily as she buried her face against his shoulder. He kissed the curve of her throat

and trailed stinging little caresses around to the nape of her neck.

His fingers coaxed forth her nipple, bringing it to a taut erectness which seemed to spark her whole body into

greater awareness. Convulsively Alina's hands gripped his shoulders, and she turned her head blindly to find the

curve of his shoulder, pushing aside the open collar of his shirt.

„Oh!“ she cried, the small sound nearly stifled by the unfamiliar pressure of increasing sexual urgency.

The betraying shiver slid down the length of her body, and she knew Jared felt it. At once his hand stroked more deeply. He found the softness of her stomach with caressing fingers.

Tracing delicate, arousing patterns on her skin, he worked around the curve of her waist, pulling the blue shirt free and pushing it and the chamois jacket

aside.

In another moment she lay exposed to his hungry gaze, her breasts hardened into betraying peaks. With a groan he

shifted her slightly, bending his head to curl his tongue around the firm nipples. His hand found the sensitive base of

her spine and probed luxuriously beneath the tight jeans.

Alina almost didn't recognize the moan, found it hard to believe it had issued from her own throat Jared wasn't the

only one who was losing his self-control, she thought crazily. An

unfamiliar desire threatened to leave her shivering

and helpless in his arms.

Reality began to slip farther and farther out of reach. The world compressed itself, telescoping into the front seat of the black Ferrari. A curiosity unlike anything she had ever known began to goad Alina, urge her to further discoveries.

The closest emotion she could identify it with was the consuming inquisitiveness she'd had to probe every aspect of the life of Battista and Francesco. But

the sensation was more immediate, more electric than the curiosity she had about the two Renaissance lovers.

Coming alive under his touch, Alina moved against Jared's hardness, finding the crisp hair of his chest as she

fumbled with the buttons of his shirt His slightly incoherent response only served to arouse her further. She began to

string kisses along the line of his collarbone, kneading his chest like a cat as she moved lower against him. He buried

his lips in her hair as she finally touched

the tip of her tongue to the flat male nipples, and the groan of response came from deep within his chest „Touch me,“ he pleaded hoarsely. „I’ve dreamed of it for so long....“

Lost in a whirling universe of sensation that fed off the driving demand of his obvious need, Alina spread damp

little kisses across the tanned chest while her hands worked against the firm flesh of his waist and back.

She felt his touch along her thigh as he explored the curve of her, knew he wanted to be rid of the interfering fabric

of her jeans. When his hand stroked over her hip and back down she found herself seeking the throbbing hardness

beneath his slacks with her own fingers.

His response was sharp and immediate. As if she'd pulled the trigger of a gun, he froze.

The next thing she knew he was pulling her reluctantly but firmly more erect, cradling her against him while he

buttoned her shirt with surprisingly unsteady fingers.

„Not here,“ he whispered with a trace of shaky amusement „Not on a public

beach. I want privacy and all the time in the world. After waiting this long, it's going to be right, not rushed!"

„Jared...”?“

She looked up at him through her lashes, instinctively seeking some explanation for her own response. It had never

been this sudden, this uninhibited. She knew herself capable of what she thought of as a normal degree of affection,

but this had been far beyond normal.

„I know, I know,“ he soothed achingly,

finishing the task of rebuttoning the blue shirt and beginning to stroke her

with long, consoling movements from shoulder to thigh. He pushed her head down on his shoulder, and his mouth

twisted in a tender little smile.

„What do you know?“ she husked.

„I know how you feel,“ he said simply.

„I expect this is how it was for Battista and Francesco. They didn't stand a

chance of ignoring each other once they'd met And neither do we. Don't look so shocked,“ he added with tender

humor. „I’m as caught up in this as you are. It wouldn’t take much for me to forget all my good intentions and take what’s mine here and now.“

„What good intentions?“ she managed, reacting to the sure possessiveness in his voice by struggling awkwardly

out of his loose grasp and settling into her seat with an annoyed flounce. „I didn’t notice an overabundance of good intentions just now!“

He watched her, green eyes still full of an unsatisfied hunger. „I told myself it should be done right Candlelight and

wine, more of the conversation we've already started in our letters, all the trappings. A woman like you should be

wooed and won on several levels. Don't you think I know that? I'm not an idiot I know that it's no good unless I have

all of you."

She stared at him, wanting to scoff or tell him to go to hell, and totally unable to do either. Alina felt trapped,

mesmerized by the spell he was weaving. „Why should you want all of me?" she finally asked on a thread of sound.

„Can't you guess? Don't you know you're the one person who can fill the empty places in my life? More than that,

you're the one person capable of making me realize what it is to be lonely. I need you. I want you. I won't be satisfied

until I have you. All of you. There is nothing else I can say, no simpler way of expressing it My need is so great that it

took me three months to work up the courage to come and get you. The fear of finding out that the woman I had come

to know through her letters didn't really exist was paralyzing. But when you opened that door last night, I knew she

was real.“

She reacted to the utter certainty in him with a woman's instinct for self-preservation – Battista's instinct „Jared, it

doesn't work like that, and if you'd read my letters as carefully as you say you have, you'd know it! Your interest in

me hinges on our quarrel over Battista and Francesco. Perhaps in some way you've identified me with her, I don't

know. Perhaps you've identified yourself with Francesco. But don't think that, like him, you can bully your way into

my life----“

„He didn't force his way into Battista's life. Not the first time. You yourself admitted he seduced her,“ Jared said meaningfully.

„Well, forewarned is forearmed! I'm not going to let you seduce me!“

„Don't be afraid of me....“

„I'm not afraid of you, dammit!“

He appeared to consider that. „No, I don't think you are. It's yourself you're worried about, isn't it? You've got

your life arranged just the way you want it, and you're afraid of letting me into it. But am I such a risk? You know who I

am. You know a great deal about me. I'm not a passing stranger. We've corresponded for three months, and now I'm

here to meet you in person. All I'm asking, for the moment, is that you spend the day with me and have dinner with me

tonight Is that too much? After all we've shared for the past three months?"

„You're trying to coax me into a relationship which I have no interest in pursuing....“ she began resentfully,

knowing she was already responding to his lures.

„Just think, instead of arguing with me on paper, you can have the satisfaction of making all your points in

person,“ he prompted. „Surely you’re not going to admit you can’t handle me. What would Battista say?“

In spite of herself, Alina felt the sudden laughter in her threaten to spill over. Her hazel eyes were lit with it as she

regarded her tormentor.

„You’re not fooling me for a minute, you know. I realize you’re deliberately

trying to back me into a corner from which my pride will allow only one exit. I'm quite familiar with your various techniques of getting me to agree with you.

You've used them all in your letters! But they won't work any better in person than they did through the mail!“

He sighed. „Perhaps. But they're worth a try. Can you really resist the opportunity of spending the day arguing

with me about Battista and Francesco, though?“

Alina tipped her head to one side, once

again, now that he no longer held her, aware of a feeling of being in

command of the situation. And she had the confidence which had come since her disastrous marriage had terminated.

Alina was very accustomed to having things go her way. She could manage herself and her life. „You have a point,“ she drawled.

A slow, mocking grin revealed his own half-buried laughter. But the expression in the gem-green eyes was one of

undeflected determination. „I know,“ he said. Then he flicked a casual glance out

the window, satisfied for the moment

with his small victory. „The fog’s clearing. How about a drive up the coast? It’s been awhile since I saw the ocean.“

„Nobody said you had to live in Palm Springs!“

„It suits me. Most of the time.“ He switched on the powerful engine and put the Ferrari in gear.

Something occurred to her. One of the insignificant little things which shouldn’t have mattered to her one way or

the other.

„How do you run your business from Palm Springs? Have you an office there?“

„I have a portion of my home set up as an office. I operate alone, you see. I follow the market activity with a small

business computer, and I have a couple of telephones. It's all I need.“

„A regular cottage industry,“ she quipped, thinking of the rumors she'd heard of his success in the commodities and stock markets. Quick, decisive kills and then total disappearance from the scene for a while. Ruthless, hard, and

very, very shrewd.

They wound their way through the now sunny, elegantly Spanish-style town by the sea. Following a few

directions from Alina, Jared guided the car along the streets that ran closest to the water. They passed secluded, exotic

beachfront homes, busy motels catering to tourists, and acres of green parks. Stretching back up into the hills, the

Spanish architecture of the town's homes gleamed brightly in the morning light.

„How did you wind up in Santa Barbara?“ Jared asked at one point as

they drove through the green hills above the sea.

„I moved here right after graduating from college. I decided that since I was finally going to have to face the real world to some extent, I would make sure I had a pleasant view of it!“

He chuckled appreciatively. „A picture-postcard town, all right. Did you have a job lined up?“

„No, but I knew I wanted eventually to open a bookstore. I went to work for Nick Elden....“

„I thought you two were partners?“

„A couple of years ago Nick let me buy into his business. He's taught me so much!“

Jared looked as if he were digesting that remark carefully. „Does the book shop deal only in rare books?“ he finally asked neutrally.

„No, we're a very diversified store. New and used and rare. Nick has a genuine flare for finding buyers and sellers

in the rare-book trade. We've found some absolutely unbelievable things for

people. A wonderful copy of Samuel

Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language* from 1755 came across my desk just the other day. And I found a first

edition of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* for a client who specializes in collecting horror stories. You should see it," she added

with a laugh. „It was bound in bright yellow cloth with blood-red lettering!“

„That was printed about the turn of the century, wasn't it?“

She nodded. „We've had some very

early Spencer and Milton and a couple of sixteenth-century books of manners.

Lovely stuff," she added with a satisfied sigh.

„You're fortunate to have a career which blends with your own personal interests," Jared observed quietly, his eyes on the road.

„Don't you enjoy making money?" she retorted cheekily.

„It's a means to an end." He shrugged. „I happen to be reasonably good at it, but I can't say it gives me any great

pleasure.“

„Just allows you to buy the things you want?“ she finished for him.

„Some of them,“ he admitted with a sidelong glance that said a great deal.

„Not all.“

„Not me,“ Alina verified carefully, lifting her chin with a touch of aggression.

„No, unfortunately,“ he agreed. „It would make things much simpler if that were the case!“

Satisfied at having made her position clear, Alina relaxed a little further,

taking pleasure in the day and the drive.
As

if a truce had been declared and
accepted, the conversation flowed easily
between them. As easily as it did
between

old friends, Alina thought at one point,
masking her amusement.

To her surprise they didn't wind up
arguing about Battista and Francesco
after all. For some reason the two

passionate footnotes to history took
second place in Alina's mind to the
unexpected interest she found herself
taking

in her modern-day *condottiere*.

There were questions she found herself asking which she would never have asked through the mail, little things

which shouldn't really have intrigued her in the first place. Her own curiosity was strangely unnerving, but not nearly

so unnerving as the realization of just how much she did know about him.

There were moments when she could almost

read his mind, and it was those instances which made her wonder just how much she had learned about him through

his letters. She had, indeed, been reading between the lines!

He took her home eventually, driving past the lovely old Spanish mission church and winding up the hillside

beyond to where her condominium was perched.

„I'll be back in a couple of hours,“ he said, leaving her at the door late that afternoon. „Time enough?“

„To dress for dinner? Yes.“ She watched him go, taking a subconscious pleasure in the smooth coordination of his

movements as he slid into the car. Five hundred years ago he would have mounted a horse or climbed into a carriage

with just that degree of ease and assurance. A vital, healthy, gracefully strong man. For the first time she allowed

herself to wonder about his love life. Almost at once she backed away from the issue. A man like that would not lack for female companionship.

So why, she wondered again later as she dressed with more than her usual care, had she always assumed him to be

an isolated, even lonely man from his letters? He himself had confirmed this.

She chose a full-sleeved burgundy velvet dinner dress that fell below her knee. The wide, romantic sleeves were caught in narrow cuffs stitched in gold. A metallic gold sash wrapped her waist, gently emphasizing her slenderness.

The V-neck accented the simple gold chain at her throat, and she concluded the gold touches with a clip that held her softly folded hair. Battista would have liked the outfit. Catching sight of herself in the mirror, Alina winced ruefully as

she remembered Jared's comments on her clothes the night before: barely restrained opulence.

But when she opened the door to him later she was fiercely glad she had chosen the burgundy velvet. Nothing

less would have done justice to her date for the evening.

Jared's basically conservative taste was evident in the fine, dark material of his suit, but the outfit had the sleek,

close-fitting look of Italian design. It emphasized his lean, rangy strength so well she knew it must have been

handmade. A subtly striped shirt and coolly marked silk tie also had that European look and fit The cocoa dark hair

was still damp and carefully combed and Alina had to fight a horrifying urge to ruffle it with her amber-tipped nails.

The thought brought a flush to her cheeks, which stayed there as she saw his slow smile of appreciation. There was

no denying they were thoroughly pleased with each other.

„Both of us may have been reading a little too much Italian Renaissance

history,“ she said lightly to break the

thread of sensual tension that hung in the air between them.

„On us it looks good.“ Jared chuckled, handing her into the black car. „Aren't you going to ask me where we're

going? Santa Barbara is, after all, your turf. I'd have thought you'd be worrying about an outsider not knowing where

to take you for dinner.“

„Frankly I hadn't thought about it,“ she admitted, savoring the close intimacy which enveloped the small cockpit

as he slid in beside her. „You would have asked for suggestions if you'd wanted them.“

„You know me so well,“ he murmured lightly, switching on the ignition.

She started to make a flippant reply, found herself hesitating, and said instead with a kind of wonder, „Sometimes I

think I do. It's strange, isn't it? This afternoon I felt as if we'd known each other for – “

„A good three months?“ He grinned.

Alina laughed and the mood of the evening was set.

He took her to the elegant lounge and dining room of an old-world hotel by the sea. As with almost everything else

in Santa Barbara, the architecture was unmistakably Spanish, with cool vistas opening onto charming gardens. The

cuisine and service, however, were continental. After a pleasant discussion of the possibilities on the menu, they

settled on spinach salad with a sizzling hot dressing, scallops mousseline accompanied by paper-thin slices of smoked

salmon and sauteed cucumbers, and a kiwi-fruit tart for dessert The wine was

a pale Riesling from one of the exotic little boutique wineries of Northern California.

The candlelight gleamed on the snowy tablecloth and polished the silver. It threw heavy, mysterious shadows on

Alina's burgundy velvet and burnished her gold jewelry. And it seemed to her that Jared's eyes turned more and more into emeralds every time he looked at her.

„Tell me,“ she asked midway through the scallops mousseline, „how did you come by your interest in Renaissance

military history? A holdover from your college years?“

„I’m afraid there wasn’t anything to be held over from my college years,“ he said quietly. „I went to work straight out of high school.“

Alina, who hadn’t bothered to date a man in years who didn’t share her academic background, thought about that

„Doing what?“ she finally asked curiously.

„Running errands for Vittorio Molina,“ he told her calmly, but the emerald eyes gleamed.

The slice of sauteed cucumber on the end of Alina's fork fell ignominiously to her plate as she flinched in reaction.

She shut her eyes in rueful despair. „I never stood a chance. No wonder he called you to ask why you wanted a microfilm of those letters.“

„He was a little curious as to why I hadn't asked for them myself,“ Jared admitted dryly, sipping his Riesling and watching her with barely concealed amusement.

„Oh, dear.“

„I told him you were tracking down information for me from any available source and simply had pursued the letters

on your own. Which was the truth as far as it went“

„I feel like an idiot! I guess I would never make it as a black-market art dealer. Little mistakes like that could destroy

that sort of career!“ Jared’s mouth quirked but he said nothing, watching as she mulled over her faux pas. „Running errands for him, hmmm? What sort of errands?“ she asked finally, anxious to

change the conversation.

„Molina is one of the most brilliant financiers I've ever met He took me on as an assistant and taught me

everything I know. His art and rare-book collection is an integral part of his life, so it became a part of mine.“

„What happened? I mean, you don't still work for him----“

„We had what could be termed a parting of the ways,“ Jared explained deliberately, his eyes on the wine in his glass as he swirled it gently.

Alina tried to figure out exactly what that meant. „You wanted to go off on your own eventually?“

He looked up. „Yes.“

She frowned. „Was he angry when you left? Did he think you should have stayed with him?“

„We parted amicably. There were no hard feelings because I left before our independent natures came into severe

conflict“ Jared grinned dryly. „I think he knew our relationship had reached a point where I would have to go off on my

own. I was no longer an apprentice. He gave me his blessing and a very beautiful copy of Baldassare Castiglione's

Courtier. “

„Ib sort of round out your education?“ Alina chuckled, thinking of the famous Renaissance book of manners which

had influenced Western social behavior to the present day. *The Courtier* covered everything from table manners to

bedroom manners.

„It's a very useful book, you'll have to admit,“ Jared said with a small laugh.

„Castiglione was well aware of the need for gamesmanship in a gentleman's behavior! Vittorio Molina understands such things. And he approves of the

Renaissance ideal of the worldly, broadly educated man who can do everything with that easy nonchalance the

Renaissance termed *sprezzatura*. “

„And which we, today, have downgraded to the phrase ‘being cool,’“ Alina concluded. „So you had a humanist's

education, after all.“ The notion of a

liberal arts or humanistic education had begun in the Renaissance.

„I’m afraid so. Not as formal as yours, perhaps, but rather varied when I think back on it. Did you major in history in college?“

She nodded. „But it didn’t really become a passion until I started working in the book shop. Exposure to the rare materials Nick handles bred a kind of obsession in me. And for some reason that obsession focused on the Renaissance.“

There was a short pause and then Jared asked carefully, as if he had to know, „This Nick Elden. Has he tried to become more than a teacher and partner?“

Alina's head came up at once, her eyes cooling. „Nick is a friend. I owe him a great deal“

„Did you plan to take him as a lover one day?“ he persisted grimly.

„If I did, it wouldn't be any of your business, would it?“ she retorted, goaded.

„Of course it would. I have no wish to

come home some day and find I'm obliged to call him out," Jared murmured

baitingly.

She saw the humor in his eyes and told herself he was merely teasing her. She could give as good as she got „You'

re not taking a truly Renaissance approach to the subject, Jared. Romantic intrigues, infidelity, and seductions were

very important to courtly life! A major source of amusement. Probably took the place of television.“

He gave her his rather dangerous smile.

„The intrigues and seductions were considered all very well when it came to another man's woman, but a lover took good care to keep a vigilant eye on his own!“

„No one kept an eye on Battista! She was her own master!“

„Until Francesco came along,“ Jared reminded her firmly.

„I have a feeling it's time to change the topic again,“ Alina stated grandly. „If you want to discuss someone's love life, talk about your own!“

„I thought you'd never ask.“

She bared her teeth at him and then quickly had to change the expression to a polite smile as the wine steward

approached to pour more Riesling into their glasses.

But when the man had turned away from the table with a small bow, Jared's eyes had sobered. He leaned forward

intently. „There is no one else in my life, Alina. I was married once. It happened when I was about thirty, and like

yours, the marriage was a mistake. I was a businessman and I made a business

arrangement with a beautiful woman

who thought she would be happy marrying a successful man and being his hostess. The arrangement failed.

Largely, I

think, because we were incredibly bored with each other right from the start! She left me to marry a much more dashing,

jet-set acquaintance, and I was vastly relieved to see her go. End of story.“

Alina stiffened at the bluntly told tale.

„I'm sure you haven't been totally alone since your marriage,“ she managed

coolly.

„Yes,“ he stated categorically. „I have.“
He saw the disbelieving look in her
widening eyes and shook his head

impatiently. „There have been nights in
the beds of other women, but they meant
nothing. I didn't particularly want

them to mean anything. I wasn't even
conscious of my loneliness until I found
myself eagerly awaiting your letters. I

was thoroughly shaken the day I realized
I was actually watching for the
mailman!“

Unthinkingly Alina's mouth curved
upward as she recalled the eagerness
with which she received the letters

postmarked Palm Springs. She had told herself she was merely interested in the next skirmish over Battista and

Francesco, but deep down she knew there had been more to it than that. The sensual tension that had hovered around

them all day quickened, compounded by the flickering sensation of mutual recognition. It was, Alina thought later as

she went into his arms on the dance floor, a little like meeting someone you had known once before very long ago.

Five hundred years ago?

It was inevitable, Alina decided later, that she would invite him in for coffee. And it was probably equally inevitable that Jared would accept the invitation as if he had expected nothing less.

She served it to him, a rich aromatic brew laced with a fragrant liqueur, and placed a plate of tiny, exquisitely rich chocolates on the glass-topped coffee table in front of the white banquette where they sat „I have to leave in the morning,“ Jared said abruptly, breaking the soft silence.

She glanced up, meeting his eyes over the gilt rim of the tiny white coffee cup. The rush of disappointment

appalled her. How could she possibly feel this way after such a short time? But she had given up seeking answers to

such questions. They had been plaguing her all evening, and there were no easy explanations.

„I see.“

His eyes softened as he studied her. She sat with one leg tucked under her, the burgundy velvet spread gracefully

around her. The small, wine-colored

shoes she had worn lay abandoned on the rug beneath the coffee table.

„It’s business,“ he elaborated.

„Something which can’t wait. I’ll be back as soon as I can.“

„Will you?“ she asked gently.

„Nothing on earth could keep me away.“

He set his cup and saucer down on the table, the emerald eyes darkening as he reached to take her cup out of her

hand and place it beside his.

Without a word he pulled her to him, and Alina went, her doubts and uncertainties

falling aside as his lips took
hers.

This time she gave herself up to the swirling magic that he wove around them. The day had been so good, the evening so perfect, and she felt she knew him so intimately on so many levels....

With a sigh Alina surrendered to the need and longing in him. Jared felt her body soften in his arms and groaned, making no secret of his desire. „You have given me so much today and this evening,“ he rasped, his mouth sliding

with clinging warmth across her own.
„And all I can do is ask for more. I find I
am a very greedy man.“

His hands moved on the velvet of her
dress, molding the outlines of her body
beneath it Slowly he leaned back

along the cushions, pulling her on top of
him. The burgundy dress cascaded in
soft folds across his slacks as he

settled her legs between his own.

She lay along the length of him, vibrantly
aware of the hardness in his thighs, the
buckle of his leather belt as it

pressed into the material of her dress,

and the urgent but carefully restrained want in him. It was as if he feared to push

too fast and too hard. As if he wanted everything to be right...

Somehow his determination to make love to her so perfectly weakened her resistance still further. Unthinkingly she

wound her arms around his neck, succumbing to the incredible lure of him. It had been working on her all day, she

realized dimly. And now she could no longer fight it This must have been how Francesco had affected Battista,

disrupting her coolly ordered, graciously structured life.

Jared accepted her growing surrender with the gratitude of a truly thirsty man, drinking in the wine of her lips with unflagging desire.

His mouth feasted on hers, deepening the kiss with a ravishing seductiveness that put all thought of the future out

of Alina's mind. The hypnotic effect was a seduction in itself. She was rapidly discovering the indescribable sensation

of genuinely uncontrollable passion. It was a sensation she had never known.

The almost casual demands of her husband had never reached her at these levels.

Slowly, wonderingly, she sank deeper and deeper beneath the waves, her mouth flowering beneath Jared's,

allowing a moist, hot intimacy as his tongue found hers.

When she began to respond, her lips making demands of their own, her arms tightening around his neck, Alina felt

Jared suck in his breath heavily, his body arching upward against hers. He cupped her curving hips and pulled her

tightly into his heat.

„Leaving you in the morning will be the hardest thing I've had to do in a long time,“ he grated fiercely as he sought

her earlobe with questing, tantalizing, gently nipping teeth. „Will you come with me?“

„I... I can't,“ she breathed helplessly. „My job...“

„I know, I know,“ he whispered resignedly. „I'll be back as soon as I can.“

„Let's not talk about it,“ she pleaded, tasting the tanned skin of his throat with

the tip of her tongue and inhaling

the warm, musky scent of his body.

„No,“ he agreed. „We'll talk about the future later....“

She felt the zipper of the velvet dress slowly, lovingly lowered and then the touch of his slightly calloused palms

on the bare flesh of her back. It sent tremors of excitement through her.

Her rioting senses urging her on, she began unlacing the silk tie around his neck, sliding it free with a teasing

sensuality that elicited another surging

movement of his body against hers.

Slowly, driven by a sudden, inexplicable desire to tease and taunt the man beneath her until his passion overrode

his restraint, she undid the buttons of his shirt, and when he was free of it, she wrapped the tie once again around his

neck. She held a silk end in each hand and used them to draw fragile patterns in the roughness of his chest hair.

„That tickles,“ he murmured, half in passion and half in warning humor.

She bent to kiss his shoulder, her body

flowing over his.

„You said Battista was the ultimate tease,“ he grated deeply. „But you seem to have studied her techniques!“

„Instinct,“ she murmured lightly, using her teeth with tiny savagery on the muscle of his upper arm. It was a delight to feel him come alive, to realize he was in danger of losing the self-control he was striving to maintain. A delight she would never have dreamed would appeal to her.

„Even the professional tease met her match,“ he reminded her roughly, his

hands sliding along her back to her derriere as he explored beneath the opened zipper of her dress.

„Are you threatening me?“

„More than you can even guess.“

Heedlessly she stirred against his thighs, feeling the hardness of him and glorying in it.

„Ah!“ he growled huskily, and with a swift, impatient movement he stripped the dress down to her waist, leaving her utterly naked above the hips.

Alina shivered from the coolness of the room and the raging green fire in the eyes which went to the tips of her breasts.

With easy mastery Jared shifted, moving her beneath him, his body settling on hers with a heavy, sensual weight that nearly took her breath away.

„Oh, yes, please!“ Convulsively Alina wrapped her arms around his back beneath the opened shirt, her eyes closing in delirious surrender to the wash of physical sensation which enveloped her.

He kissed her tightly closed eyes and then the line of her cheek. Slowly, passionately, he worked his way down her

throat to the slope of her breasts. There his mouth plucked at the eager nipples until they grew hard and taut When he

was at last satisfied with the reaction of her body he moved lower. Alina felt the burgundy dress being pushed over

her hips, out of the way of the advancing touch of his hands and his lips. Her lacy underpants and sheer pantyhose

followed the dress.

Her fingers wound themselves in his dark hair as he strung teasing, inciting little kisses along her waist and over the soft mound below.

When he drew his nails lightly along the vulnerable inside of her thigh she moaned, one knee lifting convulsively alongside him and her toes digging tensely into the white cushion.

„Jared, oh, Jared!“

Her husky plea provoked him further, and he turned his lips into the silkiness of her inner thigh. She felt the gentle,

stinging nip of his teeth and shuddered.

Slowly, with a rising tempo that nearly drove her out of her mind, he wove a dancing pattern over the most intimate

core of her passion. Head thrown back, her body arched with the tension of a bowstring, seeking more and more of him.

She cried out when he suddenly drew away, getting to his feet beside the white couch. But almost at once he was

bending down to scoop her naked body high against his chest.

Her mind spinning, she clung to him, her head nestled on his shoulder as he carried her with sure instinct down the hall to her bedroom. He stopped first at the door of the study, however, and chuckled softly as he realized his mistake.

„Wrong room,“ he murmured, striding on to the right one.

The moment of lightness agitated faint warning bells in Alina's dazed brain, causing her to lift her head and open

her eyes. He looked down at her as she lay in his arms, obviously seeing the traces of uncertainty which had come so

belatedly. Then he was settling her gently on her feet beside the bed. His eyes never left hers as he yanked the white

bedspread with its brilliant crewel embroidery down to the foot of the brass bed.

Then his hands cupped her face with rough gentleness. „No,“ he half pleaded, half ordered. „You wouldn't do that to me.“

„Do what?“ she whispered, knowing he knew of her sudden doubts.

„You would not play out the role of the

quintessential tease. Not tonight Not with the one man on earth who needs you so badly!“

His words tugged at her, destroying the faint wave of doubts. He wanted her so desperately, and she wanted him.

Even Battista had felt this way once in her life. Now. at long last, Alina understood why her Renaissance mentor had

succumbed to Francesco.

„No,“ she breathed, her hands gliding around his waist to rest on the leather belt. „Not with you. Not tonight...“

She felt rather than heard his groaning sigh of relief and masculine exultation. He folded her close, his embrace

momentarily not passionate but almost reverential. It was enough to convince Alina she had made the right decision.

Slowly, letting the wonder of the moment take her completely, she undid the belt, easing down his zipper and

letting him step quickly out of his clothes. When at last they stood fully nude together beside the bed, Alina thought

she would become delirious with the electric desire which shot through her.

They touched each other with undisguised pleasure, Jared finding the most intimate curves of her softness while

Alina explored the thrilling hardness of his tightly drawn body. Lovingly her hands cupped his maleness, bringing a hoarse sound of need from his lips.

Slowly she sank to the floor in front of him, her fingers kneading the muscles of his thighs and calves as she reigned kisses down the length of his body.

„My lovely Alina,“ he husked, his hands

burying themselves in her hair as she knelt in front of him. „You are more

than I had dreamed you could be. I think I've been waiting for you for five hundred years.“

He lifted her to her feet, kissing her with deep passion as he found the junction of her tapering legs with one

questing hand. A hiss of satisfaction escaped him as he found her waiting secret. „You are so warm and welcoming,

my lady. I can't wait any longer for you.“

„Yes,“ she managed in a broken whisper. „I need you so much... More than I had ever realized a woman could need a man.“

He picked her up again and set her gently in the middle of the brass bed, and then he was lowering himself on top of her, easing his strong legs between hers with passion and power.

Slowly, with an infinitely erotic grace, Jared completed the final embrace, his body joining with hers so completely

Alina could not imagine ever being a single, finite individual again. There

would always be some fleeting,
inseparable

reminder of this moment of sharing. It
would be with her the rest of her life.

With a savoring intensity, the passion
between them escalated, the rhythm of
the timeless bonding claiming them

both. Alina heard the little moans and
cries that issued from the back of her
throat, felt them swallowed by his
hungry

mouth.

Her nails raked lovingly down his back,
conveying her growing urgency as an

unfamiliar tautness grew in the region below her stomach. Her hands clenched almost violently around the muscular male buttock as the tension in her

rose, crying out for a release which could only be provided by the man holding her so tightly.

„Jared, oh, Jared!“

He must have heard the questioning, pleading tone in her words because his hands smoothed roughly over the

skin of her rib cage, down to close under her hips, and pulled her even more

tightly to him. „It will happen, darling,“
he

assured her thickly. „Just let it happen.“

She believed him, in that moment she
would have believed anything he said.
But she didn't know quite what to

expect. Never had she felt such sensual
straining in her own body. The affection
that had characterized the first

months of her marriage was a pale
reflection of genuine passion. It had been
easy to set aside the memories of her

husband's weak embraces. Jared's
loving mastery of her body would never

be forgotten.

Trusting him, she clung, letting her body react and rejoice. And then, quite suddenly, the ultimate convulsion

claimed her with thrilling power, stealing the very breath from her body.

Instinctively she clutched at him more violently than ever, and with this evidence of her satisfaction singing its

siren song, Jared could no longer resist giving way to his own completion.

His throaty exclamation of fulfillment mingled with hers as together they plunged over the brink and began the

long, languid fall back to the dark, warm reality of the bedroom.

It was a long, pleasant time before Alina felt like stirring. When she did so, carefully stretching her legs which lay

trapped under Jared's, the warm arm lying across her breasts tightened.

„Going somewhere?“ Jared murmured indulgently.

„I don't have to. This is my bedroom, remember? I'm home.“

„So you are. And so am I.“ She heard the satisfaction in him and wondered at it. Did he really feel that way?

„Jared?“

„Hmmmm?“ His voice was the sleepy, satiated sound of a lazy male lion.

„Do you think this is the way it was between Battista and Francesco?“

He chuckled, his lips in her unbound hair. „I know it was.“

„How do you know?“

„Are you always going to be this chatty afterward?“ he asked interestedly.

„I don't know yet. There haven't been enough afterwards to see if a pattern is going to develop,“ she retorted

tranquilly, wiggling her toes and peering down the length of her body to watch them.

„There will be,“ he promised complacently. „Now it's rime you went to sleep.“

„Why?“

„Because it's very late and you have totally exhausted me!“

„Oh.“

„Don't sound so pleased with yourself,“ he ordered, enfolding her still damp body. „I'm the one who did all the

work of getting you where you belong.“

„In bed with you?“

„Correct“

„Are you hungry or anything? I’ve got some milk in the refrigerator....“

He placed a gentle palm firmly over her mouth, levered himself up on one elbow, and planted a deliberate kiss on

her nose. „Go to sleep,“ he growled.

Alina eyed him for a moment through her lashes, saw the humorous determination in the green gaze and, with a

sigh, closed her eyes.

When she awoke it was still dark. Morning had not yet come, but as her sleepy senses took stock of her

surroundings and the memories returned she realized she was alone in the bed.

Alone, and it wasn't yet morning. Where was Jared? Surely he wouldn't have left like a thief in the night?

Anxiety coursed through her, bringing her to a sitting position amid the sheets as she glanced around the

shadowy room. Where was he?

Restlessly she slid out of bed, pulling the green robe from the closet and belting it quickly around her waist it was only as she nearly stumbled over the pool of his clothes on the floor that she breathed a sigh of relief. He was around somewhere. The kitchen?

But the light that was on was the one in her study, she realized as she entered the hall outside the bedroom.

Curiously she walked to where the door stood half open and pushed it inward.

Jared stood there, gloriously, unabashedly naked, a glass of water in

one hand as he studied the portrait on the wall His head turned as she silently opened the door. Instantly the green gaze warmed as he took in the sight of her tousled head and sleepy body. „Miss me?“ he murmured.

„I thought you were supposed to be exhausted,“ she observed.

„I recovered. Got up for a drink of water and wandered in here to take a look at the portrait I thought I'd seen earlier when I carried you off to bed. Battista, I presume?“

Alina smiled self-deprecatingly. „I like to think so. The picture fits my own mental image of her. What do you

think?“ She came to stand beside him as he turned his gaze back to the elegant woman on the wall.

„I think,“ he drawled, settling an arm around her shoulders, „that you and the woman on the wall have a great deal

in common. So, yes, it must be Battista.“

Alina chuckled. „Have you got a snapshot of Francesco?“

„Not exactly. But I have a small copy of Donatello’s *Gattamelata* which I think

might bear a striking resemblance.“

He grinned.

„The ‘Honeyed Cat,’“ Alina translated, thinking of the famous equestrian statue of the powerful *condottiere*

Erasmus da Narni. It had been the first bronze equestrian statue on such a large scale to be made since ancient times. It

stood outside the church of Sant’ Antonio in Padua. „Why did they call him that?“ she asked suddenly.

„He’s supposed to have had a temperament which combined kindness and cunning. He was a professional in

every

sense of the word, and it shows in Donatello's statue.“

„A professional. Is that how you think of Francesco?“

„It's the highest compliment one can pay such a man.“ He shrugged. „Come on, let's go back to bed. I can think of

better things to do right now than discuss Battista and Francesco.“

She smiled invitingly up at him, aware of the hard nudity of his body. „I thought you were in need of rest“

„I told you, I’ve recovered,“ he drawled. He set the half-finished glass of water down on the small table by the door

as they left the room, and arm and arm they walked back to the bedroom.

Standing once again beside the rumpled bed, he unbelted the sash of the green robe and eased it off her shoulders,

his eyes drinking in the sight of her as she stood naked before him.

„I think,“ she whispered huskily, twining her arms luxuriously around his waist, „that ‘Honeyed Cat’ would be a

good description of you.“ She purred softly.

His mouth lifted in sexy humor as he ran his hands down her back to the base of her spine. „You and Battista,“ he

growled, „certainly know how to handle men. Just be sure that you save all your compliments and talents for me!“

He lifted her onto the bed, gathering her close as he came down beside her. Alina turned into his arms with

delicious anticipation....

He left in the morning, as he had said he must But not before he had shared

breakfast with her in the garden.

„I'll be back as soon as I can,“ he promised a little roughly as he kissed her good-bye. „And then we must talk.“

„Yes, she agreed, hazel eyes shining in the morning light „We must“

6

„Alina! I just had a call from a free-lance scout who thinks he's turned up a Wise forgery of a Tennyson book of

poems!“ Nick Elden hung up the phone behind the vast wooden desk which dominated the far end of Elden and Corey

Books.

Alina glanced up from a bibliography she was studying, grateful for the interruption. Her mind had been refusing to focus on her work with its usual concentration. Memories of the previous night kept flitting through her head.

Memories of warmth and passion and... love?

She saw the pleased delight on Nick's handsome face, his silvering head nodding to himself. „That's great I've

been looking forward to seeing a real Thomas J. Wise forgery! Is this one of his better ones?“

„Not his masterpiece; most people still think his forgery of the reputed Reading edition of *Sonnets* by *EBB*.

supposedly published in 1847 by Elizabeth Barrett Browning, is the finest thing he did. But this Tennyson could be a

good one.“

„Incredible to think that Wise’s forgeries now often bring more than the originals!“ she marveled. „He was a master

of his craft, wasn’t he?“

„Definitely.“ Nick smiled, shuffling

through some papers on his desk. „He was a fine bookman in his own right

Started out as a clerk in London and developed the fatal taste of book collecting. He concentrated on

nineteenth-century authors and became quite an authority on several. His bibliographies of Tennyson and Elizabeth

and Robert Browning are still standard works in the field. His scholarship was impeccable, and he did much to

popularize systematic bibliography. You have to admire the man. He had a facility for discovering rare editions.“

„And when they were not to be discovered, he manufactured them!“
Alina grinned. „He died in the thirties, didn't

he?“

„Thirty-seven, I believe.“

„Where did the scout find the Tennyson forgery?“

„A private collection in Arizona. He wants us to handle it On a commission basis, of course. I think I have a couple of possible buyers in mind....“ His fingers drummed momentarily on the huge desk as he considered the

possibilities.

„Yes, I think I'll start with Miller. He's been after me for another forgery.“

Alina watched her partner reach for his phone again, and then she quietly went back to her work, wondering what

Jared was doing now. Had he reached Palm Springs yet? Was he thinking of her?

Her mouth twisted wryly. It was ridiculous. She was acting like a love-struck young girl instead of a reasonably sophisticated woman of thirty who knew all about marriage and the falseness of

men. What she hadn't learned from her own experiences, she'd learned from Battista. Hadn't she?

The carefully annotated bibliography of the works of an eighteenth-century author blurred in front of her eyes as

she thought of the man who had so reluctantly left her bed this morning. He was different She knew it in the deepest

part of her being. No man could hold a woman as he'd held her, look at her the way Jared looked at her, unless there

was far more to his need for her than the physical satisfaction of a night in bed.

But the thing which still amazed her most about last night was her own response. It had been easy to avoid

becoming involved in a string of affairs since her marriage. She'd taken no risks because there had been no real temptations.

She'd treated men very much the way Battista had treated them. She had enjoyed their company and attention, flattered them intellectually, entertained them, and made it absolutely clear she had no interest in marriage. In essence, she decided honestly, she'd treated them

rather like pleasant toys. They thrived on it And none of them had ever been

in a position to betray her since she'd been divorced.

She'd been lucky, Alina supposed, in the one serious betrayal she had experienced. Her ex-husband had given her

a relatively cheap lesson on the subject Her pride had been hurt, along with her confidence in her personal judgment

She'd felt like a fool, but she hadn't been wounded deep in her heart The emotions she'd had for her husband weren't

strong enough or binding enough to allow that, thank God. He hadn't, she realized much later, been the great love of

her life.

But if Jared were to do such a thing to her... No! She wouldn't think of that Jared was an intent, sincere, and utterly

honest man. She knew it! Her flowering emotions toward him were safe. It was strange after all this time to be seriously

thinking of one man and one man only.

And what was he thinking of her? She bit her lip, remembering one of his

statements that first night when he'd shown up at her party. „*Who*. “ he'd asked her, „said *anything about marriage?* “

But he'd told her he'd come to claim his lady. His remark on marriage must have been a natural male defense against her ranting at him.

For that matter, she asked herself grimly, what was she doing thinking about marriage? She'd never wanted to remarry. Life was too pleasant, too well organized, and she was much too involved with her work and her

socializing to

want to change.

She was supposed to be modern and sophisticated. What was the matter with her that she found herself thinking

in terms of marriage after one night in bed with a man!

But last night hadn't been just a casual fling and she knew it. Alina would never have been tempted by a casual

fling. She had gone to bed with Jared Troy because he had woven a kind of magic around her. A magic she would

never have dreamed existed. And once he'd made her his, the soft magic had become steel bonds. She felt deeply and utterly committed.

It was frightening in a way. Thank heaven Jared was the kind of man he was. For Battista the magic had come with

a man who couldn't be trusted. Alina shuddered.

The shop soon filled with browsers, and business became pleasantly brisk. Customers wandered down the long, ceiling-high shelves of old books,

sometimes becoming lost for hours.
Others pored over the really choice
items

housed in glass cases, and still others
hovered around the collection of newly
published materials.

By the end of the day, Alina was feeling
restless. She knew she was in serious
danger of heading straight for home

and then sitting around the house all
evening waiting for a phone call from
Jared. The thought made her grimace.
Alina

Corey did not allow herself to wind up
in such situations!

He was probably expecting her to do just that, too, she decided. He'd kissed her good-bye with such open

possessiveness that morning....

Determinedly Alina took a grip on herself. Whatever she felt for Jared, she would not

allow herself to behave in such an insipid fashion. She was a woman who had a full life to lead in her own right, and

she would not start behaving totally irrationally simply because she might be on the verge of falling in love!

On the verge? Or already well

entrenched in the quicksand of that dangerous emotion? She didn't want to think

about it closely, she realized as she drove home after work.

The phone was ringing as she walked in the door, though, and in spite of all her good intentions, she found herself

flinging down her purse and racing for it.

„Hello?“ She wished her voice didn't sound so breathless.

„Alina? This is Brad----“

„Oh, Brad.“ Desperately she tried to

keep a naturally lively touch in her words. What a stupid reaction this sudden

depression was! „How are you? Did your poet friend enjoy the party?“

„Of course he did. Everyone always enjoys your parties, you know that I'm calling to see if you'd like to have a

drink down at the marina this evening. It's been a hard day at the university,“ he added with a theatrical groan.

„Budget cuts?“ she asked, smiling.

„No, one of my students is about to publish a paper which I wish I'd written.

It's unnerving!“

She laughed. „I can imagine.“

„So come and comfort me. Doesn't a nice Margarita while we watch the sunset over the ocean sound enticing?“

„Delightful, but I don't think I can make it tonight....“ Alina's voice trailed off regretfully. To her own astonishment

she realized she was turning down the invitation because she simply didn't want to be with another man, even though

he was only a friend. She didn't want to be with anyone tonight, except Jared.

Barring his presence, she felt like being alone. And Alina usually did exactly as she liked. „Can I take a rain check?“

„Oh, sure. But it's tonight my ego needs boosting,“ he coaxed hopefully.

„You'll survive. Think of it as a tribute to your teaching abilities. The little twerp couldn't have done it without your brilliant coaching, now could he?“

„That's a thought“ Brad chuckled ruefully. „I suppose I ought to take that attitude.“

She said a few more soothing words

about his intellectual prowess and somehow Brad hung up the phone on a more cheerful note. Alina replaced the receiver with a quirking smile and glanced at the clock. She'd have a bite to eat and then...

She remembered the tiny canister of film in her desk. How on earth could she ever have forgotten? That's what she would do tonight. It would get her out of the house and give her something to occupy her mind totally. The library would be open until nine, and she could

use one of their microfilm readers.

In a far lighter, more focused mood now that she had a goal for the evening, Alina changed into a pair of jeans and

a ruffled plaid shirt She made herself a salad piled high with fresh mushrooms and then, carrying the salad with her,

went into the study.

She opened the desk drawer and picked up the little black canister, tossing it jubilantly into the air and catching it

with her free hand. A slow, wicked smile shaped her mouth. It was going to be fun proving her point to Jared.

Exciting

in a way.

But she realized she no longer had the urge to clobber him in print In fact, Alina thought wonderingly, perhaps the

article could be written as a collaboration. They could publish the ending of Battista's and Francesco's story together.

She thought of the pleasant hours of work ahead and pictured the two of them nestled cozily in front of a microfilm

reader, comparing notes. Sitting down behind the rolltop desk, she set her plate

aside and twisted off the gray top of the little black can. Idly she peered into the dark interior. And froze.

At first she couldn't believe the film was gone. Alina blinked and quickly turned the can upside down, shaking it

fruitlessly. It was gone! The microfilm copy of the letters from an eighteenth-century English tourist in Italy was gone!

Stunned, she stared at the offending canister, a thousand thoughts ricocheting around her head. A thousand

thoughts and the one which came inexorably to the surface was the

memory of Jared standing naked in her study,

staring at the portrait of Battista on the wall.

Alina sat very still, vaguely aware that her fingers were shaking as she placed them on the desk in front of her and

lifted her eyes to the picture. How long had he been in her study last night before she'd awakened? Long enough to

search her desk?

But he hadn't had the film with him when she'd discovered him, she reminded herself almost hysterically. No, logic

said, but once he'd located it there would have been no trouble returning to the study that morning and removing the film. He must have had it in his pocket even as he sat drinking her cream-laced coffee and eating her scrambled eggs!

The shock of his treachery was worse than she could have imagined. Helplessly she met Battista's knowing gaze.

„No,“ Alina whispered to the portrait, „he wouldn't have done that He wouldn't have seduced me just to get the microfilm. He's not that kind of man!“

He's another Francesco, the woman on the wall seemed to say. You said it yourself, remember?

But that was before she'd gone to bed with him. Before she'd learned of his tenderness and his passion....

A slow rage began to build inside Alina. A rage unlike anything she had ever known. In that moment she knew

how Battista had felt when Francesco had calmly walked out of her life after taking everything she had to give.

At first there were tears. Tears of anguish over the betrayal, and then tears of self-disgust at her own stupidity, and

finally tears of rage.

But the tears soon died and left the fury to burn in a dry heat. How could she have been so stupid? Alina asked

herself again and again. She hurled the empty canister at the door of the study, watching it bounce onto the carpet and

wishing it had been aimed at Jared's head.

She'd probably never get the chance to throw anything at his head. She'd probably never see him in person again!

He wouldn't be coming back to Santa Barbara, that was for certain. He

wouldn't dare!

The next time she would hear from Jared Troy would be when he dropped her a line to tell her his article on

Francesco's affair with Battista had been accepted for publication!

The only consolation she would have would be that the ending of their story wasn't going to please Jared. But all

the same, she didn't want him to have the satisfaction of being the one who concluded it in print.

Damn it! She didn't want him to get away with what he'd done! And if she

worked fast enough, he might not be able to do so.

Deliberately forcing herself to calm down somewhat, Alina leaped restlessly to her feet, thinking. He couldn't

know, she thought, that he didn't hold the only copy of those letters. On Friday when the microfilm had arrived she

had taken the elementary precaution of having the master duplicated and stored in her safe-deposit box at the bank.

At the time she'd had no thought of protecting it from theft. She'd only been concerned with keeping the master

copy in perfect condition. There was always the possibility that the film would tear while it was being wound through

a microfilm reader, or any number of other small disasters could occur. The film Jared had stolen was only a copy.

It wasn't much, but it would be sufficient to prevent him from having exclusive access to what was on that film. She

wouldn't be able to take her time now. She would have to work hard in order to beat him into print, but she just might be able to make it.

But try as she would to whip her flagging spirits into a competitive mood, all Alina could remember was the

betrayal. How could Jared have done this to her? How could he have used her like this? It hurt her, enraged her, made

her want to strangle him. Never had her emotions been so heated and so violent. Never, except for last night...

The closest parallel she had to her present feelings was the depth of emotion she had experienced in Jared's arms

the previous night.

That thought only served to increase her fury. The memory of her surrender was almost more than she could stand

The anger was not an antidote to the passion she had known, it was merely the other side of the coin.

My God! she thought, coming to a standstill in her living room and staring blindly at the fireplace. I was falling in

love with the man! I've been falling in love with him for three months and last night...

She squeezed her eyes shut in utter dismay. Last night had been the unexpected, joyous culmination of a

curious

three-month courtship. At least, that was how it had seemed at the time.

But she'd been wrong – very, very wrong. Just as Battista had been wrong.

The phone rang and Alina whirled to stare at it. It couldn't be Jared. Surely he wouldn't call to gloat? Or would he?

She watched the instrument as if it were a snake, letting it ring twice more. Brad perhaps? Hoping to convince her

to go out with him after all? Reluctantly, her hand trembling ever so slightly, she lifted the receiver.

„Yes?“ The single word was stark, hollow sounding.

„Alina?“

„Jared!“ Her breath caught in her throat.

„Jared!“ she said again, her voice rising.

„What’s wrong, honey? Are you all right?“ He sounded worried, she thought crazily, genuinely worried.

„Funny you should ask,“ she managed bitterly.

His deep voice turned abruptly hard, impatient „Alina, what the hell’s the matter? You sound as if...“

„How do you expect me to sound, you bastard?“ she heard herself shriek. No! No! She wanted to be cold and

diamond hard. She didn't want to lose her temper like this! She didn't want him to know how much he had won.

„Stop it, Alina,“ he ordered, as if he were dealing with a hysterical female. Which was precisely the case, she

thought „Calm down and tell me what's wrong. Dammit, I wish I were there,“ he added in a rough growl. „Now settle

down and tell me what's wrong. You were perfectly fine this morning when I left Surely you aren't coming apart at the

seams without me already?“ The last bit was added in an obvious attempt to lighten the mood.

„Of course I was fine this morning. That was before I realized what you'd done to me. I was-right, wasn't I? You're

a reincarnation of Francesco! Hard, ruthless, using a woman and then walking out on her. How dare you do this to me,

Jared Troy! I trusted you! I *trusted* you,“ she said again on a wail.

There was a pause on the other end of the line as if Jared were honestly trying to figure out what had happened.

Was he going to keep up the act? Didn't he realize she'd found out what he'd done?

„Alina,“ he finally said steadily. „I'm coming back to Santa Barbara. I told you I'd be back. Surely you don't think I

walked out this morning with no intention of returning?“

„Oh, you walked out all right. Taking my film with you! I never would have believed it of you, Jared! Even during

the three months in which we wrote those letters I would never have guessed you'd resort to... to seducing me and

then *stealing* that microfilm! I thought you might be angry with me for the way I got it I thought you might even try to

bully me into giving it to you. I *even* thought at one point that you might try to seduce me into giving it to you. But I

never thought you would be capable of actually stealing it!“

„Stealing the film! I don't have a clue as to what you're talking about! Now calm down and tell me what's going on.

Are you trying to tell me the film is gone?“

„You know damn well it's gone! You

stole it!“

„The hell I did! Alina, you're going to have me losing my temper in a minute if you don't start behaving rationally.

Tell me what's happened. Take it from the top, one logical step at a time. And if you don't get a grip on yourself and

give me the whole story in one coherent sequence,! swear I'm going to...“

„Going to what? You've got a nerve threatening me after what you've done!“
There was no point even trying to

control her temper now, she realized vaguely. She had lost all of her self-

control. „But I’ve got news for you,
Jared

Troy. You haven’t won completely.
You’re not holding the only copy of that
film!“

„I’m not?“ he asked dryly.

„No, you damn well are not! I had a
copy made of the master the day I got it
Took it down to a local lab and had it

run off. The master is sitting in my safe-
deposit box, you... you thief! And Fm
going to work night and day on it! You’

re not going to be the first one to get the
end of the story into print! And to think I

was on the point of offering to
collaborate with you!“

„You were?“ he inquired very carefully.

„Does that give you any great pleasure?
Does it give your male ego some sort of
thrill knowing you had me

completely fooled for a while? Did you
make love to me just for the sake of
putting a little icing on the cake of your

victory? Or did you need the time in my
bed in order to have a chance to search
my study for that film?“

„I see.“ Jared sounded suddenly

thoughtful. „I’m supposed to have found the film in your study? Last night,

presumably, while I was looking at Battista’s portrait?“

„There’s no need to keep up a pretense of innocence! I went to get the film out of the can tonight and it was gone.

I know all about it, Jared! I swear to God, if you were here right now, I’d throw something at you!“

„The slop bucket?“ he suggested wryly.

„For starters! I could strangle you, do you realize that?“

„Hell hath no fury...“ he began to quote gently.

„I'm not a woman scorned. I'm a victim of theft! You're nothing but a... a crook! A cunning thief who softens up

his victims with seduction! The 'Honeyed Cat' was a better name for you than I knew, wasn't it? I'd phone the police

and have you arrested if it weren't...“ She broke off, gritting her teeth in dismay.

„If it weren't for the fact that you obtained the film under false pretenses in the first place?“ he murmured coolly.

„Don't try to wriggle out of this by placing the blame on me! What I did to get that film wasn't nearly as bad as

what you did to take it from me!“ she cried righteously.

„Were you really going to offer to collaborate with me?“ he asked after a moment.

„Go ahead, throw my stupidity in my face! I suppose I deserve it But that's all the satisfaction you're going to get,

Jared,“ she vowed seethingly. „I'm going to write the last article on Battista and Francesco, and it's going to prove

that she never let him back into the villa! I know it is! I know it more certainly now than I ever did before!“

„Because you're feeling as betrayed as she felt?“

„You don't have to sound so kind and understanding, dammit! You're not fooling me, you know. You haven't got

a kind, understanding bone in your whole body. You're a lousy thief! A bastard of a *condottiere* who uses a woman

and takes what he wants. I should have known! I *did* know! I don't know why I let you do this to me....“ To her horror,

Alma heard a suspicious break in her voice. She would not cry! Not anymore.

„Is that everything?“

„What do you mean by that?“ she snapped.

„Is that the whole story? The entire list of accusations? I'm supposed to have walked off with your microfilm this morning?“

„After... after seducing me!“ she reminded him vengefully.

„That was the best part,“ he retorted dryly.

Alina gave an inarticulate exclamation of rage. „Fm warning you, Jared Troy, don't ever come within striking range

of me again. Don't every try using Elden and Corey Books for your searches, either. Don't write any letters and don't

think you're going to be the first one into print!“

„I hear everything you're saying, and you know damn well I'm going to ignore all of it I'll be in Santa Barbara

tomorrow night, and we'll sort this out once and for all“ He sounded so arrogantly sure of himself Alina could have

screamed.

„You can go where you please,“ she bit out, „although I'd be happy to make a few suggestions along that line, but

don't think it's going to do you any good to show up on my doorstep again! I don't even know why you should want

to come back to Santa Barbara! You've got what you came for!“

„Not quite, apparently,“ he remarked quietly.

„Don't tell me you think you can play Francesco's role right out to the end!“ she retorted scathingly. „I told you

once I learn from my mistakes.“ A sudden, horrible thought struck her. „And if you think you’re going to seduce me all

over again so that you can get your hands on the master of that microfilm, you’re out of your mind!“

„The only thing I want my hands on at the moment is you! If you think you know how Battista felt, you can bet I’m

fully aware of what must have been going through Francesco’s mind. I told you once he probably used his belt on her

once he got back inside the villa!“

„He never got back inside!“ she yelled, incensed.

„Yes, he did. Just as I'm going to get inside tomorrow night,“ Jared snapped with a rough edge to his voice which

told her very clearly he was rapidly slipping over the edge of impatience into outright masculine wrath.

„Never!“

„And when I do,“ he went on, ignoring her defiance, „I'm going to make you eat every single one of your words. I

did not steal your precious microfilm, you little shrew! Although I will admit to

one accusation," he added grimly. „I did spend the night in your bed. And I'll be spending tomorrow night there, too! Wringing one apology out of you after another!“

He slammed down the receiver before Alina could have the satisfaction of doing it first.

Hurling the instrument down, she glared at it, wishing she could have thrown it at Jared's head. How dare he? How did he dare to do this to her?

With a groan of disgust, she flung herself

into the cushions of the couch. He dared because he was arrogant,

ruthless, hard, and every bit the *condottiere* she had first thought him to be: one had made the same mistake Battista

had made.

Had Francesco seemed to be the other half of herself to Battista? Had he made passionate love to her, made her

feel as if she were the most important thing in the world to him? Had he told her that only she could fill the strange

loneliness within him? Had he used his

mind and his body to seduce her completely?

It must have been like that, Alina thought sadly. How could either she or Battista have resisted?

But there would be no second chance, Alina swore to herself. She and Battista might have been swept off their feet

once by men who didn't fit the normal male mold, who knew exactly how to get past all the carefully erected barriers.

But it would not happen a second time!

Jared would not be permitted back into her life twice. She would not allow him

to savage her beautifully structured
life-style again!

7

Alina awoke the next morning with a
sweeping sense of relief as she
remembered the invitation to an
exhibition at a

local gallery. It was for that evening, and
if ever she needed an excuse to be out of
the house, this was the time.

Celeste Asher, the artist, was a friend,
and Alina had meant to attend anyway.
But there was no denying that the

exhibition was a marvelous reason for avoiding the possible confrontation with Jared.

Not that he was really likely to show up, she reminded herself again and again throughout the day, so it wasn't as if she were actually running away.

She was still telling herself that as she dressed for the evening. It was just that if he did choose to appear on her

doorstep for whatever ego-oriented reason, she simply had no wish to deal with him and his protestations of innocence.

Going to Celeste's painting exhibition wasn't the only excuse available to her that evening. She could have spent the time making good on her vow to begin studying the microfilm master stored in the safe-deposit box. But even though her mind had returned to the problem often during the afternoon, Alina hadn't been able to bring herself to go

down to the bank and fetch the film. Now, of course, it was too late. The bank had closed hours earlier.

Somehow, in spite of all her firm intentions to begin work on the film as

quickly as possible, she wasn't yet able to

face the prospect The knowledge that Jared was undoubtedly winging his way through his copy only depressed her further.

But her anger was still riding high, she realized grimly, as she took stock of herself in the mirror. It was the safest emotion she could allow herself at the moment, and she deliberately kept the embers fanned.

It did serve to add color to her cheeks, she thought unhappily. Her hazel eyes

seemed unnaturally bright, flecks of gold glittering with a metallic hardness. The edge of her mouth twisted sardonically. The expression in her eyes went

well with the overall image she was projecting tonight. The black, high-necked blouse paired with an elongated, narrow

black skirt echoed the hard, remote look. She wore only the wide silver and turquoise belt as jewelry and sleeked her

hair into a soft knot behind one ear. She looked exactly as she wanted to feel: icy

and controlled.

Convinced she had made the right decision, Alina walked into the crowded gallery a short time later. She was at

once engulfed in the muted, self-consciously chic atmosphere. A large number of people, dressed to rival Celeste's

brilliantly colored, light-filled canvases, milled about, drinking champagne and making terribly insightful comments

about the paintings. The champagne was obviously being dispensed with a free hand, and as Celeste had often

observed privately to Alina, such largesse did much to promote the intellectual, insightful comments.

„Alina! You made it. I was so hoping you would come, darling. Here, have some of the bubbly and then I want you to meet Jeffrey....“

„Hello, Celeste.“ Alina smiled, accepting the champagne from the tall, statuesque painter. Celeste’s wealth of startling red hair had been brushed into a voluminous chaos, framing her attractive features and making her look a little like a wild lioness. Vivid blue eyes

snapped with the inner energy which flowed onto her canvases. Tonight, dressed in

a glittering, sequined green gown that emphasized her full bosom, Celeste was as overpowering and as good for the spirits as usual.

„It looks like another success,“ Alina observed.

„Oh, yes. Randall says I’m going to make a fortune this evening. Isn’t it exciting?“ Celeste laughed with unaffected

delight, steering Alina toward a bearded

young man standing uncomfortably in a corner. He was probably four or five

years younger than Celeste, who was thirty-three.

„Randall’s the owner of the gallery?“
Alina hazarded, trying to place the name.

Celeste nodded. „That’s him over there, the suave, ever-so-gallant gentleman in the charcoal suit He’s a dear.

Rather reminds me of your partner.“

„Nick?“ Alina smiled in surprise.

„You know, darling, I always expected something more than a partnership to

develop between the two of you. Nick

Elden seems so exactly your type.

Refined, educated, sophisticated. And you have so much in common what with running the shop together!“

Alina blinked, a little at a loss to explain her friendly, yet restrained relationship with Nick Elden. She sipped her

champagne reflectively. „Nick and I are friends but there’s never been a hint of anything more. He’s a very private man

in many ways. We’ve worked together for quite a while now, and to this day I still don’t really feel as though I know

him.“

„Totally involved in his rare books?“

„That’s part of it, I suppose. He has a passion for them, but it’s not the whole story....“ Alina hesitated, frowning

slightly as she tried to explain. „I know this sounds ridiculous, but sometimes I have the feeling he’s two men. And I

know absolutely nothing about the second personality. I can’t even claim to have seen it,“ she added with a laugh.

„Sometimes I imagine that when he’s not at the shop or socializing, he goes home and becomes someone else entirely.“

„He’s probably gay,“ Celeste said knowledgeably.

Alina moved a hand in negligent dismissal. „I’ll probably never know. The only thing that counts is that he let me

go into business with him and he’s been a fantastic teacher. I’ve done very well as co-owner of the shop. He’s been

extremely generous about the commissions I make handling rare-book transactions.“

„He didn’t exactly give you half the shop,“ Celeste reminded her tardy. „As I recall you had to take out a very stiff

loan in order to buy in!“

„It was worth it Tell me about Jeffrey before you introduce us. He looks distinctly unhappy.“

„I found him on the beach two days ago,“ Celeste explained airily, her volatile personality immediately sidetracked

as she threw an affectionate glance at the young man in the corner.

„A stray piece of flotsam washed up by the tide?“ Alina grinned wryly, accustomed to Celeste’s fancies.

„He’s been a fantastic inspiration to

me!“ Celeste chided mockingly.

The evening drifted past, and Alina tried to let herself become absorbed in it. She listened attentively while an

earnest young filmmaker friend explained to her the intricacies of getting a film accepted at the Cannes Film Festival,

remembering to tell him how much he deserved the opportunity. Then she was swept up in a small group of artists who

were furiously debating the merits of the New York School of painting. She lost track of the various intellectual

muddles she found herself in after that, but didn't worry about it.

Inevitably, however, she found herself winding up the hillside above Santa Barbara, heading home. Celeste's show

had been an excellent escape but it hadn't obliterated the main issue. What had Jared done that evening? Had he

actually had the nerve to arrive at her door?

The answer lay in the slightly menacing shape of the black Ferrari parked at the curb in front of her condominium.

Alina's first reaction was resigned

panic. She had known. Somehow, deep down inside, she had realized he meant what he said.

For a brief moment, the panic washed away the fierce pain of betrayal. It almost made her decide to drive right on past her own home. She could stay in a motel....

But even as she ran through the options, she was automatically braking the car to a gentle stop behind the Ferrari.

This was her home and she certainly wasn't going to be intimidated into slinking away in the night!

She waited tensely as she turned off the lights of the car and removed the keys from the ignition. Her hand was

trembling, she thought a little dazedly. Of all the silly...

Where was he? Why wasn't he slamming out of the Ferrari to confront her?

Carefully Alina climbed out of the front seat, realizing belatedly that there was no one in the black car parked ahead.

He'd come back, she thought wonderingly as she started up the walk to her front door. He had really come

back.

Just as he said he would.

Why? She fitted the key to the lock.

The door swung open, revealing a darkened hall and no sign of any lights beyond. Where the devil was he?

Playing games in the dark? It didn't seem like Jared. He would be far more direct.

Alina shook her head even as that thought flitted through her mind. She knew him so well, she realized vaguely.
Or

had the feeling she did. Here she was

predicting his behavior on the basis of three months of letters and a night in

bed! What an idiot she was!

Unable to figure out what was going on, Alina slipped through the house like a wraith in search of a burglar,

turning on lights as she went. With every step she grew more tense, more nervous. What was the man doing to her?

It took several minutes to remember that she had not left the patio light on earlier. But it was on now, she realized

quite suddenly, noting the unusual amount of light filtering into the living

room from the garden area. Alina walked

toward the French doors with a feeling of foreboding.

Jared was waiting in the garden.

He sat at the ornate wrought-iron patio table, casually thumbing through a magazine. Alina stared at his cocoa dark hair gleaming in the light.

The sheer nerve of the man routed her panic. How dare he wait for her like this? He must have circled the row of condominiums and vaulted the back

fence into her private garden.

Look at him, she thought vengefully, sitting there as if he had every right in the world.

He looked up suddenly and his eyes locked with hers through the glass separating them. Alina caught her breath at the expression glittering in the green depths, visible even from this distance.

And then he smiled. It was an enigmatic smile, full of grim, masculine determination. Alina felt chilled.

„Well, at least you had the sense to come home alone,“ he remarked, closing the

magazine negligently, his voice

carrying easily through the screen of the partially opened window on one side of the doors. „I was afraid I might be

obliged to stage the heavy, macho scene with some poor innocent man you might have dragged home as a defense

against me.“

„I don't need any defense against you, Jared Troy,“ Alina gritted, angling her chin defiantly. „All I have to do is

keep that door locked. If you want to spend the night in my garden, you're welcome to so do. It gets a little cold out

there when the fog rolls in, though!”

Jared got lazily to his feet, thrusting his hands into the front pockets of the snug jeans he wore. The jeans were

something of a shock. Together with the unbuttoned leather jacket riding over an open-necked plaid shirt, they

seemed to add to the subtle menace about him tonight. It was as if some of the civilizing veneer had been removed. A

mental image of how Francesco must have looked to Battista when he removed the gaudy court clothes and put on

battle dress came unbidden to Alina's mind.

„But I won't be out here by the time the fog comes in, will I?“ Jared drawled.

„I'll be lying in your bed, listening to

you tell me how glad you are that I came back to Santa Barbara tonight“

„Not a chance!“

„Let me in, Alina.“

„Give me one good reason,“ she hissed, hating the prickles of anger and fear which were flashing along her spine.

„I didn't steal your microfilm. What

more of a reason do you need?“

„You’re the only one who could have!
The only one with a motive and an
opportunity!“

His mouth quirked upward at that „You
have a point about motive. We’re
probably the only two people on earth

who are really consumed with a need to
know what happened to Battista and
Francesco. But I’m still saying I didn’t

take the film. The only thing I had on my
mind that night was you.“

„What were you doing in my study?“ She
wished desperately he wouldn’t stand

there and lie to her. Every fiber of her being was in danger of being seduced into believing him in spite of the evidence. Her inner weakness made her

angrier, more high-strung.

„I told you. I got up for a glass of water and wandered in to look at the portrait“ Jared moved, gliding soundlessly

closer to the nearest glass-paned door.

„Believe me, Alina. You know you want to, anyway. Let me in and I'll remove all your doubts.“

She wanted to scream at him not to look at her like that, not to speak to her in that mesmerizing voice. How could

she be so stupid as to stand there listening to the man?

„Go away, Jared. You're not going to get another chance to use me!“

He reached out and twisted the handle of the door. It rattled fruitlessly beneath his touch. „Open the door, Alina,“

he ordered very softly.

Her eyes locked with his a moment longer as she felt the power of his will reaching out to force itself on her. Then,

slowly, emphatically, she shook her head in denial. Turning on her heel, Alina walked out of the living room, switching

off the light behind her.

She didn't dare stay there challenging him face to face, she realized. She wasn't sure she had the courage to go on

defying him. How she could be so humiliatingly weak, she didn't know, but the shakiness of her resolve was

frightening. He was right She wanted to believe him.

Alina had reached the kitchen when she

heard the tinkle of carefully shattered glass. She knew instantly what it

was. Jared had broken one of the small panes in the French doors.

Whirling, she braced herself against the white tile counter behind her, feeling like a small, cornered animal. She was

trembling, and in that moment she couldn't have said whether outrage or fear or some combination of both was the

cause. Jared was going to force the test of wills on her. She should have known he would. *She should have known.*

A moment later he appeared in the kitchen doorway, leaning against the jamb with such casual menace that Alina's

knuckles whitened. „I wonder,“ he murmured sardonically, „if it was this easy for Francesco.“

Alina swallowed and finally found her tongue. „I doubt it Battista lived in a violent age. She would have had the villa better protected against unwanted intruders!“

„Am I so unwanted?“ His voice deepened huskily. „You wanted me very much the other night“

„Stay away from me, Jared.“

He ignored her, leaving the support of the doorway to start forward. „Don't you realize that nothing could keep me

away from you? Not after waiting so long and especially not after what happened in your bedroom the other evening.“

Instinctively Alina began edging away from him, sliding along the counter, her eyes never leaving his.

He changed direction to follow her cautious retreat. He didn't rush her, he simply came toward her with a certain air

of inevitability.

„You won't convince me of anything, definitely not your innocence in the matter of the theft, if you... if you attack me,“ Alina warned breathlessly as the panic began to take hold again.

„I wouldn't dream of attacking you,“ he said softly. „I'm going to make love to you.“

He was closing the distance between them, each step bringing him closer. In another moment or two he would

reach out and grab her. In that instant, Alina knew she could not force him to

back down. He was bent on subduing her physically, acting on the age-old masculine principle that any woman could be handled effectively by sheer force.

Alina's nerve broke. Consumed by a flaming rage, she swerved, grasping a saucer which rested on the counter top.

She flung it at him without giving herself a chance to think. And then she was running, even as the china dish

clattered to the floor behind her.

She heard his muttered oath and wondered if she'd managed to hit him

with the saucer. He was coming after her now with the long, easy strides of a large cat closing in for the kill. Alina fled down the hall toward the study, the narrow black skirt hampering her movements.

Ducking into the study, she whirled to slam the door and lock it But she was too late. One large hand caught the door, pressing steadily inward as she braced against it with her full weight from the other side.

„Damn you! Get away from me, Jared! You have no right...!“

„We'll talk about rights later,“ he informed her, pushing almost easily against the door.

She couldn't hold out against his weight. Frantically her eyes scanned the small room, searching for weapons. Then

she leaped away from the door, flinging herself across the short stretch of space to the ceiling-high shelves that lined

the opposite wall.

Instantly the door cracked open behind her, revealing a dangerously annoyed Jared. Alina didn't hesitate. She had

gone too far. There was nothing to do

except to continue fighting. Methodically she picked up the nearest object on

the shelf beside her, a little brass candlestick, and hurled it at him.

„Stop it, Alina! So help me, I'm going to use my belt on you after all!“ He warded off the flying candlestick with one

arm. The green eyes blazed at her as she reached for the cloisonné bowl which had stood beside the candlestick.

„Get out of here, Jared!“

„I'm going to exact full payment for everything you throw at me, you little hell cat!“

The cloisonné bowl whizzed past his head, missing it by scant inches to land with a thud against the wall behind

him. Before it had even hit the floor, a small dictionary was sailing through the air.

The male annoyance coalesced into something far more intimidating. Alina saw the flash of cold fury in the

narrowed emerald gaze and it gave her a perverse satisfaction to know she had finally made Jared as angry as she was.

„I thought you were different!“ she grated accusingly as she picked up the next object on the shelf and aimed it at

his chest. „You really had me fooled, you bastard. Did that give you a lot of pleasure?“

The latest volley struck harmlessly against the black leather jacket Jared ignored it, taking a step forward. The lines

of his harshly carved face were set in an attitude of unswerving determination. „What made you think I was different?“

he rasped, catching the book which came flying at him. „What made you think I was a man you could trust?“

„I thought you were sincere! An honest man!“

„You thought I was a reincarnation of Francesco! How the hell could you believe I was any better than he was?“

Jared challenged, fending off a flying pencil holder.

„For the same reason Battista thought she'd found a man she could trust, I suppose,“ Alina yelled in outrage, her

breath coming in short pants which flushed her face. „You seduced me! All those letters making me think you were just

interested in proving your point about your friend, Francesco, when all the time you were actually seducing me!“

„I was?“

„You know you were, dammit! You led me to think I knew you! Understood you! What's worse, you made me

believe you might be the only man on earth who understood me! And then you used that against me. You found my

weakness and used it to seduce me! All for the sake of getting hold of that piece of microfilm! I'll never forgive you for

that, Jared Troy!“

He struck aside the copy of the Renaissance history journal almost absently, his eyes on the color in her

cheeks

and the sparks of gold in her *eyes*.

„You’ve got it backward, you know. You were the one who was seducing me.“

„That’s ridiculous!“

„I wish it were,“ he whispered harshly.

„But it’s the truth. You made me think you might be the one woman on earth

who would truly understand me, but that’s not the case, is it?“

„I understand you now, all right!“

„No, you don’t If you did, you’d know

what your accusations are doing to me!“

„What?“ She stared at him, caught off balance by his grimly rasped words.

„Don't try to tell me I'm *hurting* you by

letting you know I found out the truth!“

She laced the words with all the scorn at her command.

„A man likes to think his woman trusts him,“ he whispered as she faltered over the next object on the shelf.

„I'm not your woman! Fm not any man's woman!“

„You weren't until the night you gave yourself to me,“ he agreed far too gently.

„Alina, you little shrew, put down

that bookend and look at me! Do you really believe I'd treat my woman so badly? Do you really believe I'd steal that

microfilm just to one-up you in print? If I'd wanted that film from you I would have demanded it. I'd have made you give it to me. But I would never have resorted to stealing it!“

Alina clutched the bookend, her gaze pinned by his. She could feel her resolve wavering at the pleading in his voice and the still angry sincerity in his

eyes. „You must have taken it,“ she managed breathlessly.

He shook his head. „You know better than that You know I would have used other means of getting it, don't you?“

He put out a hand and carefully removed the bookend from her nerveless fingers. She barely felt it as her mind

churned with conflicting knowledge. There were the facts of the theft to be balanced against the clamor of her

instincts. She wanted to believe him innocent She wanted it so badly she knew she was allowing it to affect her

judgment in that crucial moment.

But she couldn't fully deny the knowledge of him she'd gained from three months of arguing with him via letter. It

might be an emotional, irrational response, but deep down she knew he was right. He would never resort to stealing. It

simply wasn't his style. He had Francesco's own pride, she thought belatedly. Neither man would lower himself to

such a petty action.

„Oh, Jared,“ she whispered shakily, her hazel gaze suddenly betraying the underlying vulnerability. „Are you sure you didn't take it?“

He almost smiled at that his face softening as he studied her. „Quite sure.“

She closed her eyes, drawing in a deep, steadying breath. It was such a risk, such a risk....

„You can trust me, sweetheart,“ he murmured, not touching her. „I might beat you from time to time, but I would never cheat you. In any way.“

The trace of humor in his mild threat reached her senses, and Alina gave a long sigh of relief. Her eyes flicked open, the furious gold sparks melting rapidly. „*Oh, Jared!*“

She threw herself into his arms, shaking with reaction as she buried her face against the leather jacket He held her fiercely, as if he'd had a very narrow escape, indeed. Without a word Jared molded her to his body, conveying the depths of his own relief as she trembled slightly in hers.

„It's all right,“ he soothed, stroking the

nape of her neck. „It’s all right. I know how you must have felt“

„Do you?“ she whispered brokenly.

„Don’t you think I know you well enough by now to understand what it must have been like for you to find that

film gone and me the only logical candidate for thief? You had protected yourself for so long, only to wind up giving

yourself to a man who seemed to have stolen everything.“

„It wasn’t just that you appeared to have taken the film,“ she agreed in a small,

muffled voice.

„I realize that“ His hand moved upward, gently pulling the pins from the knot behind her ear. In long, luxurious

movements, he let the bronzed brown softness fall free to swing around her shoulders. „Don't you think I know how much you gave me the other night?“

„I was so afraid....“

„But not any longer?“ he interrupted, the raw hope plain in his words.

„No, not any longer.“

It was the truth. Whatever else he might be, Jared wasn't a thief. She knew that now. How could she have thought

he was? In some ways she really knew him very well.

„What are you smiling at?“ he demanded in amusement as he sensed her change of mood.

„Our thinking we know each other so well. You were so sure you could talk sense into me, and now I can only

wonder how I ever thought you capable of theft I should have known better. I *did* know better. It was just that I was

so angry....“

„With yourself?“ he hazarded perceptively.

„I suppose so,“ she groaned, pulling away to meet his eyes.

„Battista taught you well, didn't she?“

Alina lifted one shoulder in mute acknowledgment of the statement „Men are safest when they're under control and not allowed to get too close.“

„Intellectual pets?“ he mocked, eyes gleaming with laughter and something more. Something deep and sensuous.

„Exactly,“ she confirmed, responding to the look in his eyes. Her lips curved with an unconscious invitation.

But instead of taking her up on it, the amusement vanished from Jared's expression. „Were you this angry when you found out your ex-husband was sleeping with his female students?“

„You mean did I hurl half the contents of my bookshelf at him? No. I simply packed my bags and left“

„He didn't come after you?“

She cocked her head to one side, hearing the urgency behind the question. „Of

course not. Richard was a

philosopher. So he accepted my decision. He wouldn't have dreamed of doing anything so forceful, even if he'd

wanted me back.“ And she hadn't wanted him to come after her. She'd felt nothing but disgust over her husband's actions.

„But you knew I'd be back tonight, didn't you?“ Jared's hand laced and tangled its way through her hair in an

erotic little motion that stirred Alina's nerve endings.

„Yes,“ she whispered honestly. „I knew.“

He nodded in satisfaction. „That’s why you were out when I arrived. Where the hell were you, anyway?“

„I take it this isn’t the time to tease you and tell you I was out with another man?“

„Not unless you want me to make good on all those macho threats I was making awhile ago!“

„I attended a showing of a friend’s paintings at a gallery downtown. A *female* friend.“

„Ah.“ He began a slow, seductive smile that caught at her senses. „Thought I’d get tired of waiting for you and go away, hmmm?“

She chewed reflectively on her lower lip. „I told myself that was a distinct possibility. But as soon as I saw the Ferrari in front of my home...“

„You realized what you knew deep inside all along, didn’t you? That there was no escape. You were going to have to face me and your own feelings.“ He bent down and scooped her easily into his arms, holding her tightly against his

chest.

„Jared?“ A flicker of pain wavered in Alina's hazel eyes as she looked up at him. „Jared, I'm sorry I thought you'd taken that film.“

„You just made up for it,“ he assured her with a dagger grin.

„How?“ She frowned, already aware of the tremors of excitement shooting through her limbs as he started out of the study with her in his arms.

„By believing me against all the evidence. You still only have my word

on the subject,“ he reminded her coolly.

She lifted her fingertips to touch the grooves etched into the side of his mouth. „It’s enough.“

He bent to kiss her throat with warm gratitude. „Thank you, Alina.“

8

The kiss, which had begun in gratitude, merged with rising passion. Head back, her hair falling wantonly over his arm,

Alina closed her eyes in relief and pleasure. The two sensations mingled for a time, leaving her a little dizzy.

She realized she was being carried into the bedroom, but when Jared set her down it was not in the middle of the brass bed. Instead he seated her gently on the white lounge beside the window. When she opened her eyes she found him on one knee in front of her, tugging off her shoes.

She smiled softly, reaching out to run her fingers through his dark hair as he bent over his task. He looked a little rough around the edges tonight, she thought affectionately, surveying the leather jacket and jeans again.

„What’s so funny?“ he demanded, glancing up in time to catch the flash of amusement in her eyes.

„I was thinking that you came dressed for trouble tonight...“

„And I found it“ He let the shoe drop silently to the carpet, the dagger smile reflected in his eyes. „Only now can I

truly appreciate what poor Francesco went through! Getting inside the house is the easy part!“

„Don’t go drawing any conclusions about Battista and Francesco based on what happened between us tonight!“

she scolded, her heart leaping at the expression in his eyes. „It’s not the same sort of situation at all!“

„Yes, it is.“ He put up slightly roughened palms to capture her face and pull her head briefly down to his. „It most

definitely is.“

He kissed her lingeringly, urging her lips apart and seeking out the warmth of her mouth with hunger and passion.

When he released her to go back to his task of undressing her, Alina was trembling.

But she wasn't the only one whose body was reacting so strongly. Jared's fingers were shaking as he began

unfastening the buttons of the black blouse. He leaned forward as he slid the material off her shoulders and caressed

the unconfined breasts with the softest of little biting kisses.

„It was worth wading through that barrage you hurled at me in the study,“ he teased gently, cupping her small

breasts. „I kept telling myself it would be.“

„You were so sure of yourself?“ she

mocked, knowing her womanly softness was budding into firmly tipped

fullness beneath his touch. Her fingers clenched urgently into the muscles of his shoulder, slipping beneath the collar

of the jacket.

„I didn't have any choice. I need you too much,“ he admitted. He stroked the nipples and then his hands slid down

to her waist, finding the zipper of the skirt.

In another moment or two she was naked, her slender body gleaming in the pale light of the bedside lamp. Still he

knelt on one knee before her, massaging her feet and calves with slow, sensuous motions. As his fingers worked their

magic he began dropping damp, heated kisses along her thighs.

The languor of desire stole through Alina's body, narrowing her eyes in heavy-lidded passion and sending wave

after wave of erotic excitement down her spine. She loved this man, she realized in an overwhelming flash of certainty.

She loved him, and in acknowledging that, she recognized the other truth: she had never really loved before in her life.

That was why it had been so easy to play Battista's game, to convince herself that she had no desire to remarry.

She had never really known what it meant to need another person so badly.

Slowly, lovingly, she began undressing him, sliding the black leather jacket onto the floor and fumbling with the

buttons of his shirt. He let her take her time until she reached for the buckle of his belt. Then, as if he had grown too

impatient to await her ministrations, Jared got to his feet and finished removing the rest of his clothes.

She thought then he would surely move them to the bed, but instead he dropped back down in front of her, the

emerald eyes very green and full of uncharted depths as he deliberately, inevitably parted her legs.

Kneeling in front of her he began caressing the insides of her thighs with circling, random patterns that made Alina

unconsciously sink her amber nails into the bare skin of his back.

„Oh!“

The exclamation was a muffled moan

from far back in her throat as his lips began following his fingers. He worked his way upward toward the heart of her femininity, each kiss more lingering and more heated than the last.

„Jared, please...! Oh, Jared, I think I'm going to go crazy...!“

„That's how I want you,“ he breathed, his tongue darting out to taste the warm silk of her. „As crazy as you make me.“

With steadily mounting tension, he continued to caress her, sometimes letting his fingers curl deeply into the

roundness of her upper thigh, sometimes drawing his nails to delicate detail behind her knee. He was almost

worshipping her body, Alina realized with a strange feeling of tenderness. The thought made her catch her breath. He

needed her, he wanted her. Was he in love with her? Did he know what love meant? She had only just discovered it

herself----

She leaned forward, finding the nape of his neck with her lips just as he closed his hand possessively over the core

of her fire. He must have felt the quiver

that shook her body at the intimate touch,
heard the almost soundless moan of
passion that escaped her throat.

He responded to it abruptly. Groaning
with deep male need, Jared suddenly
shifted, going over onto his back and
pulling her down on top of him with
unexpected fierceness.

„Come here, my sweet, hot-blooded
vixen,“ he rasped as she sprawled
across his hard body. „Show me how
much

you want me!“

Gone was the worshipful attitude of a moment earlier, and in its place was a ravening masculine hunger. Alina

responded to it instinctively, pouring her pent-up desire over him in a wave of tangled bronzed hair and butterfly fingers.

She strung fiery kisses down his throat as he clenched her buttocks, and then she began working her way down

his body, glorying in the feeling of power.

Beneath her she felt the thrusting hardness of him and her hands trailed

sensuously over his ribs, across his taut stomach and below, seeking to capture and hold him in the most intimate of embraces.

Deliberately she slid across him, tangling her legs with his, until her tongue dipped suggestively into his navel.

„Do you know what you're doing to me?“ he grated, snarling his fingers in her hair and holding her to him with a tender roughness that conveyed his need. „I've never wanted a woman as badly as I want you. All these months of

thinking about you, learning about you, reading your letters as if they were love notes...“

„Oh, Jared,“ she breathed. „I’ve never known what it felt like, never understood this kind of passion, this... need.“

She had almost said the word „love.“ But even in the heat of the moment, a tiny voice whispered that it was too soon,

the sensations she was experiencing were too fragile. If he didn’t use the word yet, himself, she would wait.

„Come close and let me lose myself in you,“ Jared whispered. His strong hands circled her waist, half lifting, half

guiding her until she lay stretched out along the full length of him. Slowly, with inescapable power and tenderness, he fitted her body to his.

When she gasped aloud at the moment of ultimate possession, he uttered something choked and inarticulate. And then he was clutching the roundness of her hips, pulling her into the raging rhythm.

Alina gave herself up to the churning excitement, sensing that Jared was doing the same. Together they clung, giving and taking until their flaring

emotions fused into a single, leaping flame that consumed them completely.

It was a long time later before Alina drifted back to reality to find herself still lying on top of Jared, their damp

bodies seemingly sealed together. She lifted her head dreamily, reluctantly pulling away from the comfortable resting

place of his chest and watched as he opened his eyes with lazy satisfaction.

„You’ve a nice way of apologizing.“ He grinned, ruffling her hair. „A man could be driven to great lengths to secure

an apology from you.“

„That was not an apology!“

„A welcome home?“ he tried.

„Something like that“ Alina shifted luxuriously, ignoring his warm chuckle. He took advantage of her slight

movement, settling her gently on her back on the carpet.

One strong hand flattened proprietarily on her stomach, and the emerald eyes gleamed as they swept her body. In

spite of what they had just shared, Alina felt herself blushing.

Jared smiled wickedly as he watched the pink shading rise upward from the swell of her breasts. Propping himself

on one elbow, he bent over to kiss one rosy nipple. „You’ll get used to it,“ he assured her.

„Get used to what?“

„Me drinking in the sight of you.“

„Will I, Jared?“ Alina’s eyes glowed with the depth of her feelings.

„Definitely.“ There was all the masculine assurance in the world in his voice. He sounded enormously certain of

himself and of her.

„You’re supposed to look at me with adoring gratitude at this particular moment,“ Alina told him reproachfully.

„Not possessive lust?“ He cocked an eyebrow in mock confusion.

„Absolutely not!“

„I’ll try,“ he promised earnestly, the devil still lurking in his gaze.

„Something tells me your experience with behavior modification is limited.“
She sighed.

„Behavior modification is a term for one

of your academic behavioral scientists to use. We businessmen are more

direct,” he explained, rolling onto his back and letting one hand continue to rest casually on her naked thigh.

„You mean that you *condottieri* are more direct,” Alina corrected with spirit.

„Ummm.“ He didn’t bother to counter the charge.

There was a thoughtful silence while Jared seemed to gaze absently at the ceiling. Watching his hard profile, Alina knew his mind had gone on to something

else. „What’s wrong?“ she whispered, the humor fading from her voice.

He hesitated. Then he turned his head and gave her a level glance. „You do realize that regardless of what we’ve just settled between the two of us, we’re still left with a problem?“

„I was under the impression men held the view that sex solved everything,“ Alina attempted flippantly, unsure of his searching expression.

His quick dagger smile came and went but his eyes stayed serious. „Not quite everything. Not in this case.“

Alina's mind suddenly remembered the obvious. „You're referring to the little problem of the missing microfilm?“

she asked dryly.

„If I didn't take it, Alina, we're 'left with the question of who did. You were right about one thing. You and I are

probably the only two people on earth who care enough about Battista and Francesco to resort to underhanded

methods of research.“

She grimaced. „Are you going to hold my nefarious conduct in securing that film from Molina over my head

indefinitely?“

„Only on the odd occasion when I feel it necessary to bring you to heel.... Ouch!“

The exclamation came out on a sharply exhaled breath as Alina punched him lightly in the ribs. „You were saying?“

she prompted warningly.

„Er, yes. I was saying we're still left with the problem of who would want to take the film.“ He eyed her poised fist warily.

„It could be rather exciting,“ she noted consideringly. „Until one remembers that

no one would have had an

incentive or an opportunity to steal it“

„Except me.“

„Don't start that again!“

„You're really satisfied I'm in the clear,
Alina?“

She smiled a very brilliant smile,
wondering if the love behind it was
terribly obvious. „I'm satisfied.“

For a moment he simply looked at her,
and then Jared seemed to pull himself
back to the problem at hand. But not

before Alina had seen the flash of something in his eyes which might have been gratitude or relief. Her smile widened

invitingly.

„Don't look at me like that, honey,“ he ordered with a groan. „I've got to think. You said you made a copy of the film?“

„Within a couple of hours of receiving it I wouldn't have dared to go back to Molina and ask to have the letters

refilmed if I'd accidentally wrecked the original on a reader!“

„Oh, you'd have dared all right Probably would have fed him some line about how your 'client' namely me, had clumsily lost it!“

„I've learned my lesson in sneaky dealing,“ she assured him piously.

„I'll bet Okay, so the film sitting in the safe-deposit box at the bank should be a duplicate of the one that's missing.“

„So?“

„So I don't know what we might find when we take a look at it“ he went on

deliberately, „but I think we ought to do just that as soon as the bank opens in the morning.“

„Are you so eager to find out you're wrong about Battista and Francesco?“ she taunted.

„No, I'm just eager to find out what it's like collaborating with a researcher who knows how to apologize when the

errors of her ways are pointed out to her,“ he retorted smoothly, pulling her back into his arms with a hunger that was

more than physical.

The next day Alina left for an extended lunch with only a quiet word to Nick about needing to conduct some

business at the bank. He'd known she'd commissioned the film from Molina, naturally. She'd been far too excited at

the time of the discovery to keep it to herself. But he didn't know she'd used Jared's name to convince Molina to allow

the letters to be microfilmed. She'd thought it diplomatic not to let her business partner know she'd stooped to such

levels. She also hadn't mentioned the

film's disappearance to Nick. Initially because she'd been too upset with Jared's

supposed „betrayal“ and ultimately because Jared himself had asked her not to mention the matter.

„Why not?“ Alina had demanded curiously over breakfast A tiny frown creased her forehead as she realized Jared

was taking charge of the small investigation.

He'd smiled blandly, munching a sliced English muffin. „Will ‘because I said so’ suffice?“

„Hardly!“ she returned sweetly.

He groaned. „Some collaboration this is going to be with you refusing to get into the team spirit!“

„I don't mind being a team player as long as you don't insist on being the captain all the time!“

But in the end she'd agreed to follow his advice, so she didn't mention the fact that the film was missing to Nick.

Her small squabble with Jared over who was in charge paled into insignificance, however, beside the shock which awaited her as she eagerly, but gently,

wound the strip of microfilm into the library's viewing machine. Terribly

conscious of working with the only remaining copy of the film, Alina took great pains to handle it with caution. So

much caution, in fact, that it was several seconds before she turned her attention to the viewing screen.

For an instant she simply stared at the first page of what was clearly a book produced during the earliest decades

after the invention of printing. A book which dated from the Renaissance itself, not several letters from the eighteenth

century.

„Jared! That’s not what I ordered. I don’t even recognize that’ Those aren’t my letters!“ Alina was unaware of her

aggrieved tone of voice as she stared with dismay at the screen. „It’s a book printed in Italian, not my English tourist’s

letters!“

„Probably from the fifteen-hundreds,“ Jared observed slowly, leaning close to study the archaic printing.

„But why would Molina send me this? It doesn’t make any sense!“

The lines at the edges of Jared's mourn tightened intently. „You hired an outside filming company to make the copies on location?“

„Yes, you know how Molina is about letting any part of his collection out of his private library, even temporarily. I hired a mobile microfilm outfit that's done work for our book shop in the past Nick's used them for years. They take their cameras and equipment to the required location and work on site. They're based on the East Coast where Molina

lives, so it didn't cost me all that much. But somehow they must have gotten hold of the wrong material to film. I don't understand it“

The thought of explaining the mistake to Vittorio Molina and presuming on his generosity so far as to ask for a

refilming was upsetting. One didn't presume on people as wealthy and as powerful as Vittorio Molina.

„Already plotting how you're going to ask for another shot at those letters?“

Jared grinned wryly, slanting Alina a

sidelong glance. „Don't forget, you've

still got my clout We'll work out something....“ He broke off, his look of concentration suddenly deepening.

„What's the matter? Do you recognize the book?“

„Yes, I'm afraid I do,“ he replied so softly she had to bend down to hear him.

„It's one of Molina's prize

possessions. Very odd, isn't it, that your film crew got this particular item by mistake?“

„Why?“

„It's a very rare, very valuable treatise

on Renaissance military history, written by an historian of the time. Molina

saved me a lot of money by outbidding me for it when it came up at a private auction last year.“

„How private an auction?“ Alina asked curiously.

„Several of the people who would have given their right arms for this book weren't even invited,“ he told her dryly.

„The owner was very particular.“

„I see. Well, that's all very interesting but it doesn't answer our questions. And we're stuck with the wrong film,“

Alina grumbled in disgust The ending of Battista's and Francesco's story had been so close!

Thoughtfully Jared reached out and switched off the viewing light and began rewinding the film. „We're stuck with

the wrong film,“ he agreed slowly, „but we seem to be in possession of a microfilm copy of an item that differs from

those letters in one essential respect“

„What are you trying to say, Jared?“ Alina was having trouble comprehending anything other than her own

personal disappointment.

„We agreed that no one else on earth had a passionate interest in Francesco and Battista except ourselves, right?“

„Right“

„We’re now holding a film of a book that a number of people would pay a great deal of money to get their hands

on,“ he concluded, dropping the roll of film back into its canister.

„But it’s only a microfilm copy of the book, not the original book itself,“ she protested.

„The pages filmed from the book were not shot at random,“ Jared explained softly, tossing the little container into the air and catching it neatly as he met Alina’s narrowed gaze. „They were the pages which could be used by experts to assure identification of the work as the original and not a reproduction. The pages with small printer’s errors and the pages with the illustrations. A prospective buyer would want to examine those carefully before purchase to make sure the item was genuine.“

„Perhaps Molina is considering selling the book and had the microfilming crew shoot those pages at the same time

they were on hand to film my letters,“ Alina suggested, brightening at the thought „If it’s just a mix-up, that means his

prospective buyer got my letters by mistake. The film company mailed the wrong items to the wrong clients!“

Jared gave her a pitying glance which effectively quelled her rising enthusiasm. „If Molina was interested in selling

the book, he would have given me first

crack at it Believe me.“

Alina stared at him as he took her arm and guided her forcefully out to the car. „You’re trying to tell me the film

crew shot that book without Molina’s permission?“

„It looks that way. I’m going to call Vittorio as soon as we get back to your home,“ Jared declared a little grimly as he stuffed her gently into the car.

„But, Jared, I can’t go back home. I have to get back to work!“

„I’ll drop you off at the shop, then,“ he

agreed obligingly, sliding in beside her and starting the engine with quick efficiency.

Alina eyed his profile as he guided the Ferrari out of the parking lot and onto the street. She knew without being

told that he was completely wrapped up in this latest twist and wondered at his fierce concentration. „Jared, how badly

did you want that book when it came up for auction last year?“

„Very badly,“ he said tersely, not glancing at her.

„*How* badly?“ she pressed with growing conviction.

He shrugged. „Badly enough to ignore the fact that the book’s previous ownership is a little cloudy,“ he admitted

very softly.

She gasped. „Jared, are you trying to tell me you went into an auction for a book which you knew had been stolen?

No wonder it was a very private affair!“ Abruptly she was grinning. „And you had the nerve to criticize my

underhanded methods of research!“

„I didn't say it had been stolen,“ he protested indignantly. „And certainly the owner who was offering it had obtained it honestly.“

„Then why the cloudy history?“ she demanded pointedly.

„Well, there is some... uh... question as to how the first American owner obtained it...“

„Let's hear it I want to know all the gory details.“ Alina ordered cheerfully.

Jared groaned. „I should never have brought up the subject“

„Too late. We’re accomplices....“

„Collaborators,“ he corrected firmly.

„Oh, well, if you must know, it’s one of the items which apparently was hidden

by its European owner during World War II in an attempt to keep it out of Nazi hands.“

Alina nodded, remembering that many works of art and historical treasures had been concealed for that purpose.

„After the war it was sold to an American officer. And not, I gather, by the original owner who had hidden it. The

officer brought it back with him and kept it quiet, not wanting to have to give it up should the true owner appear and

claim it. Since then, it's been sold a couple of times, always very discreetly. No one wants to call attention to the book....“

„In case someone with a claim on it should come forth and demand its return,“ Alina concluded.

„Right“

„And you'd be one of the first to know if Molina was trying to market it?“ she prodded.

He nodded, saying nothing.

„So the film crew must have gotten hold of this by mistake,“ Alina said slowly.

„Not likely. Nor is it very likely they would film the particular identifying pages they did, either. I'll know more after

I've talked to Molina.“

He halted the car by the curb in front of the book shop, leaning across the seat to kiss her in what Alina privately

thought of as a rather husbandly way.

„See you after work, honey.“

She climbed out of the car, waved good-bye, and turned to walk back into the shop where Nick looked up expectantly.

„Business, hmmm?“ He chuckled in good humor.

Alina winced. „We’re collaborating on the Battista-Francesco thing,“ she explained weakly, hurrying to her desk and hoping Nick wouldn’t notice her betraying blush.

„Not a bad idea,“ her partner observed. „Jared Troy’s Renaissance scholarship is first class, and his collection is

outstanding. Between the two of you, you're liable to get a lot farther than working alone."

Alina bit her lip, thinking of the surprise which had awaited her this morning when she'd wound the microfilm on

the machine. But it was too late to go into a long explanation now. And Jared had asked her to keep quiet about the

whole matter. She contented herself with a quick smile of acknowledgment and bent her head over the English

bookseller's catalog which she was searching for a client.

The shock which awaited her when she drove home that evening, however, was far greater than the one she had

experienced when she had discovered the wrong material on the microfilm.

Instead of greeting her with a drink and a casual explanation of the Molina film mix-up, Jared was waiting with the

Ferrari packed. He was carrying her suitcase down the walk as she drove up to the curb.

„What on earth...?“ Alina began in stunned amazement as she opened the door of her car. „Jared, what do you

think you're doing? Where are you going with my suitcase?"

„You're coming with me to Palm Springs for a few days, honey," he said calmly, putting the case in the car. „I think

I've packed everything you'll need. If you're missing anything we can buy it there...."

„Jared! What are you talking about? I'm not going to Palm Springs with you! I have to work!" Alina stomped

forward irately, reaching for her suitcase.

Jared stepped into her path, his hands going forcefully to her shoulders.

„Honey, listen to me. Something's going on with that book. Something which could be dangerous. Molina is handling matters on his end, and I want you out of the way until everything is settled.“

She looked up into his grimly set features, not understanding. „But what does that have to do with me?“

He drew In his breath, looking as if he couldn't decide how much to tell her. Then Jared seemed to make up his

mind. „There's a chance your partner is

mixed up in this, honey. Molina is checking things out from his side. But until

everything has cooled down, I want you where I can keep an eye on you. And I want you several miles away from

Elden and Corey Books.“

„But what’s this got to do with Nick?“ she wailed, her brows drawing together fiercely. „Jared, please! You’re not making any sense!“

„I’ll explain everything on the way to Palm Springs,“ he assured her, giving her a gentle shove toward the

condominium. „Let's lock up and be on our way.“

„Stop ordering me about! I'm not going anywhere until I figure out what's happening around here!“ Alina declared, her stubbornness rising to the fore.

„Alina, my sweet,“ Jared returned in a no-nonsense voice which told her he meant every word. „If you don't get into that car of your own accord, I'm going to put you in it Understand?“

The *condottiere* was taking charge, Alina thought belatedly. So much for a collaboration.

„It virtually amounts to kidnapping,“ Alina snapped angrily as the Ferrari sped down the coastal highway toward Los

Angeles and beyond.

„An old Renaissance pastime,“ Jared drawled, his attention on his driving.

„Will you be reasonable? What in the world am I supposed to tell Nick? How can I phone him and casually say I won't be in for several days?“ she rapped.

„Tell him it's a case of true love. You got swept off your feet,“ he suggested dryly.

Alina threw him a scathing sidelong glance which, by rights, should have inflicted serious injury and probably

would have, she decided, if Jared's hide wasn't so tough. Why did he have to make a joke about true love?

„Jared, I'm warning you. I want an explanation and I want it now.“

„Okay, okay,“ he soothed. „It boils down to the fact that Molina has reason to think the microfilming agency you

use is occasionally involved in performing a little extra ‘service’ on the side. A service reserved for very special clients.

He’s having them thoroughly checked out, but by late this afternoon there was already cause to question some of their activities.“

„What sort of service?“

„Assisting in the theft and sale of certain prize books from private libraries,“ Jared told her succinctly.

„I don’t believe it“ Alina stared stonily out the window at the ocean on her right

„Nick’s used that agency for years.“

There was a deadly pause and then Jared said softly, „Exactly.“

At the unspoken implications, Alina’s head came sharply around „Are you accusing Nick of illegally dealing in rare books?“ she blazed, incensed.

„It’s a possibility we have to consider,“ he began reasonably.

„I don’t have to consider it! I’ve known Nicholas Elden for years! I wouldn’t be where I am today without him! We’

ve worked so closely, Pd know if he were involved in anything illegal!“

„Would you?“ Jared asked simply.

„Is Molina’s book missing?“ she charged.

„No. Not yet“

„Well, then? Where’s the crime?“ Alina demanded triumphantly. „What makes him think someone’s after it?“

„The fact that it was filmed by ‘mistake’ in the first place,“ Jared told her patiently. „There was no mix-up the day of

the filming. Vittorio remembers your request very well. He also remembers pulling those letters himself and giving them

to the film crew. They set up their cameras in his library and shot the letters there. But there was a point at which he

was temporarily called out of the library to handle some business on the phone. He left his secretary at the door just as

a precaution. But she was only in charge of making certain no one left with anything he didn't own. She didn't

supervise the actual filming.“

„And Molina thinks the crew took advantage of the time they had alone in the library to film those pages out of that history?“

„He thinks that's the only explanation.“

„But why?“ Alina almost wailed in exasperation.

„To show a potential buyer what they had to sell. If the transaction was agreed upon, presumably the book itself

would have been stolen at a later date. Another advantage the film crew had by filming on the premises was the

opportunity of assessing any alarm or protection systems in place around the house and library.“

„But if they shot my letters, how did I wind up with that book instead?“

„Presumably that’s where the real mix-up occurred,“ Jared explained quietly.

„Damn!“ Alina’s mouth set furiously as she realized what might have happened.

„My letters went out to some idiot

who won’t know what to do with them, and I’m stuck with a few pages from an obscure history!

Whoever got my letters will probably

toss them in a trash can somewhere!“

„Will you kindly stop viewing this situation from your own personal perspective? We may be in the middle of a

major rare-book theft!“ Jared admonished, but not without a flicker of humor as he tossed a quick glance at her unhappy expression.

Rather guiltily, Alina acknowledged the validity of his words. There were more pressing problems at the moment

than the lost letters. It was just that having them so close only to be snatched

out of her grasp... Belatedly she remembered Nick.

„What gave you and Molina the notion that Nick is involved?“ she asked haughtily, still angry at Jared's accusation.

„it's just a possibility. Molina will handle everything----“

„What does that mean?“ She glared across the seat at his firmly set chin.

Jared drew a long breath as if debating how much to tell her. „He's going to have his house watched.“

„He’s notified the police?“ she asked quickly.

„No, I’ve told you, no one wants to publicize the book’s existence. Molina’s hired a very private, very discreet agency.“

„And they’re going to watch the house to see if anyone comes back to steal the book, is that it?“ Alina’s

disgusted tone successfully conveyed her opinion of such an operation. Molina was setting a trap! „It seems to me

that I’m the major suspect, not Nick. I’m the one who actually commissioned the

film crew to shoot those letters on site!“

Jared said nothing and realization dawned in Alina's racing brain. „Oh, no! Don't tell me you two actually considered me as a suspect, too!“

„Molina mentioned the possibility but I set him straight immediately,“ Jared said quickly.

„Thanks!“ she muttered tartly, chilled at the thought of being even briefly thought guilty of such a thing.

Jared smiled slightly. „I explained to

him that you were far too passionately involved with Battista and Francesco to have thought of anything but those letters. I told him I knew you rather well. Which is only the truth. Elden, on the other hand, is another problem.“

„Why?“

„He’s one of a handful of people Molina knows who are aware of the book’s present owner. And the order for microfilming in Molina’s library came from your firm, don’t forget. It’s all too much of a coincidence. Elden knew you

were having those letters filmed, didn't he?"

Alina hesitated, feeling trapped into a betrayal of her partner, „Yes,“ she finally mumbled. It couldn't be! Nick couldn't be guilty of such a crime!

„I know you've worked with him for years, Alina,“ Jared continued gently, „but how well do you really know the man?“

It struck her that this was the second time in as many days that someone had asked her just how well she knew

Nicholas Elden. She thought of her answer to Celeste. Nick was an unknown quantity in some ways. That feeling of

not knowing what sort of person he was when he wasn't at the shop or playing the gracious guest came back in a

wave to flood her mind with unanswerable questions.

„What you're accusing him of doing carries the implication that he used me as a cover for getting that book filmed

– virtually tried to put the blame on me in case his actions were ever discovered,“ she finally said carefully.

„Yes.“

„I don't believe it. Besides, all of us have been a bit sneaky in this business. I used your name to convince Molina

to let me have the letters filmed, Molina and you both bid for a book which might have been illegally obtained years

ago....“

„Come on, honey,“ Jared interrupted impatiently. „None of those actions are in a category with what Elden might

be up to!“

„Only a matter of degree!“ she declared

stoutly.

„Deliberate theft?“ he grated.

„Well, maybe it is worse....“

„Much worse and you know it. Now let's think this through. What if Elden commissioned the film crew to try to

shoot the book if they got the opportunity? They would have shot both strips of film at the same time, and they would

have been mailing both strips to Santa Barbara. What if the film got into the wrong containers?“

„You mean Nick got my letters by mistake?“

„He could hardly admit it, could he? By asking to exchange the films he would be acknowledging his link with the

military history in Molina's collection. A link which could prove very dangerous later on if the book was, indeed,

stolen. Much simpler just to steal the film from you.“

„But there was no opportunity to do such a thing!“ she protested desperately.

„The night of the party?“ Jared offered a

little too quietly. „He’s been to your house before, presumably. He’s

probably even been in your study...?“

„Yes, but... Oh, my God!“ What if Nick had done it? Alina told herself she didn’t believe the accusations for a

minute, but what if he had? Vittorio Molina was setting a trap which could eventually lead him to Nick----

„I’m not agreeing with your logic but just for the sake of argument, what would Molina do if he did catch s –

someone like Nick in his little trap?“ she asked distantly.

Again Jared hesitated. „Molina is a wealthy and powerful man. He could ruin Elden. Destroy his reputation with a few choice words in rare-book circles.“

„Books are Nick’s whole life! I’ve got to warn him. Pull over. Jared. I’ve got to find a phone....“

„You’ll do nothing of the kind.“ Jared’s hands tightened on the wheel, and the Ferrari seemed to pick up a bit more speed. „You’re staying out of this, Alina.“

„He’s my partner,“ Alina raged, panicked and infuriated as she realized

her helplessness. „I owe him this much,
at

least!“

„I thought you claimed he was innocent,“
Jared mocked. „If he is, nothing will
come of Molina’s trap.“

„I’m going to warn him,“ she grated
between her teeth.

„Why?“

„I’ve told you why! He’s my friend and
my partner. I owe him everything!“

„Is it more than friendship, Alina?“
Jared rasped. „Or have you imagined

yourself in love with your mentor all these

years?“

„No!“

„I can see how it would happen,“ Jared went on with a touch of savagery. „You would idolize him as your teacher,

be grateful to him for letting you buy into the business. He’s got everything you thought you wanted in a lover, hasn’

t he? He’s sophisticated, well educated, accepted in all the right academic circles....“

„Jared! Stop it!“ Alina was horrified at the twist in the conversation.

‘„You're going to forget him, Alina. You belong to me now. I'm the one who came looking for you. Elden's waited

too long to stake his claim....“

„Dammit! Stop talking as if I'm a piece of property! Can't you understand what I'm feeling toward Nick? It's a

question of loyalty to a man who's been a friend!“ Alina struggled to get control of herself and her voice. She was on

the verge of hysteria as she realized Jared had no intention of letting her warn

Nick. The knowledge that she might be unable to let her friend know what Molina was planning was so alarming that she knew she was starting to believe the

accusations. But it didn't matter. Regardless of what Nick had done, she owed him the warning.

„Forget it, Alina,“ Jared advised coldly, as if he knew exactly what she was thinking.

„Jared, you have to believe me! I'm honor bound to warn him. I have an obligation to a friend...!“

Jared said nothing and Alina realized grimly he had no intention of arguing further. For the moment he was in

control. She swallowed at the harshly etched planes of his face, reading there the strength of his determination.

„What about letting him know why I’ve disappeared?“ she said a few minutes later, trying another tactic. „You said

something about letting him think I’ve been swept off my feet?“ she added tauntingly.

The green eyes flicked a brief, assessing glance at her carefully composed features. „In the morning you can phone

him and tell him that you've eloped, and you'll be back at work after you've had a honeymoon."

„Are you crazy?“ His unexpected suggestion destroyed Alina's composure at once. „What happens when I return after this fictitious honeymoon still single?“

„We can work out the details,“ he replied imperturbably.

„The details!“ she yelped. „Jared Troy, are you by any chance proposing to me just to keep me from trying to warn

Nick?“ She glared at him, rather stunned.

„Not exactly. I'm proposing to you because we belong together. If you'll overlook a few of your intellectual

prejudices and remember what we've shared, I think you'll realize that“

„You told me you weren't interested in marriage,“ Alina reminded him, her pulse leaping strangely in spite of the circumstances.

„That was shortly after you'd finished telling me what you thought of the institution, as I recall. I didn't want to

scare you off completely at that early stage,“ he admitted easily, one shoulder

lifting too casually.

„You... you mean you were thinking of marriage that first night when you showed up on my doorstep?“ The words came out in a bare whisper.

„Somehow“ – he grinned a bit dryly – „it seemed inevitable. What else can two people like us do? Correspond for the rest of our lives?“

Hardly the most romantic of proposals, Alina thought sadly, subsiding into her seat as she tried vainly to sort out

what was happening. Still, for a man like

Jared to be offering marriage must mean he felt something of an abiding

emotion toward her. Jared Troy was not the sort of man to talk of marriage if all he felt was a physical tie. Unwillingly

she thought of the loneliness she'd read between the lines of his letters....

Abruptly she tore her mind away from such weakening thoughts. She had her obligation to Nick to think of first

Nick, the man who had made her career possible. The man who had given her such an important break, introduced her to so many crucial contacts in the rare-

book world....

„Jared, whatever you and I may decide to do, I have to warn Nick.“

„You’re staying out of it, Alina,“ he returned evenly.

„I can’t just sit by and take the risk....“

„The risk that he might be guilty?“ Jared challenged.

„Yes, dammit!“

„I’ll make you forget whatever you feel for him, Alina,“ he vowed. „Trust me.“

„No, Jared. This time you have to trust

me,“ Alina replied with unnatural calm as she acknowledged the truth of her

own words. She turned to stare out the window at the blue Pacific again, her mind made up. She had no choice. Nick had to be warned.

„You’re not going to do anything more on the telephone tomorrow morning than tell him you’re getting married,

Alina,“ Jared insisted.

„You can’t stop me from warning him.“ Alina’s head came around briefly to face him. She caught the enigmatic

glance he tossed at her, and it sent a shiver down her spine. What had she gotten herself into when she'd begun the impassioned correspondence with Jared Troy? She should have known better than to fall in love with a dangerous, lonely *condottiere*, the kind of man who took what he wanted.

The remainder of the drive to Palm Springs passed in almost total silence. Alina felt edgy and uncertain of Jared's mood as he negotiated the maze of Los Angeles County freeways en route to the desert beyond. She didn't bring up

the subject of Nick again, knowing with great certainty that he would still be violently opposed to any notion of her

warning the other man. She could only wonder at the intensity of his feelings on the subject. It was as if a warning to

Nick would constitute a betrayal of Jared.

It was the sight of the large, gleaming white house with its high-walled garden that broke Alina's self-imposed

silence a long time later.

„It's like a private villa,“ she murmured unable to resist the comparison.

„Like it?“ Jared inquired a bit too casually as he brought the Ferrari to a halt in the circular drive.

„It’s beautiful,“ Alina told him honestly as she studied the gardens and house through the high gate. „It’s like

something a Renaissance nobleman might have built in the country as a place to spend the summers.“

The winding, palm-lined street continued on toward a distant golf course. Several other equally expensive

residences were set well back from the curb at a discreet distance from each other. The brilliant sun had warmed the

surrounding desert, and the mountains in the distance seemed purple in the bright light Alina knew there would be a

pool in the backyard of every elegant home.

„I got the basic design out of a treatise on Renaissance architecture,“ Jared said, reaching for the luggage as they

climbed out of the Ferrari. „I had to make a few modifications, of course.“

„You mean you didn't need dungeons or a banqueting hall?“ she mocked, following as he led the way through the gate and into the cool, lush garden. A

charming fountain which looked vaguely familiar formed a focal point It took

Alina a moment to realize that the familiarity was due to the fountain's style. It could have been cooling the garden of a

wealthy citizen of fifteenth-century Florence.

The interior of the house with its high ceilings and rich parquet flooring continued the overall effect of an

expensive, cool retreat The furniture was low and sleek with a masculine heaviness that fit very well against the white

walls. Floor to ceiling windows opened out onto the shaded garden.

„Do you live here all alone?“ Alina asked as Jared set her suitcase down on the level above the sunken living room.

„I have someone who comes in and cleans a couple of times a week and a gardener,“ he said, glancing at her.

„Why?“

„Nothing. It’s a lovely home. It just feels a little...“ She broke off, not knowing how to put it into words.

„A little empty?“ he asked, his mouth quirking.

„Well, yes,“ she admitted.

„Why do you think I came looking for you?“ he asked simply. „Come on, I'll show you the rest of the place.“

She followed him through the house, glancing into the large study with its sophisticated little computer and shelves full of files and business books. The kitchen was large and equipped with every convenience, just as she expected. The master bedroom was huge and beautifully furnished with a four-poster bed. The windows along one wall also looked out into the privacy of

the garden. When Jared pointedly set both suitcases down in that room near

what appeared to be an original of a Renaissance bridal chest, Alina tried to ignore the flicker of warmth in her veins.

He was making it very clear where he felt she belonged.

But it was the library that captured her attention.

„Oh, Jared!“ With a soft exclamation she hurried ahead of him into the panelled room lined with glass bookcases. In

addition to the valuable books that filled the room, there were several exotic

items of Renaissance military armor

housed in a long case near the window. As she turned in a circle, not knowing where to start, the small reproduction of the *Gattamelata* statue caught her eye. The serenely grim face with its feeling of restrained and controlled power drew her toward the equestrian piece like a magnet. If there was something of Francesco in this little statue, there was something, too, of Jared.

„I could get lost in here,“ she said, running a hand lightly over the mounted figure and scanning the nearest

bookcase with barely concealed hunger. The names of Machiavelli, Borgia, Medici, and Petrarch flashed in front of her

eyes on the leather and cloth spines.

„That's not a bad idea,“ Jared said, watching her quietly from the doorway.

„Getting lost?“ She spun around in surprise and then realized what he meant. Her mouth tightened and some of the

excitement faded from her hazel eyes.

„Oh. You mean so I won't be tempted to come out in time to warn Nick.“ Her tone

turned abruptly flat.

„Let’s not talk about him,“ Jared advised just as flatly.

„What would you rather talk about?“

„Dinner?“ he suggested hopefully. She could almost feel the force of his will as he tried to draw a smile from her.

With a repressed sigh, Alina gave in for the moment Nick had to be warned, but right now mere really was no

alternative except to eat Besides, she was hungry.

They bustled around the huge kitchen,

jointly fixing a salad, heating crusty French bread, and dropping the pasta

into boiling water for fettuccine alfredo. There was a companionable atmosphere about the whole project which

became an insidious attack on Alina's private decision to defy Jared. He looked so happy, she thought uneasily. He

was really enjoying having someone to whom he could show off his beautiful home. And he liked sharing his kitchen with her.

Damn! she thought with self-disgust. How did a woman fight this kind of

battle? She could sense Jared's desire for

her, his decision to end the loneliness of his life by drawing her into his world, and she felt her love for him grow even

as she remembered her obligation to Nick.

It was after dinner, which they ate at a round table near the window in the spacious kitchen, that Jared again

brought up the subject of marriage. No topic could have been better calculated to make Alina's inner turmoil grow

more chaotic.

„We can start the process tomorrow,“ he said calmly, pouring out the last of the wine.

„What process?“ Alina asked, taken off guard.

„Getting married, it takes three days, you know. Unless you want to run over to Nevada?“ he added agreeably,

glancing up to meet her strained expression.

„Jared, are you sure this is what you want?“ she managed, swallowing her wine in a Tamer large gulp.

„I'm sure.“ The green eyes glittered

across the table at her. „You will marry me, won't you, Alina? We're right for

each other. I know it with more certainty than I've ever known anything in my life.“

„There are so many things to be considered,“ she began helplessly.

„If Elden was going to marry you, he would have done so long before I came on the scene!“ Jared interrupted with sudden harshness.

„Nick and I have never been lovers!“

„And you never will be. Not now.“ He

reached out to catch her nervously moving hand and hold it tightly in his

own, his eyes boring into hers with an unnerving combination of pleading and determination. „Marry me, Alina. This week.“

The world seemed to be turning a little too fast Alina knew there were things that had to be said, important matters

which should have been discussed And there was the problem of warning Nick....

But the emerald eyes were capturing her, weaving their spell around her until she

could think of nothing else in that

moment except her love for Jared. She loved the man and he had just asked her to marry him. And she could trust him.

Above all, she was certain of that Jared would never cheat on her with another woman. He would never have asked her to marry him if he didn't intend to honor the commitment with the full force of his strong nature. In time, he would learn that what he felt for her was love....

„Yes, Jared. I'll marry you.“

He was on his feet coming around the

small table to pull her up into his arms with a passionate need that was

composed of far more than sheer male desire. „Alina, my lovely Alina. I swear you won't be sorry,“ he said huskily

against her hair, his hands moving down her back to draw her tightly against him.

„Jared,“ she ventured unevenly, her love for him making it almost impossible to bring up the subject he kept

rejecting. „There's still the problem of the film....“

„Forget it It's not our problem any longer,“ he grated, sweeping her up into

his arms. „Tonight we’ve got better things to do.“

„Such as?“ she asked with a flash of humor as he began striding down the wide hall to his bedroom.

„Such as celebrating our marriage,“ he declared with a dagger smile.

„Ah, but we aren’t quite married yet,“ she pointed out, already succumbing to the tug of his desire.

„I think we were married five hundred years ago,“ he answered equably, using the toe of his shoe to push open the

door of the bedroom. „We’re just going to give California the courtesy of respecting its laws.“

„You think Francesco and Battista were eventually married?“ Alina lifted her arms to circle his neck as he slid her gently to her feet beside the bed.

„Naturally. What else could they have done? They were caught in the same situation we are. A man and a woman who need each other, want each other...“

Love each other? Alina finished silently as his passion began making itself felt in

the tautening lines of his body.

„And understand each other,“ Jared concluded, burying his lips beneath the fall of bronzed brown hair he had taken down with a quick movement of his fingers.

Swiftly, tenderly, he removed her clothes, leaving them in a pool at her feet Alina moaned softly as his hands traveled over her nakedness, delighting in the texture of her skin, seeking the sensitive places with unerring accuracy.

„Jared.“ She sighed, leaning into his strength and letting it stir the desire in

her. Tentatively and then with growing certainty, she helped him undress.

Jared's urgency seemed at a new high tonight, she realized as the excitement in him fed her own aroused emotions.

It was as if he needed to be sure of her yet again, as if he would use his body to reinforce the claim he had made verbally.

He caught the smooth flesh of her rounded buttocks, pressing her against his lean thighs with a muttered groan.

Then he lifted her briefly once more,

settling her onto the sheets and coming down beside her with a possessiveness that told its own tale.

Alina felt her skin burn wherever his lips and hands touched her, searing the nipples of her breasts, branding the

insides of her thighs, heating the softness of her stomach. She simmered beneath his urgent, demanding touch, her

fingers playing along the hardness of his body, digging into the muscled flesh with feminine command.

„I want to be the only one who can make you come alive like this,“ he rasped

against her shoulder, his teeth gently

tormenting her sensitized flesh. „Tell me there won't be anyone else, Alina. I think I would go mad if you were ever to want another man!“

„There is no one else, Jared,“ she whispered huskily, twisting languidly beneath his touch. „There has never been anyone who could do this to me. I would never leave you for anyone else!“

It was nothing less than the truth, she thought, and then she stopped thinking altogether as he parted her legs

with his own, covering her softness completely even as she enveloped his strength.

10

Alina's conscience forced reality back upon her before she even opened her eyes to the desert sunrise the next

morning. Nothing had changed. Her dilemma remained.

Beside her Jared lay in a glorious sprawl of lean, tanned skin and tangled white sheets. The dark lashes lay along

the high cheekbones, softening the severe lines of his face. Alina turned her head

on the pillow for a moment to look at him with love and a tenderness she hadn't known it was possible to feel for a man. Then, reluctantly, she slid out of the wide bed.

Finding a short toweling robe in the huge closet, she belted it around her waist and padded soundlessly across the

tapestrylike area rug that covered the parquet flooring in front of the bed. Coming to a halt in front of the window she

stood gazing unseeingly into the garden.

A beautiful home but with a strange loneliness about it that disturbed her. No, she took that back. It wasn't

precisely loneliness she sensed, but a self-imposed isolation. She had the impression that Jared simply hadn't felt the

need of other people for a long time. Not until he had started reading between the lines of her letters and had begun

constructing a fantasy of a woman who could play Battista to his Francesco? But he didn't treat her like a fantasy

woman. A part of her felt safe in the knowledge that Jared saw her as herself,

regardless of what might have led him to her in the first place.

She heard him stir behind her and then his voice came, a little husky still from sleep and remembered passion.

„Come back to bed, sweetheart We’re on our honeymoon.“

Alina nerved herself for what must come next „No, Jared. The honeymoon comes after the marriage. And you may

not want to marry me when this is over.“ She didn’t look at him. She couldn’t It was tearing her apart to deliver the

ultimatum, but she had no choice.

The silence from the bed told her he had understood her meaning. Tensely she awaited his fury, her arms folded protectively in front of her.

But it wasn't anger she sensed lapping at her as the silence deepened. It was something infinitely more devastating. It was despair.

„You can't get him out of your head, can you?“ Jared finally said with a terrible resignation. „No matter what you feel when you're with me, lying in my

arms, he still comes first, doesn't he?"

„Jared..." Her voice was a broken thread as she tried to find the words to combat his accusation.

„I told myself last night when you agreed to marry me that you must be putting Elden behind you. But it isn't that,

is it? You've realized he's probably never going to return your love, so you're willing to accept my proposal instead."

She heard the self-torture in his words and shivered. The bed made a soft sound as Jared levered himself to his

elbow. She could feel his eyes burning into her back. „Jared, will you please listen to me? Trust me? What I have to do

is out of a sense of loyalty to a friend---
-“

„You’re not going to him, Alina.“ She heard the steel in him, felt it subduing the despair as his will once again

dominated his emotions. „You’re mine and one of these days, one of these nights, you’ll realize it There’s no future for

you with a man like Elden. Can’t you understand that? He’s not worth your

love, dammit!“

A searing exasperation that was part anger and part disgust with the obtuseness of the male of the species

abruptly gripped Alina. She turned around, her hair swinging softly across her shoulders, her hazel eyes alight with furious gold.

„You idiot!“ she nearly yelled. „I’m not in love with Nicholas Elden! I have never been in love with Nicholas Elden

or anyone else for that matter! I wasn’t even truly in love with my ex-husband! It took a thickheaded, stubborn,

arrogant, domineering *condottiere* of a man to teach me what love is all about Everything I've ever felt for anyone else

could only at best be labeled affection. It's you I love, Jared Troy! Heaven knows why! I've always had a preference

for *intelligent* men, not mule-brained, one-track thinkers who can't seem to comprehend the success of their own seduction techniques!“

„Alina!“

He was sitting straight up in bed now, his eyes locked to hers. The emerald

depths were blazing to life with a

wonder and hope which should have slowed down her tirade but didn't. She was too wound up now to quit.

„Furthermore, if this is the sort of male obstinacy poor Battista had to put up with, I can certainly understand her

decision not to let Francesco back into the villa! There is nothing more annoying than a man who doesn't recognize a

woman's love when she's handing it to him on a silver platter.“

Jared was swinging his legs over the edge of the bed, utterly unconcerned

with his own magnificent nakedness as he started toward her. „Alina, my sweet vixen, you can yell at me all you want Just tell me it’s true. Tell me you really do love me!“

„Of course I love you! Do you think I’d let myself be dragged off by a bullying, intimidating, annoying man like

you if I didn’t love you? Do you think I’d have taken your word alone about the missing microfilm if I didn’t love you?

Do you think I would – “

She never got a chance to utter the last of

her rhetorical questions as Jared reached her, pulling her into his arms

and successfully stopping the flow of words with his lips.

At his touch, Alina subsided, allowing herself to lean against his bare chest. He absorbed her weight as if it were

nothing, his kiss deepening until he was drinking from her mouth as if he had been suffering from a thirst only she

could satisfy.

„Alina, Alina,“ he finally managed in a slightly drugged voice. „I’d hoped and prayed and wanted so badly. I was

afraid to let myself believe it might be true. I was going to give you time. I told myself that with time you'd realize the attraction between us was more than physical....“

„Oh, lord,“ she muttered against his shoulder in renewed disgust. „The ego of a man. You thought I've been going to bed with you just because you're such a fantastic lover?“

She felt the sudden warmth in his skin and realized he was flushing. The knowledge delighted her. She giggled softly, tightening her arms around his

waist Then she relented.

Lifting her head, she met his eyes with teasing humor in her own. „Oh, Jared. You are a fantastic lover. But that’s

not why I’ve been willing to share your bed. I’m not even sure I knew the whole reason myself until a short time ago. I

guess the idea of loving you grew so naturally with the flow of our letters that I never even knew what had happened

to me until you walked into my life in person!“

„And I’ve loved you since that first nasty little letter you wrote to the editor of that

journal in response to the

article I'd written," he confessed with hoarse honesty. „When you opened your door to me the night of the party, I

wanted to pick you up and carry you off right then and there. I realized that whatever I'd been feeling toward the

woman who wrote those letters, it was nothing compared to the feelings I had when I finally met her face to face.“

„You love me, Jared?“ Alina murmured, her face glowing with happiness.

„With all my heart and soul. I've never needed a woman the way I need you.

I've never wanted one the way I want you. It's as if you're a part of me. A part I've been subconsciously searching for all my life. You don't know what you're doing to me by telling me that you're in love, too. I feel as if the world suddenly became complete. Oh, God, Alina...!"

As if he'd run out of words to express the intensity of his emotions, Jared folded her back into his arms, his kiss a passionate, tender, deeply moving caress which made the world spin. In that moment, Alina knew the sensation would

last a lifetime. Perhaps longer.

„Speaking of stupidity,“ Jared finally mumbled against her mouth, „you can share the prize with me! A woman like you, a self-admitted, accomplished tease, should have known when a man was totally stricken!“

„Not when that man is so different from any other she has ever known,“ Alina defended herself blissfully. „I wasn’t sure *condottieri* really understood love....“

„That’s probably why you never understood Francesco,“ he retorted

knowledgeably.

„Hah!“

„Calm down, we'll get back to that argument soon enough. This is our time, not Battista's and Francesco's!“ Jared

grinned. Then he sobered. „But I think, perhaps, neither of us fully understood love, hmmm?“

„Perhaps,“ she admitted. „And perhaps neither of us really understood exactly what was missing in our lives. I'd

filled mine with my career, my parties, my superficial friends....“

„And I'd filled mine with business and book collecting. I figured I'd given marriage a chance....“

„So had I. We both picked mates who fit our requirements at the time, I think,“ Alina said slowly, remembering how

Jared had once spoken of his „business“ marriage.

„But the requirements we'd established were all wrong,“ Jared concluded softly, with deep conviction.

„Yes.“ For a long time Alina simply stood in the circle of his arms, content She sensed the same contentment

welling up in Jared, and it brought her a happiness she would not have believed possible.

It was Jared who finally broke the gentle moment.

„It’s all right now, Alina,“ he finally said on a long sigh which drained away all the tension in his body.

She raised her head to stare at him mutely, knowing what he meant.

„Go ahead, if you feel you owe it to him,“ he went on quietly. „I don’t think he deserves the warning, but I can

understand your feeling that you have to

do something. And maybe, just maybe, he's not guilty, anyway," he added magnanimously.

„You trust me? Trust my love for you?“ she asked softly.

„I trust you. You couldn't look at me like that, tell me you love me and be lying.“ he stated with great certainty.

Then he groaned ruefully. „Now that I know for sure that you love me, you'll probably be able to wrap me around your

little finger!“

„What a pleasant thought“ Alina grinned, looking entranced at the notion. Then her smile faded and she caught

his face between her palms, standing on tiptoe to brush her mouth lightly against his. „Thank you, Jared.“

She made the call a few hours later. Jared chose to disappear into his study, and Alina knew the action was

prompted by a general conviction that Nick didn't deserve a warning rather than a failure to understand her motives.

By the time she replaced the receiver, however, she was in a state of shock. Too stunned to go in search of Jared,

Alina wandered out into the garden and sat down on the white rock edge of the sparkling fountain.

Jared found her there and crossed the lawn with an expression of concern on his face as he took in her strange,

quiet air. „What is it, honey?“ he asked gently, sitting down beside her. „Do you feel sorry for him?“

Alina lifted her head to meet his eyes, her hand trailing absently in the fountain of water. „It’s incredible, Jared.

Absolutely incredible.“ She shook her head disbelievingly. „To work so long with someone and never really know

him.

When I confronted him as gently as I could with the situation and Molina's name, Nick just sort of... gave up. He told

me the whole story----“

„Including why?“

„He gambles,“ she said simply, still struck by the fact that she had never guessed Nick's secret „I had no Idea. No

one I know would have guessed it But it explains why I always had the feeling he became a different person when he

wasn't around the shop or at a party. A friend of mine, thought he was gay and ashamed of it, but she was way off

base. I've heard of people who get themselves involved in heavy gambling debts but I've never known one.... At least

I assumed I didn't know one!“

„So he needed money on occasion down through the years? A lot of it at times?“

Jared hazarded with a knowing

tone in his deep voice.

„Yes.“

„And the obvious way for him to get it was in the profession he knew best“

„I’m afraid so. I don’t think there were very many such instances. One time, I myself came to the rescue and saved

him from having to resort to theft!“ Her mouth twisted wryly as she remembered that part of the conversation with

Nick.

„The time he ‘let’ you buy into partnership with him?“

Alina nodded, no longer surprised by Jared’s guessing. He seemed to have a better understanding of some

aspects of human nature than she did!

„Did he explain about the theft of the microfilm?“

„He took it the night of the party. The day before, he had discovered that there had been a mix-up. The head of the

film crew had phoned him in a panic and explained that I had been sent the wrong film. Nick knows my study and it

was a simple enough matter for him to search the desk during the party. He panicked, didn't think to substitute my film

for the one he was taking. But he figured

there was nothing to throw suspicion on him. He didn't realize that I'd made a

copy or that you would be around to recognize the significance of the crew's filming that particular book.“

„You told him about me?“ Jared demanded thoughtfully.

„I had to.“

„It's all right I'm glad you made it quite clear you're not the only one who knows what's going on,“ he told her

deliberately.

Alina blinked. „Surely you don't think

Nick would try to... try to do something to me!“

„Not now. Not with Molina and I both knowing the score,“ Jared assured her with a measure of satisfaction.

Alina brushed such thoughts aside. Nick would never hurt her. He had been a pitiful case on the phone. They had

been friends long enough that he knew she would never use any information against him. But there was another matter

to be considered now. How could she continue to work side by side with Nick Elden? She pushed that thought to the

back of her mind, too.

„What will Molina do?“ she asked instead.

Jared shrugged. „Nothing. He has no proof and he wouldn't act without it You can rest assured he'll keep an eye

on Elden's activities in the future, however! Maybe that alone will be enough to make your partner behave himself!“

Alina repressed a shiver. Would it? Gamblers were notorious for resorting to desperate efforts to recover their losses. And she was the man's partner!

No, came the clear thought She couldn't remain in business with Nick Elden.

She would never be able to trust the man again, and he was too likely to use their friendship, assuming she would help

him out if he got into trouble in the future. She had to get out.

She knew Jared was watching the play of thoughts across her features, but he didn't question her on them. Instead

he got to his feet with an easy movement, the quick, dagger grin lighting his face.

„Come on. It's over and I have a much better method of enjoying what's left of

the morning before we go out and
apply for the wedding license!“

Alina narrowed her eyes with mocking suspicion as she allowed herself to be tugged to her feet „You’re insatiable!“ she accused.

He gave her a reproachful glance, taking hold of her wrist and guiding her through the garden. „I assure you I have

nothing more seductive in mind than a little morning exercise!“

„Uh-huh... Oh! We’re going for a swim?“ She tossed him a laughing

glance as he drew her to a halt by the pool. „I’

ll go and get my suit...“

„Unnecessary. We have all the privacy in the world here,“ he assured her, his fingers going to the buttons of her striped shirt.

„Jared!“ A little shocked, in spite of her California attitude toward such things, Alina made a half-laughing attempt to fend him off. She stepped backward, just out of reach and clutched her shirtfront.

„Don't tell me you're going to revert to the teasing games again,“ he groaned, a devil leaping to life in the emerald

eyes as he closed the distance between them.

„It's just that I'll feel more comfortable in a suit,“ she explained quickly, sensing his intent She held up a hand,

warding him off. „Now, Jared, I'm serious....“

„So am I,“ he murmured deeply, snagging her around the waist and tugging her close to lift her lightly into his

arms. „You and Battista may have made careers out of teasing men, but both of you should know by now that

Francesco and I are exceptions. We don't allow too much of that sort of thing.“

Before she could hastily agree to undress, Jared walked to the edge of the pool.

„Jared! Wait, I'll – “

Her shriek was cut off as he stepped, fully clothed, into the pool, still holding her in his arms. The crystal water

closed over both their heads, and Alina

floundered under the surface for a long moment before finding her way to the top.

„Damn *condottiere*!“ she hissed, flicking the wet hair off her face with a toss of her head. She glared at him as he surfaced beside her, laughing.

She wanted to go on berating him, but in that moment she suddenly realized the deep happiness in him. A

happiness which had not been there the night she had first opened her door to the *condottiere* waiting at the villa

gate. And she was the cause of that happiness, Alina realized with womanly wisdom and pleasure. He loved her, just as much as she loved him. Instead of yelling at him, she submitted to his touch with delicious satisfaction as he swam toward her and began peeling off her wet clothes.

In a few moments both pairs of jeans had been heaved, soaking wet, up onto the pool's edge, along with the remainder of their garments. The laughter faded in their eyes as passion rose to take its place.

„I was wondering,“ Jared whispered a little huskily as his hands slid over her body, „how you might feel about a new partnership?“

Alina floated in the water, letting him support her near-weightlessness with strong hands which circled her waist „I’ve already agreed to marry you,“ she reminded him, eyes half closed.

He shook his head. „I’m not talking about marriage. We’ll be married, all right, but marriage isn’t a partnership, sweetheart!“

She arched one eyebrow and men decided to argue that one with him later. „You’re referring to a business partnership?“

He inserted one hair-roughened thigh between her legs, easing her against him with erotic deliberation that sent shivers of expectation down her spine. „I thought you might be in the market for one,“ he said meaningfully. „You must realize you can’t stay with Elden now.“

Alina’s eyes snapped open. „How did you know I’d started worrying about

that?“

„It’s obvious, honey.“ he said gently.
„What were you thinking of doing?“

She hesitated. „Perhaps going into business for myself.“

„Corey Books?“

„Has a nice ring, don’t you think?“ she asked saucily.

„I like the sound of Corey and Troy better.“ He grinned. „Think of the contacts we’d have between the two of us!“

„I thought you enjoyed playing the wolf

of Wall Street,” Alina temporized, her mind going to work on the idea of a business partnership with her future husband.

„I told you once, it’s been a practical way to pay for my real interest, which is book collecting. I wouldn’t have to give it up completely. I could always go back to it if we needed fresh capital.“

„Corey and Troy, hmmm?“ Alina mused, the warm humor flaring in her eyes.

„Interested?“ He grinned, sweeping her closer against his naked chest.

„I could be persuaded.“

„I have a little something extra with which to sweeten the deal,“ he murmured coaxingly, beginning to nibble gently

on her earlobe.

„What’s that?“

„The wedding gift I’m going to persuade Vittorio Molina to give us,“ he drawled invitingly.

„Another copy of those letters?“ Alina pulled back from the deepening embrace, excitement momentarily pushing

aside the passion. „Really, Jared? You can persuade him to refilm them?“

„I'll want your signature on the dotted line, first, naturally.“ He chuckled. „And Vittorio will want another agency to do the filming!“

„I'll sign! I'll sign!“ Alina agreed enthusiastically. „And Molina can choose any agency he wants! Speaking of

which, however...“

„What's he going to do with the crooked film crew? I don't know. I'll have to talk to him. My guess is, he'll simply

put out the word that they're not to be trusted. It won't take long for them to stop getting the juicier assignments.

There's probably no way of proving anything against them."

"I hope Nick meant what he said on the phone." Alina sighed, remembering her soon-to-be-ex-partner's words.

"Made a promise to quit gambling, I suppose?"

"You don't sound as if you believe he will?"

"Let's say I have my doubts. It's not easy to fight that kind of compulsion. But now

he knows that Molina's on to

him, he may find other ways of covering his debts! About compulsions, however. I have one, too....“He wrapped his

arms around her, pulling her close until the hair of his chest teased her nipples.

Alina twisted happily, her legs tangling with his. „I love you so much, Jared!“

„You couldn't love me any more than I love you,“ he rasped, his body responding to hers with unmistakable need.

„When I think of all the times I reread your letters, imagining what I'd do if I

had you there beside me in person...!”
He

finished the sentence on an urgent groan.

Alina felt him fall effortlessly backward through the water until he was sitting on the pool steps. He settled her

eager body along the length of his, taking possession of it as he took possession of her mouth.

They made love with a grace induced by the watery environment, slowly, lingeringly, lovingly. Jared watched

through passion-slitted eyes as the final moment came for her. Alina arched

thrillingly, her ecstatic cry caught in her throat And she was woman enough to know that the sight of her responding to him had a devastatingly erotic effect

on Jared His own muffled shout soon followed as he surged powerfully upward, holding her so tightly she had to gulp

for breath.

Down, down they came, literally and figuratively, each lost in their very private world, clinging to each other until

they suddenly found themselves trying to

breathe water.

The shock brought them floundering, laughing, to the surface, still holding each other tightly, the loving mystery of the moment still showing in their eyes.

„This particular technique may take a little practice,“ Jared admitted with a grin, catching his breath. „We’ll work on it after we get the license. Which reminds me, it’s about time we got going on that project...”

„I wonder if Francesco tried to rush Battista into marriage when he returned,“ Alina mused as Jared glided

back

toward the steps, one hand around her waist.

„No doubt about it It’s the only way to cure a professional tease,“ Jared declared, hauling her up to the edge of the

pool. „Nothing like marriage to the right men to settle down women like you and Battista!“

„Who would have thought“ Alina began as she lifted her face for his kiss, „that a couple of *condottieri* would

know so much about women!“

„Only about two very special women,“
Jared whispered against her lips, „just
two very, very special women.

Francesco got his Battista and now, after
all this time, I've got my Alina.“

He sealed the claim with his kiss.